



# Sight-Reading in Piano Lessons

**Insights from teachers' and students' perspectives**

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### **Sight-Reading in Piano Lessons, Insights from teachers' and students' perspective**

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#### **Abstract**

Sight-reading can be considered one of the building blocks of musicianship. It is a familiar subject for every musician, each of whom have varying opinions and experiences about it. This thesis focuses on the contemporary approaches towards sight-reading in piano lessons in Finland. The need for consideration of diverse learners in the subject matter was highlighted along with sustainability in lifelong learning regarding sight-reading for young students. The impact that technological advancement might have on the students in the near future was considered along with some alternatives to sight-reading currently in use.

Musicians have been sight-reading and teaching it in music lessons for many centuries, through many changes in society. Opinions and methods have changed and developed drastically over the years, shaped by new revelations such as the significance of teachers' support in the achievement of their students. Understanding how that ties in with new findings about diverse learners have resulted in a slow shift in how lessons are conducted. The pedagogical approaches today are therefore significantly more student-centered compared to decades ago. This thesis aims to gain an insight into the current attitudes and practices regarding sight-reading in piano lessons by uncovering the opinions of both teachers and students.

By describing and analyzing the perceptions of the parties involved, namely the teachers and students, this study hopes to present an insight into sight-reading practices in piano lessons via the phenomenological approach. The data was collected via online questionnaires for both teachers and students, then coded into 6 categories, where possible, to extrapolate for comparison in similarities, differences and patterns regarding opinions of sight-reading in piano lessons. The 6 categories are: Playing, listening, technique, improvising, theory and sight-reading.

The findings reveal that there appear to be a shift in attitudes generally, with teachers regarding sight-reading as less important while students regard sight-reading as important. It is also worth noting that some training regarding diverse learners, with or without special needs, will benefit music teachers today in their pedagogical pursuits.

#### **Keywords/tags (subjects)**

Sight-reading, prima vista, piano lessons, english

#### **Miscellaneous (Confidential information)**

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# 1 Background

## 1.1 Sight-reading

Sight-reading, also known as “prima vista”, is the unrehearsed reading and performing of a notated piece of music. In other words, it is the instantaneous interpretation of musical symbols. However, sight-reading is more than just identifying notes; it involves understanding structures, styles, harmony such as intervals, chords and their interactions and movements, as well as perception and interpretation of ideas, textures and rhythms. It can be loosely described as a continuous feedback between aural, visual and analyzation of new information. Sight-reading is considered one of the basic musicianship skills (Payne, 2005) along with writing, listening, analyzing and improvising. It provides the individual with more independence in their learning, granting access to a wide range of materials that can enrich their experience, which in turn have a positive impact on sight-reading skill (Lehmann & Ericsson, 1996; Hardy, 1992).

Given how important sight reading is in a student’s development as a musician, the way it is learnt or taught makes a big difference, especially in a beginner, as it sets the foundation for future learning (Kornicke, 2021). In practice, sight-reading is often learnt as a “by product” skill over time, through exposure to different materials, and seldom taught specifically. Apart from basic theory lessons where notation is taught, it is often assumed to come naturally as the learner gains experience through playing. Additionally, sight-reading is not usually part of the focus in higher level music studies, as it is assumed to be acquired by the time the student reaches that level, which further stresses the importance of addressing it early on in the learning journey.

Awareness of the phenomenon of sight-reading skill being neglected by teachers (Agay, 1981; Barnes, 1981; Bernstein, 1981 as cited in Hardy, 1992) is not recent, having been highlighted, with references to even earlier studies, by Hardy over 30 years ago. She had described in her thesis that “Typically, piano instruction has concentrated on repertoire, interpretation, performance technique, artistic perfection and memorization.” (1992, p.10) There are certain strategies and methods when it comes to sight-reading, but as it is not typically considered essential, it is therefore often overlooked in favour of correcting other practical skills such as articulation, expression, rhythm and flow.

Hardy also commented “the vast majority of students she came in contact with could not sight-read well, although their ability in piano performance was often quite exemplary.” (1992, p.6) In her study, she found that while 86% of teachers surveyed considered sight-reading as a critical pianistic skill, only 7% taught sight-reading systematically. Almost 10 years later, McArthur (2001, as referenced in Dirkse, 2009, p.5) had a similar observation that “sight-reading is often neglected or included only if time remains”, and almost 20 years later, Dirkse noted that “sight-reading becomes limited to the first playing of an occasional new repertoire piece” (2009, p.5) which he cautioned would send the message to students that sight reading is not an important or valued skill. This is consistent with the author’s personal experiences, as well as observations over the years, and reveals that sight-reading skill being overlooked in piano lessons had been a chronic phenomenon with adverse consequences.

Sight-reading is a skill that musicians often struggle with, especially at the beginning of their learning journey. It involves:

- Perception (decoding patterns)
- Kinesthetics (playing the instrument)
- Memory (recognizing patterns)
- Problem solving skills (improvising and guessing) (Hodges & Nokler, 2011, p.2)

It also often involves a time constraint, contributing to the pressure, which can be already quite high depending on the situation.

The difficulty level of sight-reading varies, ranging from single voiced with simple rhythms and a small range of pitch on one clef, to multi voiced with complex rhythms, wide ranging pitch, involving multiple key changes on multiple clefs. Another factor to consider is the performance directions that accompanies the notated music, often in a foreign language, sometimes requiring specific technical knowledge. A good understanding of a variety of music genres and/or periods facilitates the sight-reading process; once the musician is able to discern the style, it narrows down the rhythms, chord progressions, speed and other characteristics typically associated with the particular style, making it easier to predict, hence streamlining the sight-reading process.

The abovementioned factors could account for the typical approach towards sight-reading skill in piano lessons. Pedagogues, having been through the process themselves, understand that sight-

reading is a skill that develops over time. However, that does not explain the inconsistency in proficiency in sight-reading skills within the same levels.

While sight-reading can be a challenge by itself, there are some who struggle more with it due to factors such as anxiety, physical disabilities, learning disabilities such as dyslexia and ADHD, physiological limitations such as an underdeveloped brain in younger learners, as well as motivation in a generation of children who have grown up in a culture of passive entertainment that subsequently affected their attention span.

Child music prodigies have been recorded in historical literature for many centuries, with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart being possibly the most prominent, reportedly having made his first composition before the age of 5. In present day, video recordings of child music prodigies make international news every now and then. This may give the impression that sight-reading is easily achievable even by young children. However, in a study done to explore variables in piano sight-reading achievement, a correlation between a late age of beginning and greater sight-reading achievement was found, indicating that even if young children can learn to read music, their understanding of notations is limited by their developmental stage that resulted in them processing information differently from adults (Kornicke, 2021). It is therefore consequential to keep in mind that even if there are child prodigies, that is the exception rather than the norm. It is also evident that exemplary musicality can be achieved even without proficiency in sight-reading, although the sustainability of that is questionable, which is something pedagogues should keep in mind in deliberation of a young student's learning journey.

Considering that motivation is one of the determinants of achievement in musical skills such as sight-reading (Kornicke, 2021), along with the information we find in a literature review on young children and screen based media, where it was concluded that "exposure to screen-based media can lead to poorer executive functions, attention difficulties, and behavioral problems" (Swider-Cios et al, 2023, Section 3: Discussion), it gives food for thought for pedagogues regarding possible challenges in the near future with respect to musical skills such as sight-reading.

## 1.2 Alternatives to sight-reading

Sight-reading may be a prevalent method for the conveying and receiving musical information today, but it is not without alternatives. Other methods include:

- Oral (by voice)
- Aural (by ear)
- Action demonstration

Oral method, as the name implies, involves using the voice to demonstrate the musical information. It is used in conjunction with the aural method, also known as “playing by ear”. Both oral and aural methods often include body movements to convey the melody, rhythm, timbre and other musical information. It is a key feature of a number of early childhood music education methodologies, namely Orff, Dalcroze, Suzuki and Kodaly (Gault, 2005). Action demonstration involves the teacher demonstrating the actions and the student mimicking it.

The oral and aural methods are part of basic musicianship skills. All three methods are frequently employed through all levels of music education in varying degrees. However, these alternative methods require some degree of memorizing and a source of input, hence heavy reliance on these methods undermines the independence of the student, compromising the sustainability of their musical journey in the long run.

## 2 Sight Reading in Piano Lessons

### 2.1 Objectives of this study

In this age where technological advancements have revolutionised the organisation and dissemination of information, thereby changing the structure of learning, there are some questions: is there a shift in attitudes regarding sight-reading? Do music teachers and students still regard sight-reading as relevant?

As a result of studies done on the topic of neurodiversity, there is a more comprehensive understanding of different learners that reveals the need for a more expansive approach in teaching. In a study conducted on grades 9-12 English teachers, it was found that a “mismatch between teaching styles and students’ learning style preferences resulted in low achievement, inattentiveness, or

negative attitude towards the subject and the teacher” (Goa, 2023, Section 6.1: Conclusions) It may be assumed that sight-reading skill comes naturally in the course of learning music and that those who struggle with it simply need to put more effort in it, but it may be that some students process information differently and will benefit from different approaches and tools more suited to their needs.

Historically, sight-reading music among friends and family was a typical activity among musicians in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Bashford, 1996) Today, piano teachers and piano lessons, both online and in person, are the main source of sight-reading instructing and practicing for piano students. Given the weight of that, it is necessary as a pedagogue to reassess if piano lessons today support the students’ needs sufficiently in this aspect, as well as to contemplate what could be done better to ensure sustainability in their students’ learning, considering the limited resources available to them. For example, are students with special needs being sufficiently supported? If a student with dyslexia or various visual impairment needs clearer, bigger print or extensively coloured markings, it might be easier to modify their music sheets via a program such as Adobe Photoshop where it is possible to modify, store and view electronically instead of manually marking each note and bringing around a stack of enlarged paper scores. Having the ability to make changes to their music sheet also ensures they can continue to have access to a wide range of materials without having to depend on a particular source for the specialized music sheets, offering them sustainability in their lifelong journey in music learning.

According to a study by Tao et al. (2022), a teacher’s support has significant influence on a student’s achievement, which is consistent with the findings in another study on music students’ motivation, where it was concluded that music students who enjoy and feel empowered in musical activities are more likely to commit to the learning process despite challenges (Woody, 2020). Inversely, music students who experience failure often withdrew from engagement and subsequently faced a decline in performance skills (O’Neill and Sloboda, 1997). This demonstrates the correlation between teacher’s support, skill acquisition and motivation in an education journey.

The significance of a teacher’s support in the student’s progress is evident. Therefore, acquiring the perspectives of both teachers and students will impart a comprehensive understanding of whether piano lessons today support learners’ needs sufficiently regarding sight-reading.

## 2.2 Review of related literature

In her 1992 Master's thesis, Hardy highlighted the phenomenon of sight-reading being neglected in piano lessons as an ongoing problem and set out with 3 hypotheses:

- i. The ability to sight-read at the piano is regarded by teachers as one of the most important pianistic skills.
- ii. The skill of sight-reading is not being addressed weekly in the piano lesson.
- iii. The DPSRP (Diagnostic/Prescriptive Sight-Reading Program), administered to class piano students will improve sight-reading skills at the piano. (Hardy, 1992, p.15)

She had conducted a nation-wide poll with response from 221 certified teachers in the United States of America. The results of the poll had provided valuable insights into the situation in the United States of America at that time. Sight-reading was regarded as "fairly important" at the very least. In her thesis, and subsequently an article under the same title published in 1998, Hardy reviewed some sight-reading books available commercially at that time and elucidated on her approach towards teaching sight-reading, including a system that she had designed for this purpose. The Diagnostic/Prescriptive Sight-Reading Program (DPSRP), which she introduced in her thesis in 1992, diagnose, plan and track a student's progress in sight-reading with clear guidelines. It also identifies specific errors in the student's sight-reading so that a remedy could be applied.

Unfortunately, only part of her thesis was accessible so the information that was available is limited. Based on the materials that was available, it can be considered as a very systematic and clear method with achievable steps where sight-reading could be incorporated into lesson time without compromising on other aspects. A limitation to this system could be the failure to address the different learning styles of students, although it might have been addressed in the "diagnostic" section of the thesis, which is regrettably not the accessible part of the material. Assuming that different learning styles was not addressed, it can be considered an outdated approach to expect all students to come with the same standard issues that can be fixed with standard methods, akin to ticking boxes off a checklist.

Dirkse (2009) expressed the same perspectives as Hardy (1992) regarding the lack of adequate consideration of sight-reading teaching methods in piano lessons. His study focused more on evaluation of several commercially available instructional books for sight-reading. He based his evaluation on the following categories:

- i. topographical awareness of the keyboard
- ii. directional reading ability
- iii. pattern recognition skills
- iv. effective sightreading habits

In his Master's thesis, he conducted a detailed examination of the relevance of those categories in sight-reading skill and critically analysed 4 series of instructional books for an average-age beginner. Similar to Hardy, his stance favoured a teacher-led approach to learning and failed to take into account the diversity in learning styles and processes. Although teacher-led approach is ideal at the beginner level, which is the focus of his study, incorporating some viewpoints from the student's point of view will provide a more comprehensive and relevant perspective.

Dirkse's (2009) approach to breaking down the elements of consideration in teaching sight-reading is very similar to Pokki's approach in his doctoral thesis in 2016. Pokki broke down the elements as such:

- i. skills in visualizing musical notation
- ii. anticipation skills
- iii. skills for preparing for a playthrough
- iv. playthrough skills
- v. mastery of pianistic musical patterns
- vi. keyboard feel
- vii. the skill of inner listening
- viii. SOIA skills: application, problem solving, improvisation and guessing

The difference is that Pokki breaks down the categories into smaller elements, for example, sections i and v could be classified under category iii under Dirkse's approach and sections ii, iii, iv and vii could be classified under category iv under Dirkse's approach. In breaking down the category into smaller elements, it allows Pokki to examine and distinguish each element in detail.

Pokki's objective was to develop a practical guideline that can be used to both explain and provide assistance in improving sight-reading skills through music psychology, studies of expert practice and practice-based piano pedagogical knowledge. As a performer and teacher himself, Pokki is familiar with the mechanisms that make up both the execution and pedagogy of sight-reading. He identified possible obstacles gave suggestions for overcoming them. He also highlighted the topics that still require research in sight-reading pedagogy as ergonomic, motivation and the learning environment. These are especially relevant points currently, as mentioned earlier in this thesis about the repercussion of technological advancement on the upcoming generations of students.

Another relevant literature is Vuori's doctoral dissertation in 2002: *Look, play and immerse: pianistic experiences of prima vista playing* (original Finnish name: *Katson, soitan, läpielän: pianistisia kokemuksia prima vista -soittamisesta*). Vuori conducted semi-structured interviews, where 8 participants played through the same pieces 5 times in succession with an interview at the end of each sessions. The objectives of her study is to describe the sight-reading experiences of the pianists as a whole in order to identify the elements of the process and experience. Through this phenomenological approach, Vuori examined the "approaches to prima vista as experienced qualities of space and time, both as a musical skill and as a body-phenomenological question" (translated quote from Vuori, 2002, p.3) and concluded that the sight-reading experience can be categorised into two broad categories, namely living-through and playing-through.

At the end of her dissertation, Vuori determined that the entire experience of a performance is a complex social interaction that involves the communication and reception of verbal and nonverbal cues. In her opinion, the non-verbal component of a musician's skill needs further research and better way of structuring or measuring in order to fully understand the experience.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Phenomenology**

The angle of approach for this study is to gain an understanding of the current situation by describing, analyzing and understanding the perceptions of the parties involved, consistent with the objectives of phenomenology methodology (Marton 1981). As Marton puts it, there is one world that people understand in different ways. To understand the current sentiments towards sight-

reading in piano lessons, we have to understand the phenomenon as it is experienced or understood by the participants involved.

The phenomenological approach is a branch of qualitative research which is data-driven. Qualitative research focuses on exploring and understanding, which is more suited to this topic as compared to quantitative research, which focuses on measuring numerical data (McLeod, 2019). In data-driven research, the data is analysed and interpreted, with a hypothesis subsequently derived from the analysis and interpretation, as opposed to a hypothesis-driven approach customary in quantitative research (Bazen et al, 2021). As the aim of this study is to understand what is happening, the hypothesis is inductive.

Data is collected through a small sample of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observations and content analysis in phenomenological research (Bazen et al, 2021). For this study, a structured questionnaire method was chosen for flexibility in acquiring data. To ensure free expression in order to capture a wider range of perspectives for analysis (Marton & Booth, 1997), open-ended questions were used where possible. Care was taken to avoid leading questions as far as possible while maintaining relevance to the topic under scrutiny. The objective was to get as close to reality as possible, in order to obtain an authentic representation of the participants' reality.

### **3.2 Comparative Study**

This study involves two groups – the teachers and the students. Comparing both sides of the interaction allows the students' needs, expectations and preferences to be bridged with the teachers' experience in the subject and the pedagogy. To understand the interaction of their perceptions to the same phenomenon, the data from the two groups will be systematically analysed for similarities, differences and patterns, consistent with the comparative study method (Iranifard & Latifnejad Roudsari, 2022).

In the analysis, the data was processed via coding to simplify and organize the information collected. The responses are analysed and grouped into codes, or categories (McLeod, 2024). The codes are then compared with each other to identify the similarities and differences, as well as to interpret the meanings of these relationships.

### **3.3 Limitations**

Although the phenomenological approach can capture deeper meanings and provide a rich understanding on this topic, there are limitations to the data collected with this approach. The individualized focus means that the data can only provide general assumptions of a population (Jordan et al, 2024), compromising the validity and reliability of this study.

The data collected is relatively small due to finite resources, which further compromises the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn from this study. However, the questionnaire format used for this study contributes to the reliability of the study as the structured format ensures that all participants were asked the same questions even though they were given the option to answer the questions freely in the open-ended format.

The reach of the questionnaires is unfortunately rather small, especially for the response on the students' perspective which is crucial in providing the other perspective for comparison with the teachers' perspective. The small amount of data that was collected limited the level of analysis that could be conducted. However, the author hopes that this study will nonetheless present a contemporary insight into the lived experiences of teachers and students on this topic, as well as provide a stepping point for further, more extensive research that can be done on this often overlooked topic today.

## **4 The study**

### **4.1 The approach**

This study comprises of separate questionnaires, accessible in both Finnish and English languages, addressed to two groups – piano teachers in Finland and piano students aged 10-20 years of age in Finland. The questionnaire is not usually the choice when it comes to qualitative research, but it had been selected as the tool due to language barrier and ease of data collection over a wider area. As the author is not a native Finnish speaker, interviews will compromise the authenticity of the data if the respondents do not respond in their native tongue and the author will not be able to respond effectively in Finnish. An open-ended questionnaire provides the chance for analysis of carefully deliberated responses with reduced interviewer influence on participants.

The focus group for piano students has been narrowed down to 10-20 years of age because students in this age group would have been sufficiently experienced in structured learning, with a wide range in competency with regards to music. Students in this group are usually engaged in full time education and are hence familiar with the process of learning and developing their skills. This group of students are likely to have existing learning disabilities diagnosed (Arrhenius et al., 2021). The age range of 10-20 years falls mostly within the adolescent age, which is often regarded as a period of personality construction and individualization in adolescent psychiatry (Halén, 2017) and had been noted as the age where the decision to continue studies or quit is made. This is also the age where students' personality develops as they shape their identities, preferences and opinions, as highlighted in the National Center for Biotechnology Information, "An adolescent's identity is an emerging reflection of his or her values, beliefs, and aspirations" (NCBI, 2019, Summary). In addition, piano students in this age range are less likely to be enrolled in higher level music education, where sight-reading is usually no longer considered a core subject in piano lessons.

## 4.2 Ethical considerations

Some ethical considerations when conducting online surveys include:

- i. informed consent
- ii. privacy/confidentiality
- iii. anonymity
- iv. data security
- v. avoiding bias (Roberts & Allen, 2015)

Informed consent requires voluntary participation, and full disclosure of the study and author's intention, to the participants, whereas privacy/confidentiality refers to the protection of participants' personal information, which can also be achieved through anonymity to prevent unwanted exposure of sensitive information. Similarly, data security requires proper handling of the participants' information to prevent leaks and violation of the participants' information. To ensure authenticity of the study, the author strived to be aware of possible biases and pay special attention to avoid influence on the study.

Other ethical considerations include ensuring the mental, emotional and physical well-being of the participants, as well as transparency in the reporting, analysing and data acquisition process.

The participants were contacted generally through email, with the teachers' emails sourced through an internet search for both private piano teachers and piano teachers in institutions in Finland. The email (in Finnish and English) sent to piano teachers, via 178 email addresses, had been attached in "[Appendix 1. Email to piano teachers](#)". The student participants were mainly contacted through the teachers in the emails and also in "muha" classes the author had participated in teaching for internship practice. Before the commencement of the questionnaires, the participants were given some information about the questionnaire. The information (in English and Finnish) given on the teachers' and students' questionnaires had been attached in "[Appendix 2. Questionnaire Information for teachers](#)" and "[Appendix 3. Questionnaire Information for students](#)" respectively.

The questionnaires are conducted anonymously online via a secured survey platform, Webropol.

### **4.3 The data**

#### **4.3.1 Teachers' insight into sight-reading in piano lessons**

The number of participants from the teacher's perspective is 6. The data collected from the questionnaire is originally in Finnish and translated into English for the data analysis. The response to question 1 reveals that 63% of the respondents are teaching in higher level music education. The remaining 37% may be involved in both beginners and higher level music education. However, it should be noted that the teachers were specifically asked to answer the questions with only students between the ages of 10-20 years old in mind.

#### **4.3.2 The data – Students' insight into sight-reading in piano lessons**

The number of participants from the student's perspective is 3. The data collected from the questionnaire is originally in Finnish and translated into English for the data analysis. The response to question 1 ensures that the participants involved are indeed within the selected age range for analysis, with the average age of participants being 13.3 years old. The response to questions 2 and 3 indicates that the students received sight-reading instruction at the same time when they began piano lessons. The average age of the participants of this questionnaire starting piano lessons is 7 years old and the average number of years of receiving music instructions is 6.3 years, which usually corresponds to the advanced beginner level.

## 4.4 The analysis

In Hardy's 1992 thesis, she categorized the focus of typical piano lessons as repertoire, interpretation, performance technique, artistic performance and memorization. Along with other musician-ship skills mentioned in this thesis, the categories have been narrowed down to the following:

- i. Playing – Repertoire, sound, rhythm and execution of music-making
- ii. Listening – Aural perception, analysis and interpretation
- iii. Technique – How the playing was executed
- iv. Improvising – The creative aspect of music-making
- v. Theory – Information about harmony, form and history
- vi. Sight-reading – Unrehearsed playing of a piece of music

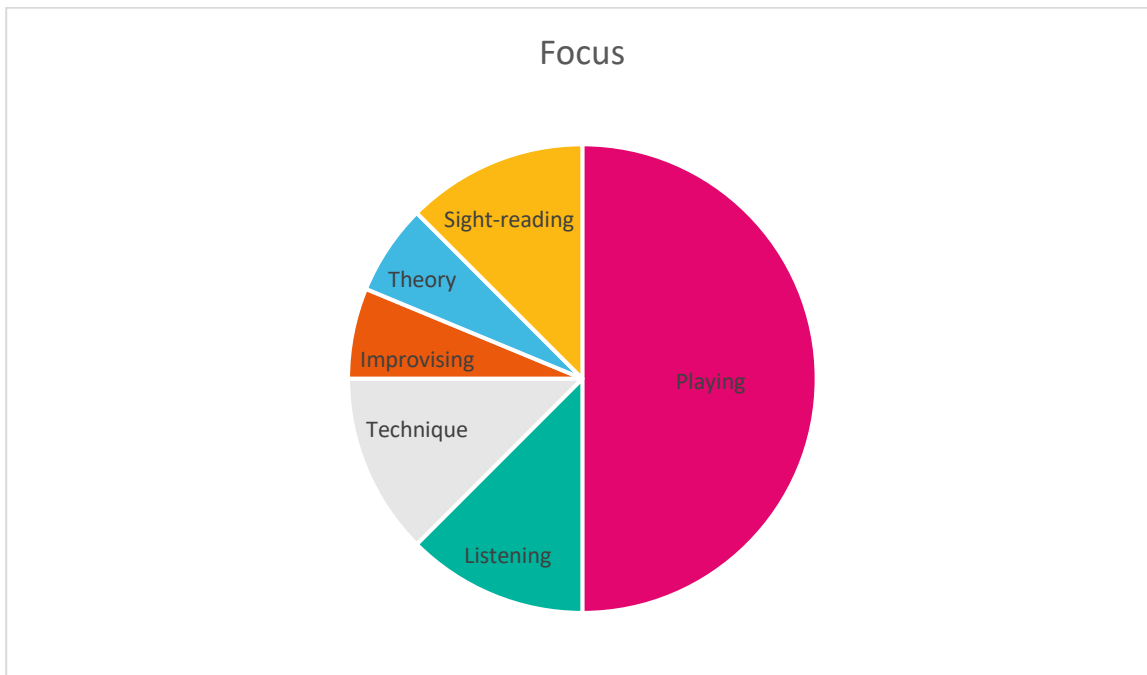
The data obtained had been coded into these categories where possible.

### 4.4.1 Analysis of the response from the teachers' questionnaire

In question 2 that broached the topic of focus in piano lessons, the number of mentions in the categories are as follows:

Playing	Listening	Technique	Improvising	Theory	Sight-reading
8	2	2	1	1	2
50%	12.5%	12.5%	6.3%	6.3%	12.5%

Some notable comments include "Playing is the primary thing, so that you can play a variety of pieces." As well as "Reading music is important, and we start with that right from the first piano lesson." There appears to be a strong distinction between sight-reading and playing, with playing regarded as a musical skill and sight-reading as more of a theoretical skill.

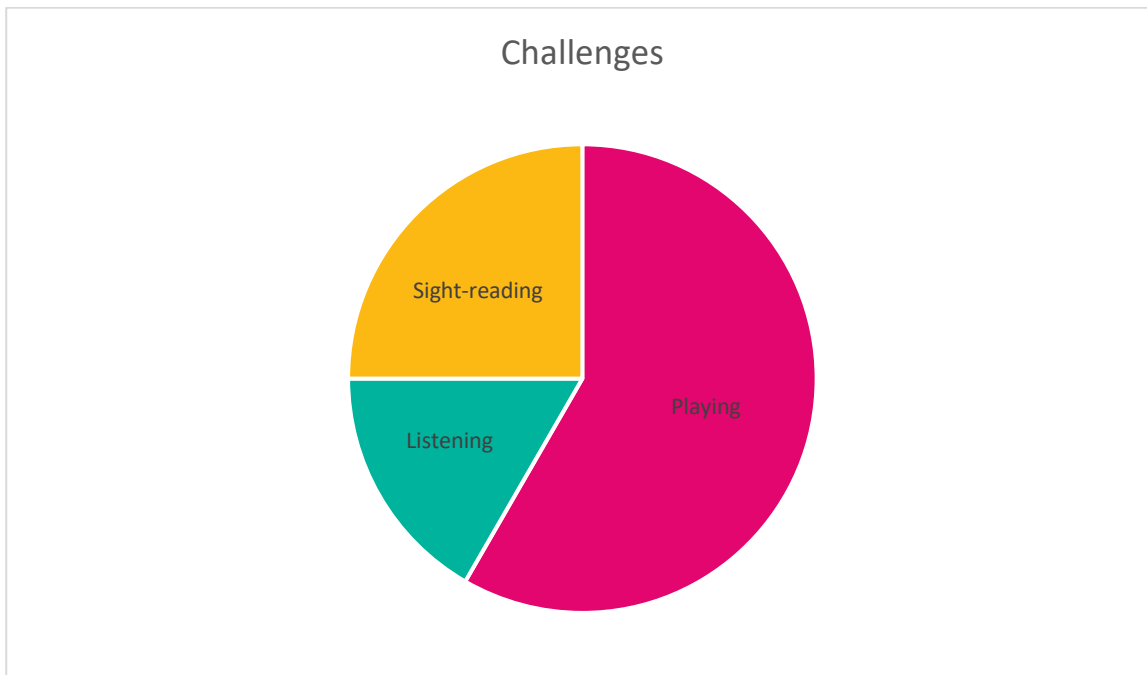


There is a distinct dominant category revealed here – Playing, followed by Sight-reading, Technique and Listening in equal weights and then Theory and Improvising. All teachers who specified the focus of their lessons mentioned Playing.

In question 3 that broached the topic of perceived challenges in students, the number of mentions in the categories are as follows:

Playing	Listening	Technique	Improvising	Theory	Sight-reading
7	2	0	0	0	3
58.3%	16.7%	-	-	-	25%

Some notable comments are “There is no one best way, each is an individual”, “Internal listening is missing” and “Everyone's challenges are individual”. In general the teachers agree on the individuality of each student.



Once again, Playing was revealed as the dominant category, followed by Sight-reading, then Listening. Theory, Improvising and Techniques do not appear to be considered a challenge for the students in the focus group. Sight-reading and Listening had equal positions in the previous question, but now Sight-reading was regarded as more of a challenge than Listening.

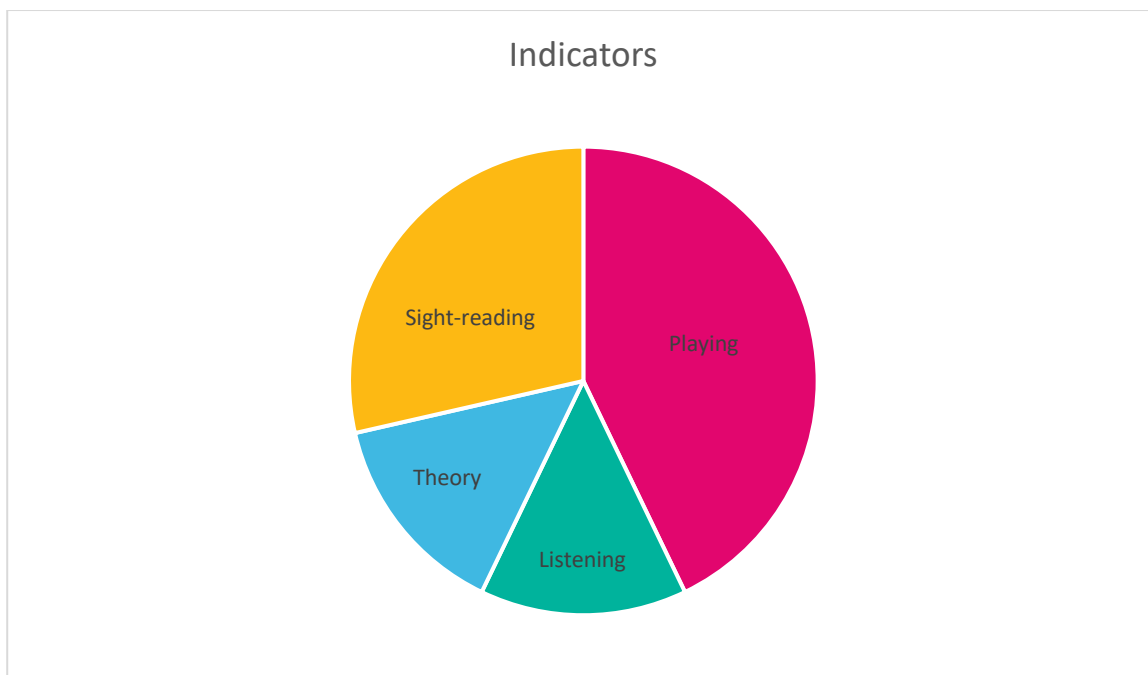
In question 4, where asked specifically about inclusion of sight-reading in piano lessons, 83% responded with “yes”. However, only 33% mentioned a particular strategy, for example, “we practice anticipation and cover the bars with a piece of paper so that the student learns to look ahead into the music”, used in sight reading exercises. This is consistent with Hardy’s (1992) observation that strategies and methods are often overlooked in sight-reading.

17% of the participants answered questions 5-9, which are specific to having the direct experience of student(s) displaying distress during sight-reading. In these responses, the participant described loss in musicality (the categories used in coding in this chapter applies) in the event(s) to which the proposed solution is to work on the mental state rather than sight-reading skill. Some comments include “even a good player’s technique is lost, listening is lost, tempo is forgotten, etc” and “Music has become detached from musical notation”. This could indicate that the participant do not consider the difficulty the student experienced as being the result of lack of practice/skill/strategy,

or that it could be improved by more sight-reading practice. In contrary, the practicing of sight-reading skill in this case is regarded to have expunged the musicality of the experience in this case.

In the responses to question 10, 80% believes they can detect a learning disability through the student's playing via the categories:

Playing	Listening	Technique	Improvising	Theory	Sight-reading
3	1	0	0	1	2
42.9%	14.3%	-	-	14.3%	28.6%



Most comments are along the line of "it is noticeable with long experience". This is in contrast to the findings from Hasu's study where it was concluded that "the teacher cannot conclude from a playing lesson whether a student has a learning disability" (2017, p.8) which corresponds to her observation that "In the studies of a music teacher, learning difficulties and different learners were not discussed at all." (2017, p.17) In her thesis, Hasu found low correlation between the teacher's

observation of the students and the results of tests measuring learning difficulties, though she also noted that “a music teacher may notice learning difficulties” (2017, p.227), which is more consistent with the response to the questionnaire. This reveals that the understanding of different learners are still in its infancy.

In the response to question 11 regarding correlation between sight-reading skills and general musicianship, 67% do not see a correlation between sight-reading skill and general musicianship and 33% do. This is in consensus with Hardy’s observation 30 years ago that a significant portion of piano students she encountered could not sight-read well despite being excellent at playing (1992). In the response, 33% stressed that sight-reading skill is nurtured rather than given by nature and 16.5% pointed out that sight-reading only imparts the information about the position of the notes, and that the ones who can read well are not necessarily the ones who can interpret it well musically. This point will come into relevance again in the analysis for Q.13, where the question of the exact definition of sight-reading comes into light.

In question 12, where asked for an approach to a student who continued to struggle with sight-reading after trying, 67% suggested more practice, 33% mentioned time constraint, 17% suggested alternative methods from sight-reading and 17% stated that never happened. It should be noted that none of the response included mentions of a student-centered approach, for example, trying to figure out what may be preventing the student from overcoming this obstacle. This corresponds to Hasu’s observation that “The music school system – in terms of curriculum and attitudes- has also not taken different learners into account until the last ten years or so.” (Hasu, 2017, p.17) The programme Hardy designed for her thesis in 1992 included a “diagnosing” component, which could be indication of a student-centered approach and is in consensus with Hasu’s comment that pupils should be taught “according to symptoms” (2017, p.196). One notable comment was “not everyone has to be the best music reader in the world, but there are other ways to learn songs” with video recordings given as an example. This indicates that the influences of technological advancement on the way learning is conducted is already in motion. Alternative methods are now in consideration, being more accessible and therefore replacing some older methods.

In question 13, where asked for additional comments about teaching sight-reading, 33% mentioned particular strategies, 50% do not cover sight-reading in piano lessons and 33% mentioned

sight-reading as not being one of the priorities in their piano lessons. This is consistent with Hardy's finding that only a small portion (7%) of teachers interviewed taught sight-reading systematically (1992). One of the response specified "meaningful elements" as being more important than reading the notes, although the examples given for the "meaningful elements" are typically considered as part of sight-reading skill, at least in English-speaking regions. This could mean that the teachers, who are all Finnish, may be defining sight-reading as specifically "note-reading" - the reading of the notes, like the response to Q.11: "often those who can quickly perceive a note are not the most musical players, but only focus on the positions of the notes on the staff", rather than the overall reading, understanding, interpreting and execution of an unfamiliar piece of music.

In total, sight-reading is mentioned as important in piano lessons 5 times and not important 8 times in the span of this questionnaire, meaning that when sight-reading's importance in piano lessons was mentioned, it was regarded as important 38% of the time and not important 62% of the time. This is in stark contrast to Hardy's finding in 1992 where 86% of the teachers viewed sight-reading as important. The portions of text that had been categorized as regarding sight-reading as important are:

1. Q.2, response c, "reading music is important"
2. Q2, response f, "improving note reading"
3. Q4, response b, "yes. We teach how to read"
4. Q4, response f, "I try to play at least some prima vista with everyone in class"
5. Q13, response d, "It is an important thing that should be practiced more often"

The portions of text that had been categorized as regarding sight-reading as not important are:

1. Q.3, response b, "too much thinking about notes and focusing on note reading"
2. Q4, response a, "if there is time, I will include"
3. Q7, "excessive pressure on the importance of reading notation"
4. Q12, response a, "not everyone has to be the best music reader in the world, but there are other ways to learn songs"
5. Q13, response a, "there really isn't much time for it"
6. Q13, response b, "no one thinks about the names of letters in a word when reading, the same applies to music"
7. Q13, response c, "I don't actually teach prima vista, but it is a so-called extra exercise"
8. Q13, response c, "aims for fluent reading only if the student already reads music well"

By far, this is the strongest indication of a shift in teachers' opinions regarding sight-reading in Piano lessons.

#### 4.4.2 Analysis of the response from the students' questionnaire

In the response to question 4 that broached the topic of ease and challenges in learning piano, the number of mentions by the students, coded according to the same categories as for the teachers' response, are as follows:

Challenges:

Playing	Listening	Technique	Improvising	Theory	Sight-reading
1	0	0	0	0	1

Easy:

Playing	Listening	Technique	Improvising	Theory	Sight-reading
0	1	0	0	0	0

Generally, Improvising, Technique and Theory do not stand out as either easy or challenging, with the students' focus being Playing, Listening and Sight-reading.

In the response to question 5 that broached the topic of enjoyability in learning piano, the number of mentions of the categories are as follows:

Playing	Listening	Technique	Improvising	Theory	Sight-reading
2	0	0	0	0	1
67%	-	-	-	-	33%

This indicates that Playing is a major motivation for the students and that some students enjoy Sight-reading too. Listening, Technique, Improvising and Theory do not appear to have any bearings in terms of motivation. One notable comment was “learning new songs”, which indicates that incorporating sight-reading practices in a relevant manner is achievable.

In the response to question 6 that broached the topic of their opinion of the importance of sight-reading, the average response is “important”. None of the participants answered “not important” or “not really important” and one participant noted it as difficult. This clearly indicates that students regard Sight-reading as a valuable skill in their music education.

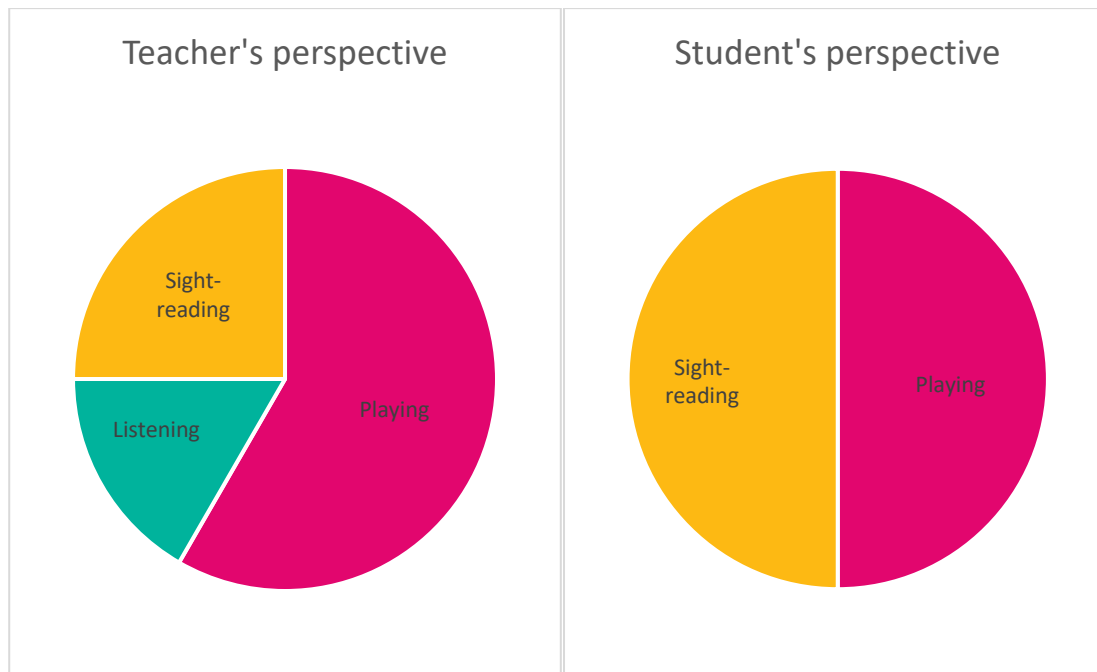
In the response to question 7 that broached the topic of difference in playing and sight-reading, the average response is between “different” and “quite different” with one respondent noting sight-reading as being more difficult. This implies that the students regards the experience of sight-reading as distinct from that in playing a familiar repertoire, as well as recognizes the challenges of sight-reading.

The response to question 8 indicates that 100% has had exposure to sight-reading exercises in piano lessons and the response to question 9 indicates that the students are generally satisfied with the amount of attention on sight-reading in piano lessons, though it could be more. Overall the students, who are familiar with sight-reading, appear to have a positive disposition towards sight-reading and enjoy the process of playing something new in their piano lessons with one comment “the teacher has a lot of exercises to train *prima vista*”.

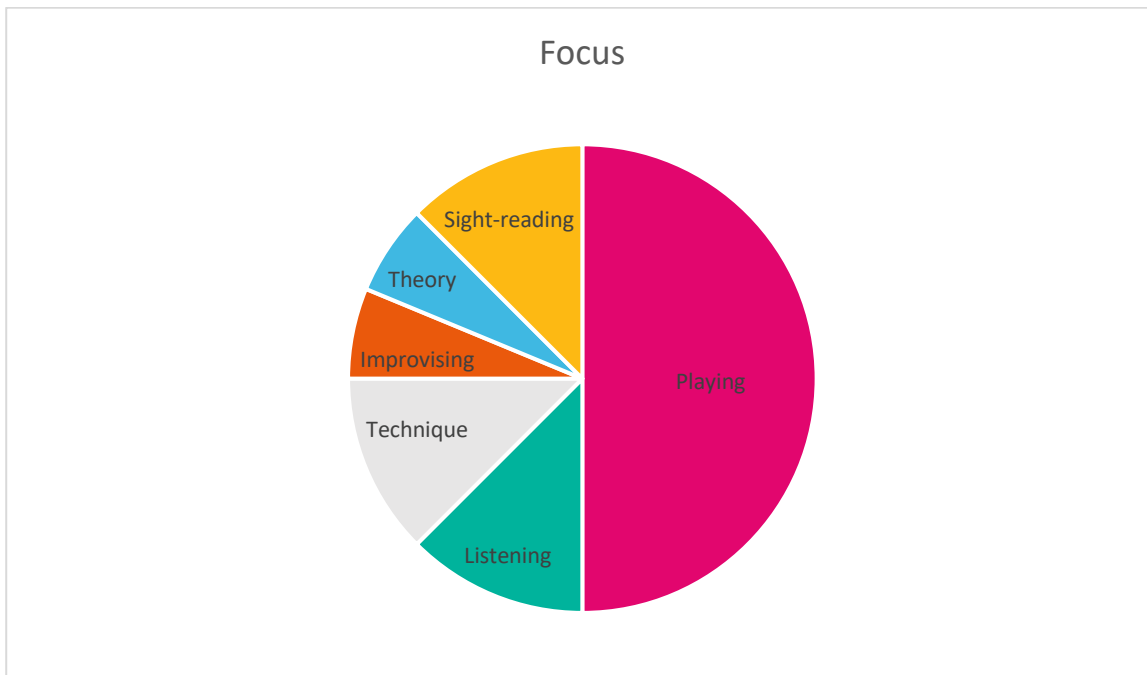
The response to question 10 indicates that the students do not have a clear structure when it comes to sight-reading, implying that teachers might not be employing any particular strategy for sight-reading, like Hardy had discovered in her 1992 study where only 7% of teachers interviewed taught sight-reading systematically, or the students might be intuitive in their approach to sight-reading, or they are not aware of the pedagogical process of their teachers.

#### 4.4.3 Comparing the teachers' response with the students' response

The responses to question 3 in the teacher's questionnaire and question 4 in the student's questionnaire are similar. Both identified playing and sight-reading as the main challenges.



However, when we compare the response to question 2 in the teacher's questionnaire, we can see that when it comes to allocating focus of the lessons, sight-reading gets compromised significantly. This may imply that the focus in piano lessons today may not be supporting the students' needs sufficiently.



That said, when the response in Qn.5 of the students' questionnaire is brought into the equation, where 67% of the enjoyable aspect of their piano lessons is indicated as Playing, we can understand there is a good reason for Playing to be a prominent focus in piano lessons. Playing can be considered as a major motivating factor, which according to Kornicke, is one of the determinants of achievement in musical skills (2021).

The responses to question 4 in the teacher's questionnaire and question 10 in the student's questionnaire are quite consistent. 33% of the teachers' response mentioned a particular method or strategy in teaching sight-reading, consistent with Hardy's observation that strategies and methods for sight-reading are overlooked in favour of other musical skills (1992). None of the students could recount any particular method or strategy used for sight-reading, although as mentioned above, the students' response could be due to the fact that they are not considering sight-reading from a pedagogical perspective, but rather approaching it intuitively under the guidance of their teachers.

The responses to question 13 in the teacher's questionnaire and question 8 in the student's questionnaire reveals an inconsistency. 50% of the teachers do not appear to cover sight-reading in their piano lessons whereas 100% of the student respondents have sight-read in their piano lessons. There could be a number of reasons for this inconsistency, the most likely being that 63% of

the teacher respondents are teaching in higher level music education, in which case it may be proof for the convention of sight-reading being acquired and addressed in the early stages of music education, as mentioned in p.2 of this thesis.

When sight-reading's importance in piano lessons was mentioned by teachers, it was regarded as important 38% of the time and not important 62% of the time, as compared to the response to question 6 in the student's questionnaire where the average response is "important" and none of the participants answered "not important" or "not really important". This indicates that there appears to be a discrepancy in the perceived importance of sight-reading, with teachers considering it not important and students considering it important generally.

## 5 Conclusion

According to the results of the analysis, there appears to be a shift in attitude regarding sight-reading. Overall teachers do not seem to regard sight-reading as important components of piano lessons. However, students seem to value sight-reading as an important skill. This potential gap in opinion can be an indication to pedagogues that their students might be more receptive and appreciative than expected, for more focus on sight-reading skills in their lessons. Even though it may seem an arduous task that could be done without the assistance of a teacher, the input and support from the teacher, along with the experience that both teacher and student can obtain through the process, may be a beneficial element that a teacher can bring to their piano lessons.

Additionally, based on the analysis of the data and the author's personal experiences in teacher's training as well as understanding from other teacher's opinions, there is a deficiency in music teachers' training in the aspect of diverse learning methods in general. As Hasu pointed out in 2017, information in this aspect is still lacking in a music teacher's training. As the number of music students with special needs is expected to increase due to better diagnosing and awareness, music pedagogues will benefit from better knowledge and training in handling such situations to ensure high quality, sustainable and enjoyable journey in music learning. It should be stressed that the purpose of labeling, if necessary, of a learning difficulty should only be for narrowing down the possible solutions that are most likely to work, in order to find a solution with the best results.

Some other considerations that have come into question during the process of this thesis includes the efficacy of novel applications that introduced new approaches to learning sight-reading and the increasing accessibility of the sharing of pre-recorded materials that can potentially reduce the importance of sight-reading skills if alternative methods become easily available. These relatively new technological advancements may be reshaping the learning environment and practices at this very moment. As of such, it is too early to be able to discern the effects, but is definitely a line of inquest for the future.

In the course of this study, it has also come to light that alternatives to sight-reading may be the way forward for certain groups of students. A long term study comparing the effectiveness and experiences of different methods used for different learners will yield valuable insights into the field of diversifying the teaching methods that can be employed in music pedagogy. Afterall, if there is one world that people understand in different ways, why limit the pedagogy of a creative subject to a few standard paths?

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Email to piano teachers

Hyvä vastaanottaja,

Nimeni on Anlin Kallio ja opiskelen musiikkipedagogiksi (AMK) Jyväskylän ammattikorkeakoulussa. Kirjoitan parhaillaan opinnäytetyötäni, jonka aiheena on opettajien ja oppilaiden näkemykset prima vista -soitosta pianotunneilla, ja haluaisin kutsua teidät osallistumaan kyselyyn verkossa.

Kysely on saatavilla sekä suomeksi että englanniksi, ja sen täyttäminen kestää noin 15 minuuttia. Kyselyssä kartoitetaan mielipiteitä prima vista -soitosta eri tasoilla toteutettavilla pianotunneilla Suomessa. Osallistumisenne auttaa ymmärtämään nykyisiä käytäntöjä ja asenteita prima vista -soittoa kohtaan pianopedagogiikassa Suomessa.

Mikäli mahdollista, toivoisin myös oppilaidenne osallistuvan kyselyyn. Oppilaiden vastaukset ovat tärkeitä, sillä ne auttavat ymmärtämään heidän näkökulmaansa tähän muusikkoutta kehittävään taitoon. Oppilaiden osallistuminen voi auttaa kehittämään oppimisympäristöä ja tarjota vielä kattavamman näkemyksen aiheesta.

Kysely toteutetaan täysin anonymisti – mitään tietoa, josta vastaaja voitaisiin suoraan tunnistaa, ei kerätä. IP-osoitteita ei tallenneta eikä kerätty tieto tule olemaan jäljitettävissä. Vastaukset tallennetaan salasanalla suojatulle Webropol-alustalle ja niitä käytetään ainoastaan opinnäytetyössä, joka käsittelee prima vista -soittoa pianotunneilla. Minä olen opinnäytetyön ainoa kirjoittaja eikä tietoja jaeta ulkopuolisille.

Kyselystä on kaksi versiota – yksi pianonsoiton opettajille ja toinen 10–20-vuotiaille pianonsoiton oppilaille. Kyselyihin voi vastata 11.5.2025 asti.

Oppilaiden kysely löytyy tästä linkistä: <https://link.webropol.com/s/opisprimavista>

Opettajien kysely löytyy tästä linkistä: <https://link.webropol.com/s/opetprimavista>

Kiitos mielenkiinnostanne. Mikäli teillä on kysyttävää, voitte ottaa minuun yhteyttä osoitteessa ad2365@student.jamk.fi, niin vastaan parhaani mukaan.

Ystävällisin terveisin,

**Anlin Kallio**

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Dear sir or madam,

My name is Anlin Kallio and I am a Music Pedagogue student from Jyväskylän Ammattikorkeakoulu. I am currently working on my bachelor's thesis, Teachers' and Students' Insights into Sight Reading in Piano Lessons, and would like to invite you to participate in a questionnaire online.

The questionnaire is available in both Finnish and English, and should take about 15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire includes questions about opinions on sight reading in piano lessons at different levels in Finland. If you decide to take part, your contribution will help us gain insight into the current practices and attitudes towards sight reading in piano lessons in Finland.

If possible, I would like to invite your students to participate too. Their participation matters because it will help us better understand students' current opinions about this musicianship skill. Their participation can help shape the learning environment and provide a more complete insight into this topic.

The data is collected anonymously in this questionnaire - we will not collect any data that could directly identify the participants, the IP addresses will not be stored and we will take all reasonable measures to ensure that the data collected remains untraceable. The responses provided will be stored in a password-protected site on Webropol and used in the Bachelor's thesis about sight reading in piano lessons. The data collected will not be shared with external parties and I am the sole writer of this thesis.

The questionnaire is available in two versions – one for piano teachers and one for piano students aged 10-20 years old. The questionnaires will be available until 11.5.2025, after which it will no longer be accessible.

The student's questionnaire is available via this link: <https://link.webropol.com/s/opisprimavista>.

The teacher's questionnaire is available via this link: <https://link.webropol.com/s/opetprimavista>.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. If you have any concern regarding this, please contact me at [ad2365@student.jamk.fi](mailto:ad2365@student.jamk.fi) and I will do my best to answer your query.

Best regards,

Anlin Kallio

## Appendix 2. Questionnaire Information for teachers

This questionnaire is about sight reading skill in piano lessons, with focus on piano students between the ages of 10-20 years old. Please limit your answers in this questionnaire to students who fall in this category.

The data from this questionnaire is collected anonymously and will be used in a study about sight reading in piano lessons.

Your contribution will help to better understand the practices and attitudes towards sight reading in piano lessons these days.

Your participation is voluntary.

By clicking next, you are consenting to participation in this study.

-----

Tämä kysely käsittelee prima vista -opetusta pianotunneilla, keskittyen 10-20-vuotiaisiin piano-opiskelijoihin. Keskitythän vastauksissasi opiskelijoihin, jotka kuuluvat tähän ryhmään.

Tämän kyselyn tiedot kerätään anonymisti ja tuloksia käytetään pianonsoiton oppituntien prima vistaa koskevassa ammattikorkeakoulun opinnäytetyön tutkimuksessa.

Osallistumisesi kyselyyn auttaa ymmärtämään paremmin pianonsoiton prima vista -opetuksen käytäntöjä ja asenteita.

Osallistumisesi on vapaaehtoista.

Klikkaamalla Seuraava-painiketta hyväksyt osallistumisesi tutkimukseen.

### Appendix 3. Questionnaire Information for students

This questionnaire is about the approach towards sight reading skill in piano lessons. Sight reading refers to the reading and execution of musical notations at first glance.

The data from this questionnaire is collected anonymously and will be used in a study about sight reading in piano lessons.

Your contribution will help to better understand the practices and attitudes towards sight reading in piano lessons these days.

Your participation is voluntary.

By clicking next, you are consenting to participation in this study.

-----

Tämä kysely käsittelee prima vista -opetusta pianotunneilla. Prima vista tarkoittaa nuottien lukemista ja soittamista ensisilmäyksellä.

Tämän kyselyn tiedot kerätään anonyymisti ja tuloksia käytetään pianonsoiton oppituntien prima vistaa koskevassa ammattikorkeakoulun opinnäytetyön tutkimuksessa.

Osallistumisesi kyselyyn auttaa ymmärtämään paremmin pianonsoiton prima vista -opetuksen käytäntöjä ja asenteita.

Osallistumisesi on vapaaehtoista.

Klikkaamalla Seuraava-painiketta hyväksyt osallistumisesi tutkimukseen.