

But I Paid for 30 Minutes!

By Judy Weigert Bossuat

The child is concentrating, cooperating, and learning at 100%. It is a terrific lesson—well constructed, to the point, joyous. The parent and student are being sent home with a clear assignment. They understand and are confident that they are capable of achieving the goals that have been laid out. The child and I are feeling really happy. But, oops! The natural conclusion to the lesson came at minute 22.

And I hear it—or feel it. The parent’s eyes flit to the clock or her watch and there is the request for what I call “filler lesson time.” “Could you listen to...?” “Jeremy, show your teacher how you do...” “Doesn’t our lesson go until half past?” The teacher and child are finished, but the minutes paid for aren’t. What tends to happen?—filler.

You can always find a way to fill the time. There’s always more review to hear. There’s always another scale to do or an exercise to repeat ten more times. But is filling the time in the student’s best interest? Are we teaching students to give us less than 100%? Have we started the parent’s home practicing job in the lesson? In the end, what do children learn from filler lessons?

- Not to trust you. The child thinks and feels as if he is finished...and you add more.
- Not to give 100%. Students soon learn that it is dangerous to give their complete effort. They might be asked for more and then what will happen? Admonitions that they are not trying hard enough?
- That they can manipulate the situation by wasting time at the beginning of a lesson or causing delays which result in late arrival. The lesson will be shorter and the chance of having to concentrate longer than they are comfortable decreases.
- That quantity is more important than quality. In reality, this is like adding too many breadcrumbs to the hamburger or too much water to the tomato sauce. Would you want your hairdresser to keep cutting just because the next appointment doesn’t start for ten minutes?

Certainly good teaching occasionally includes example repetitions to help guide the parents, but when does the line get crossed so that the teacher becomes the substitute for the home practicing parent? And do these extra repetitions permit the parents to pressure the child into doing what really is the parent’s job? We have all heard a parent say to their youngster, “Now Johnny, pay attention so that you can remember how to do that exercise when we get home.” What are the actual chances that the child will remember exactly what was repeated in the lesson and what if his memory is different from that of his parent? It must feel counterproductive to the child to be pressured to take the responsibility to remember and then discover when she gets home that the parent thinks the child’s memory is wrong. Result: conflict and mixed messages.

Teach the child, not the minutes

During my many months in Matsumoto I never saw “one child, one parent and one teacher” in a lesson room. Circulation in the halls did not happen every half hour. Parents and children came and observed, had a lesson, stayed and observed some more. How long were the lessons? Minutes did not seem to matter. Lessons were as long as necessary to make the point and have the child give 100%—and no less—of their best effort.

But how can we create the same conditions here in the West where, as Dr. Suzuki often joked, “Time is money?” The best formula I have found is to have three students arrive at the same time. The children each get their individual moment (in a rotating order) and then the parents have the left-over time for their own education. The difference between the progress of these children and the children who do no observation is phenomenal, even if the non-observing child has older siblings studying the instrument. In addition, the parents and children become steadfast friends and dropouts are much less likely. Everyone needs others with whom they can share victories and challenges. If scheduling three students at a time is not feasible, how about scheduling two, or overlapping by 15 minutes the beginning and end of all your lessons?

Instead of “filling” the lesson, why not teach the parent? How about answering their questions, working with them on their own playing, discussing with them ideas for stimulating home practice. Try pretending to be the child so the parent can practice doing a specific exercise you have requested..

We need to teach each of the children individually. Give each of the two or three children in the room their special time with the teacher, but make it what each child needs and use the rest of the time to help the parents. The more the parents are trained, the more there will be practice follow-through at home. The better the practices at home, the longer the child will learn to concentrate and give you 100% effort.

How often as teachers do we fall into the trap of spending lesson time doing what the home practice did not accomplish? Are we really helping, or are we making the parent even more dependent on us? Once the student and parent have understood, they really need to have time to work things out on their own. Learning to practice is a process. Parent and child need to learn to work together and discover where they have questions.

Parents and students: watch, relax and absorb

There is so much to learn from watching other students' lessons. As a parent you should relish the time watching the student less advanced than your own child. Appreciate where you have been and empathize. Enjoy the time watching children more advanced than your own. Follow their lessons closely and see what you can learn. While each child is different, there are common factors in the learning process. Plus, the intricacies of the music unravel with familiarity. Buy the more advanced book and follow along in the music.

The observation is wholeheartedly for you the parent, but your child learns too, even when you think she is not paying any attention. Use the time to cuddle. Relax. Enjoy that the pressure is off your child and she can draw pictures to her heart's content. Even children one might expect to be disruptive get the hang of it and stay quiet. Just be clear about your expectations and about what is appropriate behavior and activity.

Yes, there are groceries to get, supper to make and cleaning to do. Real life is like practicing review pieces and playing scales. You can always do more. But relishing the moment, observing and relaxing reap unquestionable rewards.

In my studio at the University of Oregon, one learns to expect observers because of the long-term training courses. Even if no other teacher is actually sitting in the room, the chances are good that the video camera is going so university students with class conflicts can get their observations completed. In individual lessons I am clearly intent on the child standing in front of me at that moment, but they are not "private" lessons. There are other parents, children and teachers watching. Over time, everyone gets used to it.

Changing our attitudes

Let's look again at the 30-minute dilemma. Perhaps we help create the preoccupation with lesson length when we price our lessons by 20, 30, 40, 45 or 60 minute durations. Maybe if we priced lessons by book level we would have more freedom to teach the children exactly what they need. (And perhaps there would not be such a hurry to speed through the repertoire if the price went up as the children advanced!)

I find in the attitudes towards lesson time an interesting dichotomy. Running overtime is fine, but teaching five minutes less than the time paid for can elicit clock-watching and requests for "filler." How often have you had a parent offer to pay extra when you teach past the allotted time? I once asked one of my son's teachers to please let me pay for 45-minute lessons rather than 30. It was apparent to me that they were consistently running over the time. With a look of astonishment, his teacher said that it was the first time in 35 years of teaching anyone had offered to pay more before being asked! How surprising!

It takes "teacher bravery" to give the child the lesson you feel he can take while giving you his 100% best effort, especially if it might not fill the required minutes. Filler lessons don't ultimately serve anyone's best interest. Values get skewed and time becomes more important than what is being learned.

Teachers: Be brave enough to teach the lesson that is necessary and appropriate.

Parents: Respect that filling time might not be teaching your child what you are hoping he will learn.

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