In Our Students’ Shoes

All educators should be learning something that is difficult. For many of us who grew up thinking the arts were only for those who had talent, learning to draw, dance, or play an instrument can provide a challenge. Most students only pursue arts training if they are thought to have talent, which is a natural interest in something coupled with an unlearned facility in it. Everyone can develop some level of expertise in the arts; for those of us without innate talent, art or music lessons can be a challenge similar to those faced by children learning reading or math. Imagine if we only taught reading or math to students who demonstrated talent in those areas! Violin lessons have provided me with valuable insights into the struggles students face and how educators can help children learn.

Principal vs. Violin

After my appointment as principal of an arts-focused school, I was challenged by our strings teacher to join the third graders in beginning strings instruction. She provided a violin and I tried to attend class weekly. The children loved it; and my designated buddy made sure I kept up with practice even if my principal duties made me miss a class. After the children helped me through fourth- and fifth-grade violin class, I was hooked and decided to begin private violin lessons.

I will never forget sitting in the studio’s waiting room for my first lesson. The teacher came out, looked around the room, and asked a little girl if her name was Bridget. I said, “I’m Bridget,” and we began our journey together. At first, I rarely played a measure without being asked to stop so that some techniques could be corrected. During that first summer, I never made it through one whole song without interruption. It seemed to me that nothing I was doing was working the way it should. My teacher tried to explain how to hold the violin and bow correctly, to understand the relationship between the angle of the violin and the angle of the bow and, most of all, to be relaxed while paying attention to all these details.

I was feeling pretty discouraged until she uncovered my learning style. I needed hand-over-hand, kinesthetic practice to understand what I needed to do. This was the key and we have used the technique weekly with success. Whenever I just can’t do what my teacher tells me to do, she makes me relax—no small feat—and she takes control. By working through the motor patterns under her control, I am able to successfully take over on my own.

So what have I learned by taking up this seductively difficult instrument as a 50-something-year-old principal?

“Educators should be learners—not only for acquiring new knowledge, but for the experience gained from learning something difficult.”

You are never too old to try and children appreciate witnessing your effort. Sometimes, trying is hard and risky and might be embarrassing. We need to be tuned in to our students to support them when they are taking risks.

It is helpful for children to see an adult learning something hard and not being instantly good at it. Usually, adults can easily do what we are trying to teach children to do; it helps kids to see that hard work can result in improvement.

Having a good teacher who can analyze and suggest solutions is a precious gift to a learner. A good teacher spends much time figuring out how each student learns best and uses that knowledge at every opportunity to keep the student going. Good teachers are problem-solvers who never give up on anyone.

All students need opportunities to see how much they have learned and improved. Playing pieces that were hard a few months ago is a good way to see improvement.

Never give up on the basics. Scales may be boring, but they allow your mind to focus on small parts of technique that you can’t focus on when you are playing something more complicated. Students should review easy material to build confidence and fluency.

All students can improve if they are challenged. I always thought I had a good ear for relative pitch and harmony. I have learned that it isn’t as good as I thought, but that it is improving slowly with practice.

Old habits are hard to break—and new ones take concentration to establish. Children need time to relax their brains from all this hard work. Activity and recess are crucial.

Having a goal can be motivating. Knowing I have to play in a concert can inspire me to endure tedious practice. Knowing that learning will be shared with others is motivating for students, too.

Praise is only valuable when it is genuine and it needs to be specific so the learner knows exactly what was done correctly. Criticism definitely needs to be balanced with specific praise—otherwise the learner can become disheartened and frustrated.

Sometimes even principals have to give someone else control to learn something. As a leader, we must be open to learning from others, including children.

Educators should be learners—not only for acquiring new knowledge, but for the experience gained from learning something difficult. The arts can provide a challenging learning experience as well as valuable insights—and maybe something to help us relax!

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