



DISPARITY IN THE OUTCOMES OF PLAY IS THE WAY® SCHOOLS

By Wilson McCaskill

It was after a workshop recently that I was asked a question, which I found hard to answer simply and clearly.

The teacher who asked the question was a proponent of Play Is The Way® (PITW) and was attending her third PITW workshop. She had attended her first a decade earlier when we presented a one-day workshop at her school. Since then she had changed schools twice and been pleased that both were using PITW. When advised that new staff could attend a PITW workshop she seized the opportunity and was quick to tell me that on each occasion she got something significant and different from repeating the process.

Her question went something like this:

I have been using Play Is The way in my classrooms for about ten years and in three different schools. The school I'm at now call themselves a Play is The Way school but really only a few classrooms do it and mainly the teachers just use the language.

My previous school tried to get it going as a whole school but too many teachers said it didn't work and it just fell away. I did Play Is The Way with my class but after me there was very little and that was confusing for the kids.

My first Play Is The Way school was the only school that really got it and all the staff were really onboard and using it consistently. It made a real difference and there was a real commitment to sticking with it because of the changes we were seeing. We just knew we were onto something when there were less kids being sent to the office.

Do you have any reasons why some schools use Play Is The Way well and others just find it too difficult or not worth the effort? Oh, and the thing is, all three schools had roughly the same number of kids, with teachers under a lot of stress, difficult kids and quite a few families who were doing it tough.

This teacher had waited patiently to be the last person to speak to me, so I knew she wanted a carefully considered answer. We talked for about twenty minutes during which she shared more of her PITW experiences and observations, as did I, to try and arrive at a suitable answer.

I thought it might be helpful if I shared some of the observations we made and conclusions we reached.



1. It is important for schools to realise that PITW is not a prescription that offers a step-by step, paint-by-numbers process for the development of personal and social capabilities. It is a method that offers substantial guidance but requires the knowledgeable, skillful and creative input of leaders and teachers to be successful.
2. Study of the PITW resources is required to permit the information to percolate through the experience and intellect of each teacher and the staff as a whole to arrive at an interpretation best suited to the context in which it is being employed.
3. While we acknowledge that many schools may be similar and at the very least all are shaped, in large part, by the demands and requirements of the national curriculum, no two schools are identical. Hence, schools must be free to *adapt, adjust and apply* PITW in a manner that is responsive to the specifics and peculiarities of their circumstance to maximize its benefits.

That said, schools must also ensure that the essential elements of PITW (games, Life Raft activities and self-reflective language) are implemented with fidelity if significant improvements in personal and social capabilities are to be achieved. And it goes without saying, that best outcomes are far less likely when implementation is piecemeal, poorly supported by administrators and pursuing best practice in behaviour education is of minor importance.

In essence, PITW works well in schools that see behaviour education as part of core business and the central column on which academic development stands.

The PITW *Implementation Guide* is of considerable help and schools that choose to be guided by it invariably implement PITW successfully and sustainably.

4. Because PITW is a not a short-term, quick fix behaviour intervention it requires strategic implementation to embed it as the behaviour education methodology that accompanies students for every year of their lives in primary school.

If a teacher faces challenging student behaviour on a daily basis then it is only natural for them to want a quick fix. Resorting to techniques of coercion and manipulation can be very tempting in difficult classrooms. Under stress we all want immediate relief and systems of punishment and rewards do give short-term benefits. However, nothing really changes and astute teachers understand that they need to forgo immediate relief and gratification for long-term, lasting benefits. Slow change is lasting change, but slow change takes patience, perseverance and the courage to work through daily discomfort.

Obviously, embedding PITW is easier when it's in the hands of skillful, stable leadership that has fostered the commitment of a unified and stable staff.



5. Just as staff have varying skills in the delivery of curriculum, with certain subjects being their favorites, not all staff are comfortable and competent with behaviour education. Therefore, as with other subjects, less able staff will need additional support; usually in the form of mentoring, additional training and more time to do the required investigation and study of PITW resources.

The pressures of the oft cited crowded curriculum can make it very difficult to honour the process of PITW implementation by ensuring that time is given at staff meetings for ongoing in-house professional development, discussion of the process and the identification and acknowledgement of progress.

6. PITW is not a plug-n-play program. It is a means to establish a sustainable and effective culture that guides students in their attainment of independent, self-managing, self-motivated learning and living. As such, it needs the sustained intention and attention of leadership and staff.

Entering the PITW process believing it will require little application and organisation and seeing it as an add-on to curriculum, rather than an add-in, will almost certainly bring about its early demise. Wise leaders will ensure they have staff consensus before implementation and pace the implementation to avoid overloading teachers. Overloading can result in token use of the PITW elements. Again, the *Implementation Guide* offers assistance here.

7. The larger the school the more essential it is to create an *action team* to drive the program. The right selection of teachers for the action team will ensure they become the go-to people for staff who want assistance. They will also plan and deliver on-going professional development, based on the content of the resources.

A switched on, creative action team can be the difference between success and failure. If they are proficient and motivated they will help to maintain momentum and prevent the inevitable dips and troughs in PITW delivery from becoming full-blown collapses.

8. The biggest hurdle to effective and sustainable school wide implementation is when PITW philosophy and behaviour education practice are at odds with what one, some or many teachers in a school believe to be the role of educators in the twenty first century.

If those teachers disagree with the requirements of the *Personal and Social Capabilities* domain of the curriculum and believe that behaviour development is solely the task of parents, the hurdle gets significantly higher. And if the techniques of operant conditioning are their preferred practice and they believe teachers have the right to compliance and obedience from their students at all times, then the hurdle is nearly insurmountable.

Vast amounts of research prove the life long benefits, in all spheres of a persons life, of being independent and self-motivated as opposed to being



authority dependent and motivated by praise and rewards: being self-managing as opposed to controlled by power and punishment.

School leaders need to be aware of this research (thankfully most are) as do teachers because it shapes and justifies the content of the *Personal and Social Capabilities* domain and points clearly at the need for behaviour education and the direction it must take.

9. If a teacher is fundamentally committed to compliance and control, which requires the use of positional authority exerted through punishments (euphemistically called consequences) and rewards, there will be an inevitable clash with PITW philosophy and practice, which seeks to develop independence and self-management through education and empowerment.

It is said a leopard can't change its spots and a teacher deeply committed to behaviour management and their role as boss of the classroom, rarely shifts their position. When asked to implement PITW, invariably he or she does so to prove it does not work and to ensure that it does not get traction. And as no one likes to be alone in a cause, they often recruit others to the cause of returning the school to old world order, even if data/research proves that to be ineffective and damaging.

If there is a cohort of teachers within a school committed to the old order the chances of effectively shifting the school's culture, within a reasonable time frame, become extremely difficult. I have known of principals who were willing to wait several years for certain resistant and influential teachers to retire or move on before commencing their school's PITW journey.

10. PITW requires skillful leadership from principals and deputies. An administrative team that has the energy and commitment to stay in front of the pack, with the awareness to see bumps in the road and take corrective action, will harness PITW's potential to improve student outcomes in all areas of school life.

In being able to *adapt* and *adjust* PITW, administrators have the opportunity to negotiate a means of *applying* PITW that keeps staff on side. The trick is to avoid compromising PITW to the extent that it is no longer behaviour education but simply a disguised form of behaviour management.

11. There is no doubt that you can have two neighbouring schools of similar size drawing from a similar demographic, with teachers trained in the same institution, running PITW at the same time and find one doing so successfully and the other faltering and failing in quick time. There will be reasons for this and I have put forward what they are likely to be.
12. One thing is for certain. Behaviour management techniques are simple and easy to establish. They offer a comforting but false sense of security and any improvements they make are temporary...leaving teachers constantly looking for bigger sticks and larger carrots in the blind faith that the ultimate stick and



carrot are out there somewhere. Behaviour management ultimately puts the child at risk.

Behaviour education is challenging because it takes skillful teaching and tests the emotional control and maturity of the teacher. It requires teachers to be at their adult best. It requires them to see behaviour as only the surface phenomenon and to care for the student regardless of their behaviour. They must want to help the child discover the reasons behind their behaviour, and help them learn how to manage their behaviour. Behaviour education can be unnerving and takes courage and perseverance to master. Behaviour education will ultimately save the child. PITW may not be for all schools and all teachers but it can work for most students.