



Play Is The Way® "reflective language"

# Regular practise improves professional practice

By Wilson McCaskill

Although our Play Is The Way® (PITW) "reflective language" is seen by teachers as a powerful and effective way to help students learn to manage their behaviour, it invariably causes some measure of anxiety in teachers as they struggle to become fluent and flexible in its use. Like most things, proficiency improves with practise and the hard thing for many teachers is to start slowly and not expect too much from either the language or themselves in the early stages of PITW implementation.

There are some things that are important to realise and do on the journey towards proficiency in the language and its use during games, classwork and general school life. The first important realisation is that a one-day workshop attended by teachers prior to implementing the program, is simply not enough exposure to PITW methodology to ensure the fidelity of its implementation. Additional study of the resources is required and our "Administrators Guide," which is hopefully read thoroughly by school leaders, advises that at least two weeks be taken by all staff to do the required study, discussion and discovery prior to taking PITW to their classrooms. Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that this time for preparation is not always taken. It appears that PITW is sometimes initiated when teachers are ill prepared, causing some to falter, fall and become discouraged.

To assist educators prior to implementation, the "Administrators Guide" contains a fidelity of implementation checklist which we recommend administrators use. This checklist helps to ensure that staff is ready to commence PITW and identifies any areas that need to be addressed before starting the games program. A significant part of the preparation process for classroom teachers is to read Volume One (red manual) of the Play Is The Way® complete program. We suggest that teachers read all of Volume One but we understand that this may be difficult for busy teachers, so we ask that the chapter titled "Professional Learning," containing many and varied articles, be read when teachers find more time or on an as-needs basis. To encourage the awareness of the valuable content within these articles and to make it easier for teachers, some school leaders leave time at staff meetings for the sharing and discussion of a selected article.

Key concept one, **THE GOLDEN RULE** is essential reading before commencing the games program. We ask teachers to embed this concept during the two to four weeks they spend studying the resources. Volume Two (blue manual) contains our suggested games timetable and guides the teacher on when to introduce the remaining concepts. However, it is only a guide and some teachers will prefer to change the order of the concepts and the time spent on each to suit the needs of their students. There is nothing wrong in doing so and we accept that a teacher's assessment of what his or



her class needs at a particular time plays an important part in enhancing the program's effectiveness.

Teachers will also need to study the first few games prior to playing them. We expect teachers to take volume two with them when playing a game for the first time and they should not hesitate to ask for student help in interpreting the instructions. While students play the games it is important that the teacher is watching closely. Observing what happens and knowing the aim of the game, helps teachers to ask the questions that get students thinking about what they need to do, either individually or collectively, to improve their outcomes. There is no need for any "special language" here and all the teacher needs to ask is what any observer would ask if they were trying to help the players. The only thing to remember is to ask questions rather than supply answers. This is something teachers already do as part of their everyday teaching practice.

In the instructions for every game is a section titled "Issues and Observations." It is very important to read this section carefully. It is here that teachers get a heads-up on what is likely to happen in a game and the sorts of things that can be discussed, explored or shared with students to improve the playing of the game or the self-managing of behaviour. Again, no "special language" is necessary and encouraging students to use their critical thinking skills to problem solve, to strategise, organise and understand themselves and others as they attempt to master the games, is the main objective. The reflective questions (one or all of them) from our *Self-Mastery Checklist* (purple poster) may help add clarity and focus to any discussions, but much benefit can come from a game without using any one of the questions.

As further back up for teachers, each game is accompanied with a maxim. This gives those teachers who cannot think of any insightful or penetrating questions, a chance to involve their students in a deeper exploration of the game by discussing the maxim in reference to the game. In fact, I would recommend that all teachers, at some point, find the opportunity to discuss the maxim.

Teachers get hung up on the use of the PITW reflective language because they see it as they only language to be used when discussing behaviour. This is not the case. PITW reflective language has been devised to be an addition to the language teachers already use to help children probe and fathom any subject. It forms a part of the conversations and discussions teachers have with students on a host of things in the daily experience of school life. With time, practise and regular exposure to the language it will also become a part of the way students talk to each other. With only six questions, the Self-Mastery questions become tedious, dull and repetitive if all discussions about behaviour are restricted to their use exclusively. However, the questions, when used well, do help students to see the truth behind their actions and can assist greatly in empowering students to manage themselves. The six questions also help schools to establish a workable degree of consistency in their approach to behaviour and when tied to the 5 Key Concepts become a framework that guides and informs children as they try to determine the best way to behave.

For teachers who want to develop fluency with the language and use it with confidence and ease, the first decision to make is to study "THE LANGUAGE"



section in Volume One. On numerous occasions I have asked teachers, who have said they struggle with the PITW language, if they have studied the language section and invariably they say they haven't had the time. Here I must rise to the defence of PITW. The development of personal and social capabilities (behaviour by another name) is a requirement of the National Curriculum and warrants the time and effort required to deliver its objectives. Just as no school would adopt numeracy or literacy programs without ensuring teachers were well prepared to deliver them effectively; behaviour (which has for far too long been the unlisted subject of curriculum) deserves the same respect and the adequate allocation of time and effort to prepare teachers, and for teachers to prepare themselves.

It perplexes me that many teachers who say they struggle with the reflective language fail to go back to Volume One and read the appropriate section again and more closely. Doing so will reveal that the six questions of the Self-Mastery Checklist are "circular" by design. That is to say that no matter which question you ask first, it will lead to another question on the list, which in turn can lead to another and another. That each question can be linked to any other question gives the language its strength and leads students to the realisation that self-mastery requires the rational control of often irrational emotions. (*Be The Master Not The Victim Of Your Feelings* - purple poster). Study will also show that teachers need to avoid making statements or judgements and ask questions that prompt self-reflection and self-evaluation.

Once a teacher gets comfortable enough to go beyond asking a single reflective, self-mastery question (which could be any one of the six) followed by any normal interactive conversation that would ensue as the teacher helps the student to redirect their behaviour, will come the desire to start linking the questions. Linking the questions fosters in the student a greater level of self-awareness, thereby increasing his or her chances of being able to self-manage. When addressing linked questions to a group, greater social awareness is generated and hence the greater likelihood of social management. Linking the questions and harnessing their "circular" effect requires following the steps as detailed in "The Language" section. Namely,

- Step One: Ask A Closed Question
- Step Two: Acknowledging The Answer
- Step Three: Backwards To Go Forwards
- Step Four: Closing.

It does worry me the number of times a teacher expresses, in a surprised voice, that they weren't aware that were steps in the use of the language. To further assist teachers "The Language" section offers additional advice that should be studied. It can happen that a teacher undermines his or her own good use of the language by simply not being aware of all the issues detailed in the chapters within the section.

Of course, knowing the steps and using them fluidly takes practise and the best way to do this is for staff to practise in the safety of the staff room. All that needs to be done is for someone to propose a scenario and then for teachers to role-play their way through the scenario while attempting to link the questions.



**For example**, the scenario might be that John has been playing soccer with a group of boys during recess. As usual the boys on his team rarely, if ever, pass the ball to him. He calls out for it as much as he can and tries to get into the best positions to receive it but to no avail. On this occasion it all got too much for him and when one of his teammates was about to take a free kick he stormed up to the boy, pushed him away, picked up the ball and deliberately kicked it onto the roof of a classroom block. Two representatives of the boys who were playing have brought the problem to you and told you their version of events. You have located John and are now talking to him and the two representatives.

Role-playing this scenario, with a teacher playing John and two others playing the representatives, can be very informative for those playing the roles as well as those watching. Asking teachers to swap roles and those observing to step in to take over and act out their suggestions helps to spread the creative load around. It is important that teachers are not playing the roles to catch each other out (this can easily happen) but rather keeping their response within the realm of what children, who *aren't* the school's most problematic, might say. It is also important for teachers to realise that they can "try that again" if they felt they could respond differently or more effectively or if they would like to try the suggestions of a colleague. If the scenarios are taken as a serious but supportive and potentially enjoyable way to train and develop confidence and competence in the use of the linked language, much good will come from the process.

Role playing scenarios also lets teachers put forward situations they felt they could have handled better or situations that they have avoided handling because they weren't sure how to. Does this take courage? Most definitely, but lets not ask of our children what we will not give of ourselves. The rule of thumb here is:

### ***Regular practiSe improves professional practiCe.***

(In other words, S before C - Improve Self before improving Children).

Even though we all know that all subjects are taught within the context of behaviour, the world of education spends too much time managing behaviour and too little time educating students to manage their own behaviour. Although the domain of personal and social capabilities is broken into the four strands of

- SELF-AWARENESS,
- SELF-MANAGEMENT,
- SOCIAL AWARENESS,
- SOCIAL MANAGEMENT,

all of which can be described as the key competencies of self-motivated, independent, persistent, resilient learners (requirements of the curriculum), the most prevalent approach by teachers does little more than develop "authority dependent" children whose only awareness of self is what they are told and who, either as individuals or in groups, are constantly managed by teachers.



The fact that the development of personal and social capabilities are a requirement of the curriculum is reason enough for teachers and leaders to adopt a professional approach to whatever is their chosen means to develop those capabilities. This being so, the argument that the domain is not that important and does not warrant the allocation of time and training to prepare teachers, flies in the face of research and avoids the realisation that reduced academic outcomes are rarely due to insufficient intelligence, and more likely attributable to the inadequate skills and knowledge of the teacher and the behaviour of the student in or out of the classroom.

I acknowledge that teachers are going to have up-skill themselves in PITW delivery by on the job use of the games, the language and the key concepts, but there is no avoiding the need to study the resources. Such study will necessitate the frequent revisiting of the resources and frequent consultation with colleagues and administrators or members of the "action team" whose aim is to lead the "behavioural" learning of staff. (See Administrators Guide). Perhaps this application and commitment to the professional development of staff, in the domain of behaviour education, could have been avoided if teachers had spent a significant portion of their university training developing the skills to deliver the personal and social development of students, as described by the curriculum. This, however, is rarely the case and I'm not exaggerating when I say that of the many hundreds of teachers I have talked to, most feel inadequately prepared to deal with behaviour in the classroom, let alone educate students in the four strands of the personal and social capabilities domain. This sense of inadequacy invariably leads to using "carrot and stick" techniques of behaviour management and manipulation and an ongoing reliance on teacher's disempowering capacity to punish or reward students into temporary compliance.

So, PITW training usually starts with a one-day workshop and continues with self-directed in-situ training that is hopefully supported by ongoing whole staff training, at regular intervals, prepared and directed by school administrators or action teams that have accepted the task of doing so. There is no more complex subject than behaviour and no greater challenge than to help children develop the skills to master their own behaviour.....especially if those children have entrenched difficult or inappropriate behaviours in the first place. Add to this problem, teachers who may be well versed in the techniques of BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT and not BEHAVIOUR EDUCATION and you can rightfully expect that considerable time, effort and training will be needed before the teaching practice arrives that successfully delivers the requirements of the personal and social capabilities domain.

Skilled leadership is required to both help and motivate teachers to undergo the in-situ training to successfully develop the requirements of social and emotional learning. Leaders acknowledging the importance of social and emotional development and the all-pervasive role it plays in the development of the whole child is the crucial first step. With that step taken, it falls on teachers to fulfill their obligations to deliver the requirements of the personal and social capabilities domain to the best of their professional ability. I have no doubt that doing so will require study, practise, effort, commitment and finding the time when there is so little to find.