

Interview with Leroy Slanzi – Play Is The Way Representative in Canada

How did you encounter PITW?

My Play Is the Way journey started mostly because I always seemed to be chasing student behaviour. Very old school management strategies (reward / punishment) were doing just that, managing behaviour. I am a big data guy (yes, I know a bit geekish), and every year the data was the same. There was literally no increase or decrease in behaviour year after year. The hardest part through the years though was reflecting on who I was as a school leader.

I was raised in a home that was pretty strict (my father is Italian and came to Canada when he was 18), but I still had a lot of love right up until my parents divorced, which also shaped me into who I was. The point is; that is what I used as a leader. I gave my kids a ton of love but was also a very strict leader. I hate to admit it, but I used punishment (fear) to have kids behave. Detentions, in-school suspensions, suspensions, etc. we're my stick.

Anger and frustration were also very prevalent when I was using the threat of punishment and I would often go home and reflect and feel sick to my stomach about how I reacted to kids and my staff.

Thank goodness, throughout it all I was also inherently friendly, empathetic, kind and naturally believed in forming relationships. My early years as a leader were quite the juxtaposition and it hurt me personally. I knew I had to change what I was doing as it was simply not sustainable and I truly was not helping my students become better human beings in a way they should be.

What made you introduce PITW into your school?

During my first few years at Merritt Elementary School the staff and myself developed an amazingly collaborative bond (which doesn't always happen in a school) and we started to reflect on behaviour and how we could do things differently.

We started diving into Growth Mindset strategy and used it in conjunction with the Zones of Regulation and how a child feels. It was helping, but not nearly enough as we found it was a lot of good information but just not practical (hands-on). Using self-soothing strategies when a child had no control over their emotional escalation, even though they could identify when they were yellow or red emotionally, simply did not work for most kids. For some it did, but for most it did not, especially considering that many of our children had experienced unspeakable trauma in their lives.

By pure luck I guess, two of my experienced teachers happen to go to a Play Is The Way® Training session. They came back from it demanding that we incorporate it into what we do, as it was the tool/strategy that would help us help kids to self-regulate, develop self-control and be in charge of their own social emotional needs. I may have ignored them if it wasn't for the trust and sheer determination of the staff I was working with. Please keep in mind that this staff was not a young staff and many we're within 5 years of retirement. So, for them change was something they saw all too often and too often it did nothing. For them to dive into this program wholeheartedly was amazing.

What was your process to embed PITW and what was the response of teachers, parents and students?

After the conversations with my teachers, and seeing their passion for this program, I did what any smart administrator would do; I jumped all over the opportunity to learn about a program that would inspire my staff so much. I almost immediately booked in the then trainer (Sean Smith) to come in and do a whole school workshop. I found the funding necessary and made sure every adult in my building from top to bottom attended because we all felt as a team this could change our school culture exponentially.

After we did the training, we devoted every staff meeting for the remainder of the year to practise games with each other. We also devised a schedule to implement the Life Raft concepts into our day-to-day practice (which was fluid as PITW theory ties directly into the core competencies mandated by our Ministry of Education). We made it our mission, as a whole staff, to implement PITW and there wasn't an adult who could argue against doing so as PITW is literally embedded in everything we do.

The students bought in hook line and sinker, because for them, anytime you can start your day with a game it meant something. They also quickly understood how easily they got emotionally heightened through games or in other facets of school. Learning through play to self-soothe enough to survive and participate for longer periods of time without conflict, meant the world to them. The best part was their impact on their parents who did not stand a chance against their kid's expectations around all the key concepts!

What was the response of the department, other schools to PITW and was there any data that confirmed PITW was working?

Like any program that is incorporated in a school, we as administrators must prove that it is worth the expenditure. Luckily for my colleagues and myself, in our district we have a Superintendent who is behind us and encourages thinking outside of the box, in the hope that we may just come

up with something that will save lives. By saving lives, I mean giving all kids a fighting chance to overcome whatever roadblocks they face academically or social and emotionally.

The beauty of PITW in this context is that every educator alive knows a child cannot progress if they have social and emotional roadblocks. They need to be able to work through those challenges just to focus. I am, in no way, shape or form, undermining the need for the necessities around food, clothing and shelter. We just happen to be very fortunate in that our district has made feeding all kids a priority, so during school hours the issue of hungry kids does not often rear its ugly head.

The ability for us to grow and continue down the Play Is The Way path all hinged on results. You will remember earlier in the interview where I alluded to being a punitive type administrator. I used to run a detention hall and never stopped it when I introduced PITW. I too needed to see results before I shed my personal authoritative baggage.

Thankfully the program did exactly what I hoped it would and within 10 months we went from 30 kids every lunch hour in detention, to none. Our student's abilities to resolve conflict, self-regulate and develop an identifiable empathy towards their classmates shut the detention hall down. Suddenly, for the first time in 10 years of being an administrator my lunch hours were free. No more punitive measures were necessary in my school.

So, I did what every Canadian Principal would do. I went and bought a beautiful, left-handed road hockey stick and started playing road hockey every day with the kids. Do you have any idea how good a 40-year-old man looks against grade 3/4/5/6 and 7's...? I had a hat trick every lunch hour, absolutely dominated out there. 😊

Tell us about your step into high school and the challenges of embedding PITW in that context.

About a year and a half ago I was moved to a high school and I was always under the impression that PITW would be almost impossible to implement. Not entirely because of the "cool" high school kids, but because high school teachers typically see themselves as specialty based subject teachers. I teach History, I teach Math and I teach Chemistry and so on. In high schools, there is an expectation that students show up with the ability to be organised, self-regulating, and ready to actively engage in their education.

It had been 10 years since I worked in a high school and what I realised within hours was this was not the case. High school kids were more emotional, more easily influenced and many could not, or would not actively engage in their education. Luckily, in our province, the core competencies that our elementary schools were implementing were also expected to roll out in high schools across the province.

That expected roll out just happened to align with my first year as a Principal. It was challenging but an easy sell as teachers, regardless of specialty, every day in every class were desperate for their students to persevere, to be more resilient and to learn how to control their emotions in ways that were not external (alcohol and drug use).

I am in year two now and after a year of engaging staff and having them see why and how the core competencies are crucial in developing emotionally intelligent and intrinsically motivated kids, more and more of my teachers (senior Math and Science teachers even) are turning to PITW theory to help get our teenagers to help themselves. Now that 70% of my staff is trained, I will be modeling games and dialogue in classes (most recently a Science 10 class). Life Raft activities are already embedded into our classes and into monthly grade assemblies that I run.

In summary, I really believed it was a mountain that could not be climbed, but fortunately the kids demanded it based on their behaviour and I can tell you, teenagers could give a rat's ass around authoritative type admin. They have zero fear of a suspension or a stern look, or a raised voice. They need and demand behaviour education.

What are your hopes for PITW in Canada by becoming our PITW representative?

Right now, our world is becoming increasingly over stimulated and not with moral type messaging. Our kids have 10 times the amount of advertising and 10 times the amount of negative content to view. Gone are the days when I would try and peak around the corner to catch a glimpse of the movie "Porky's" on TV (yes mom, I did that without you catching me) or listening to some serious heavy metal to feel rebellious. Our children see more restrictive material on you tube, the television and through social media by the time they reach primary school than we did by the time we hit 18 years old.

Kids assume that what they see is real and when it is not, they cannot manage their feelings. On top of that, here in Canada our standard of living is so high that many parents, even with two incomes, cannot afford rent. When they can, it's because they must work two jobs, but the cost is leaving their children to be reared by a technology, television and daycare. This is not a Canada thing; this epidemic is worldwide. So, my hopes are not just for Canada, but the United States, Australia, New Zealand and anywhere that will take PITW to help them help our children around the world learn some self-control and emotional stability - but mostly empathy.

PITW is not something that I do because of money, as my job pays very well. I do PITW because I believe in it and I want to leave this world a better place than when I came into it. I have a desire to help as many educators as possible survive education. Teachers are leaving this profession in droves and it is my job (Wilson's job) to help our fellow colleagues stay in the most important profession in the world, so that our societies do not go to hell in a hand basket!

What has using PITW done to your own teaching style and in what ways have you seen it change the teaching of others?

I mentioned earlier that I was raised in an authoritarian based home. You did as you were told, you did not question authority or Dad would have a big problem and that was scary! My father was very caring as well and there was never any doubt how he felt about me. Naturally, just like most educators my age, I took my home and school experience into the classroom and schools I ran.

I was always very successful because relationships meant the world to me and because fear works in the immediate, so what happened after the kids left my school did not matter. And in a fear based, authoritarian system it lasts only as long we are in a child's eyesight, or space. Nothing intrinsic ever really comes from that style of teaching.

When I hit the roadblock at my Elementary school and became frustrated with the status quo and nothing ever changing behaviourally, I knew I needed to do something different. Play Is the Way absolutely transformed me personally and professionally. Daily teaching kids to understand themselves and not be the victim to their emotions, caused me to reflect every minute of the day around how I approached my students, my own kids and my own personal relationships. I am now a very calm person and my family members and colleagues cannot believe the transformation (although, when I'm in the middle of coaching a basketball game I do slip sometimes!).

It's not just me either. I get a lot of comments from so many educators regarding their own personal and professional growth. Emotional intelligence is a character trait that doesn't just need to change in our kids. Even we adults need to better ourselves. Teaching emotional intelligence and intrinsic motivation naturally causes us to reflect on our educational practice and definitely makes us better humans without us even knowing it. The people around us see it and feel it. It is an amazing place to be; very Zen like. 😊

Tell us why you believe PITW to be sustainable and the role of leadership in establishing and maintaining a whole school BEHAVIOUR EDUCATION culture.

This is tricky because if you do not have a cohesive staff you need a leader who can and will lead by example to bring everyone together and to organise the necessary structures for full implementation. I believe for classroom teachers it is simple to maintain Play Is The Way because we are required to teach to the Core Competencies and Play Is the Way is literally your daily, monthly and yearly plan to do that. It's gift wrapped for you. The school leader can make their own professional lives very easy by establishing a strong presence around PITW and support staff

within their schools to implement. If they do this, I guarantee, because it happened to me and is happening again at the high-school I'm at right now, your school will run much smoother.

Any time students can do things independently and learn how and why their behaviour affects them personally and socially, you will win. A student body that owns their own behaviour can problem solve through most conflicts. They will show empathy and forgiveness. They will be able to self-soothe and develop an inner strength to overcome most obstacles they face in a school setting.

It starts though, with all staff understanding that behaviour should not be managed. Math, English, Science and all subjects aren't managed they are taught. Behaviour is the most complex subject on the planet, especially currently where more and more behaviour is taught from a screen. We must counteract the technological behaviour education and replace it with an even stronger and more moral behaviour education program, and that my friends is, Play Is the Way. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind!

Would you share some thoughts about the effectiveness of PITW with indigenous students and cultures?

Here in British Columbia, Canada (and Canada as a whole) we have adopted and embedded First Nations Culture into our everyday more and more. Residential Schools tried to assimilate and wipe out our natural history here in Canada. However, our aboriginal communities are roaring back and are working collaboratively with our province and school districts to make everyone aware of the atrocities that our indigenous population had to go through, all the while educating all of us, including our kids, around aboriginal culture and traditions. What a beautiful culture and a shame that it was almost lost for all of us to enjoy and learn from.

Indigenous teachings are immersed with teachings of bravery, courage and kindness to all. There is something here called the Seven Sacred Teachings and they literally coincide with the key concepts and all the character traits PITW develops through its methodology.

Often when teaching Life Raft activities, we will use Aboriginal Elders to tell stories of great inner strength and communities coming together to make their communities better. They talk of great hunters sharing hunting and gathering secrets and how brave you must be to face Mother Earth's animals; all of which are paid homage to after a hunt. Play is such a big part of every child's life and having the games from PITW tied into indigenous tradition allows us to easily infuse aboriginal Life Raft teachings into our core competencies and everything that is Play Is The Way.

This connection and combination of other activities in our school district has recently made us (our high school and district) number one in the province for aboriginal graduation rates in the

2018-2019 school year. Play Is the Way is not the sole reason for this achievement but the impact of its theory on educators (myself 100%) and how they approach indigenous kids has certainly been significant.

What do you think are the biggest challenges or threats that the PITW philosophy poses for teachers, schools and departments?

This is frustrating for me because it poses no threat whatsoever. I have been in the educational game now for just over 20 years and I have been a school-based administrator in an elementary, middle and high school setting for 13 of those years. I've been in 5 different schools in 3 different geographic regions and there is nothing that fits in to what we want as educators and school leaders more than Play Is The Way. I challenge anyone to challenge me pedagogically on the merits of Play Is The Way and what it does for a school. This program POSES NO PROBLEM if you want your school to be what it should be.

The challenge lies in the human being at the front of the class or at the helm of the ship. That challenge is a fear of stepping into the unknown; the fear of failing and getting it wrong; the fear of being at the helm when something doesn't work and ultimately being responsible for that mistake. Fear is what seems to stop most educators from diving into programs. And please do not throw budget and monetary constraints at me. We spend so much money on so many things with such a small shelf life that we keep spending and spending. With Play Is The Way the cost is upfront and then year after year you save more and more money because of what the program does for our schools.

And now I will step off my soapbox, get my emotions in check and return to the interview at hand



Why you believe the PITW process makes sense to kids and why do you think its practical, hands-on, games focused approach is what curriculum needs?

In summation, there is no greater power when working with children than play. The power of play can never be underestimated. It is through play that we can help guide behavioural education in our schools. It is through play that kids are the most real with their emotions and it is through play that kids learn best. More and more we see academic programs use play to teach literacy and numeracy and the same is true for behaviour. The practicality of play for children (and us adults) can never be questioned. It is as natural as the hair on our head (sorry Wilson) and the sun in the sky. Through play there is a much greater ability for us to engage our kids, with very little to no effort! Teaching our entire curriculum through play isn't some fantasy, it is a reality!

Thank you, Leroy. I'm sure there will be much interest in your "at the coal face experience" of Play Is The Way. It is a pleasure to have you on the team and Julie and I look forward to showing you some more PITW schools in Australia and New Zealand when you next return to our side of the world.

Am I right in thinking that you would be happy to have Aussie and Kiwi teachers visit your school in Merritt?

For sure, I look forward to sharing our PITW journey with whoever comes to visit.