My name is Dorothy Thomas and I teach Grade 1/2 at Alberton Primary School in Gippsland, Victoria. As a graduate teacher I find I am reflecting all the time, when things are either not working so well and if they are working well. It prompts me to think about what was so effective or not so effective about that lesson? What did I do to impact on my students negatively or positively? I approach reflection as a professional way to improve my practice. I see my pedagogy as a work in progress, something that I am steadily building and constantly improving. I believe it is a process that continues for all of life. It is also something that our students need to learn in order to be able to step back from themselves and take responsibility for their own learning.

**DIMENSION 1**

Prior to being appointed in my first full-time appointment, I worked for four weeks fulltime as a Casual Relief Teacher. This gave me the opportunity to observe the students I would be teaching and an insight into the personalities and learning characteristics of my students. Though many worked well, what I observed was a need for students to be able stay on task. Some were struggling with the work, some were disengaged and others were not challenged enough. It was clearly a diverse group, as most classrooms today are. Within this young cohort I also observed that my students needed to learn how to get along with one another and how to resolve disagreements, which was often getting in the way of learning.

When my year as a classroom teacher began I was working hard to provide student-oriented tasks, often with hands-on activities, which my training had taught me was the best way to engage my students. However I soon discovered this was not enough to meet the needs of all my students. Through observations and assessment of their work I knew I was still not meeting the needs of all my students. This was evidenced by some students still showing lack of engagement, inability to stay on task, occasional disruptive behaviour and inability to resolve disputes without teacher intervention. When I introduced concepts that I expected the children to have some prior knowledge of, only some would have this. Therefore the work I was presenting was probably too high for the zone of proximal development of most of my students. I needed to find a way to re-engage these students.

**DIMENSION 2**

I knew from my university studies that engagement was a key criterion that would assist with many of these issues. I also knew from my reading, that open-ended tasks with hands-on, active learning would also be essential, yet on my placements I had not seen this type of pedagogy in action, and therefore I lacked confidence in my ability to implement it. My training pointed me towards my peers, my mentor, to do research and to try and find some answers about this style of pedagogy.

My mentor, Frances Taylor, who had the Prep/1 class and I both were having the same difficulties with our students. She identified that in both classes keeping students on task was particularly challenging, students were prone to lose focus and to present challenging behaviours even though
we were incorporating hands-on activities and some play. However, developmentally, staying on task was a difficult challenge for many of our students.

During my studies some of my peers had completed placements at schools where play-based learning was being implemented and I remembered how positively my friends had talked about this approach to teaching and learning. This certainly was a pedagogy that was open-ended and student-centred with lots of hands-on activities but here the child appeared to be in control of their learning. Because I had not experienced this pedagogy on placement myself, it was not clear to me how play could be channelled into purposeful learning. I discussed this with my mentor, and she was also curious about this approach. We both felt that considering our cohort of students, allowing self-directed learning through play might be a way to achieve better learning in our classrooms.

Around this time I was accepted into the DEECD Supporting New Teachers’ Practice program, which introduced me to the Evidence Based Professional Learning Cycle (EBPLC). It made me aware that I had clear evidence of a need in my students and that I was at Step 2 in the cycle of identifying my needs. Our principal, Malissa Nicol, listened to our discussions about our class dynamics and our wonderings about play-based learning. Though she had some reservations about this style of learning, she organised for us to visit a school where this was a whole-school approach. Not only did this visit give me firsthand experience of what play-based learning looks and feels like, it also gave me the opportunity to observe another teacher and how she focussed her students on their learning tasks. Up until then I thought I was teaching explicitly, but seeing her learning intentions clearly displayed around the room, and referred to frequently when modelling, teaching and discussing learning with her students, made me realise how much more explicit I could be. This was an area of my practice I needed to strengthen.

**DIMENSION 3**

In order to better understand play-based learning I undertook some research. My research led me to Kathy Walker, and the Walker Learning Approach. I bought her book and was excited about the concept of allowing children to choose where they wanted to play and then through scaffolding direct play towards learning intentions. Walker Learning also have a Facebook page which shows lots of photos of how the classroom environment can be set up to entice children to play and learn. This was a valuable resource that gave my mentor and I lots of ideas on how to set up our classrooms.

The school visit that my Principal had planned for us was a huge turning point. The classrooms were crammed full of interesting nooks and crannies where children could play and explore. Drama stages with racks of dress ups, outdoor Café settings, hair salons, a table with interesting things to touch and smell, a doctor’s surgery and a builder’s corner. We noticed a calmness about the students; they weren’t overwhelmed by the many choices and cramped space. In fact they were very polite and articulate when asked about their learning environment. Once the session began, after being “focussed in” by the teacher, the students were highly engaged and generally took responsibility for their own learning.

I really liked the reflection on learning that occurred at the end of an investigations session. Students knew that during reflection they would have the opportunity to share with the rest of the class what they had been investigating and learning, and would make connections with their current
learning intentions. There was also a class reporter and a photographer, who also shared their work with the class, giving them a very authentic and real-world purpose for their work. There were many great ideas and strategies for teaching that I could try in my classroom.

On return to school my mentor, principal and I had many discussions about how we would implement this pedagogy into our classrooms. We talked about how often and how long we would run these sessions for and how we would set up the classroom. We decided to begin with a 2 hour session once a week, with writing, reading, speaking and listening incorporated through the focussing in and reflection sessions and through reading and writing centres for children to play in. As far as developing my skills to implement the pedagogy and the scaffolding of students as they played, it was more trial and error. I simply learned through “doing” as each situation was highly individualised.

**DIMENSION 4**

My mentor and I could hardly wait to begin trying out play-based learning though we also had reservations about how well we could implement the pedagogy, how well we could scaffold the learning in such a child-driven session and how it might be perceived by parents who might consider it “playing” rather than “teaching and learning”. We were also aware that some of the strategies embedded in the pedagogy could be used all throughout the day, not just during play-based learning sessions. We could make learning intentions highly visible around the classroom on brightly coloured star shapes, we could refer to them frequently whenever talking to the class or to individual students, and we could have children reflect back on learning intentions after any teaching and learning sessions.

Personally I felt that this style of pedagogy was much more in line with what I had learned during my course and my personal beliefs about teaching and learning. For me, the Chinese proverb, “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand,” really explains my beliefs about learning; that students need to be actively involved for real learning and understanding to take place. However, because play-based learning had only been mentioned in passing at university, I didn’t have the skill base or thorough knowledge of it to implement it initially. The visit to the school to see play-based learning in action had been extremely helpful, as for me as a visual learner, seeing how this pedagogy was implemented had been far more beneficial than any reading I had completed. It requires a great deal of skill on the part of the practitioner; a solid understanding of students’ interests, in depth knowledge of the curriculum and an ability to think on your feet and guide students towards their zone of proximal development through play. These were all skills that I was only beginning to develop, and each year as a new cohort of students arrive, a teacher must adapt and fine tune their skills to meet the needs of their new students. For a first year teacher this was challenging, but my mentor was also finding the same challenges as she had to adapt and modify her practice too. This was reassuring for me, and having someone to share the challenges with was very helpful. As we were only trialling the pedagogy, it meant that we could gradually build up our skills and knowledge base.

We were aware that we wouldn’t have the resources or the space to set up permanent centres, but we could set up less complex centres once a week and trial play-based learning, without disrupting the routines and curriculum we already had in place. I decided to have an art/drawing centre, a
play-dough/cooking centre, dress-ups, construction (with cardboard and recyclables), a shop, building blocks and a school. I'll never forget the excitement that the children generated that first morning, as they peered through the glass doors. Not only were our own grades excited, nearly all the students at the school were trying to get a peek at what we were setting up. Grade 6 children were heard to say, “Wish I was in Grade 1/2 (or Prep/1)”. The first session was packed with excitement, and the children were highly engaged with whatever activity they chose. We had combined our classes for that session, and the older and younger children worked well together. However, the classrooms were very noisy and chaotic and after a few sessions like this we decided to keep our sessions just within our own classes. Things became calmer and less chaotic. The children began to work in a more focussed manner. The art/drawing centre became a business selling art work, with a manager and employees. The children developed price lists and advertising campaigns. Similarly the shop used a small white board to display prices and began using play money and calculators to calculate change. The “school teachers” developed classroom rules and a behaviour management protocol for disruptive students! Our book corner became a library where librarians set up a table to stamp books and write slips with the due date on them. Students were negotiating with each other, improving their social skills, developing ideas and problem solving.

Learning intentions were displayed obviously around the room and were referred to wherever possible, especially in the focussing in session. However, explicit learning intentions were now being talked about every school day, at the start of a lesson, and also in a reflection sessions in order to assist children to think about their learning and to connect it to what they had been doing.

Reflection sessions during play-based learning were a very positive experience, where students could show off their creations or talk about what they had role played. I noticed an improvement in students’ oral presentation skills and widening of their vocabularies. Some of the creations in the construction area were extremely detailed and well thought out; for instance, a Star Wars space-ship with a module that could detach and be used for escape if the ship was invaded. After a session I also had the children write about what they had been making and doing which was another way to increase the learning outcomes from the experience.

This was all very positive and students were definitely better behaved and better able to stay on task. Oral language skills were improving; students were developing negotiating skills and sharing strategies and beginning to articulate their learning. Even during the rest of our classes, improvements were occurring, because now we were incorporating play-based pedagogy, investigation and choice, in as many learning activities as possible.

However, I felt that there was still a lot to learn. Sometimes a student might express that their intended learning intention might be “effort” because this was a school value we had been concentrating on that week. Suddenly every other child would also be talking about how they would show “effort” when making their play-doh, painting and construction creations, rather than building on their knowledge of how to write narratives, or the counting-on strategy that we had also covered that week. My skills are still developing in these areas, but reflective practice, further research and professional development are helping to improve this scaffolding skill.
My mentor and I were really pleased with the improved engagement, oral skills and improved attitude our students were showing. Incorporating the principles into the rest of the curriculum was also making a difference. Though it certainly didn’t solve every problem area that had been identified, students were much more motivated about being at school and often commented that they couldn’t miss school on a day they were having play-based learning. Parents were also giving very positive comments about it, indicating that students loved it.

As time went on we experimented with other centres, including a small hospital and post-office. These were very popular and generated other rich learning experiences, filling in forms and diagnosing patients and so on. However, my mentor and I both felt that we weren’t achieving the learning outcomes we would like. We were on the right track, but we needed to refine it.

This is where the cycle starts again. After discussions with my principal I incorporated a writing template to assist my students when writing about their experiences, and asked them to complete it before moving onto another centre. My mentor and I attended a professional development session focussing on the reporter, photographer and focus student roles, and how to scaffold students towards learning intentions. This was really helpful and again my practice has improved. Students are now using reflective language when they talk about their learning, and some can articulate clearly how they have achieved a learning intention. I am also now giving students with roles more individualised attention when they carry out their tasks, so that being a focus student means a chance to spend quality time with the teacher. It gives me an opportunity to build stronger and more positive relationships, while giving them focussed scaffolding as they play. As a teacher this is really rewarding.

But I continue to look for more ways to increase the learning from this student-centred, inquiry-based style of learning. Moving to permanently set up stations and running shorter four days a week sessions will be the next step in order to achieve a consistent pedagogical approach across the whole week.

I hope you will find the EBPLC as helpful as I have. It has helped me to focus my professional learning requirements specifically around what skills I need most, in order to make the greatest difference to my students.