

**The Impact of the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) Implementation on  
Manitoba Adult English as a Second Language (AESL) Teachers:**

**A Phenomenological Inquiry**

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**Abstract**

Changes in organizational systems, such as education, are common and are usually undertaken in response to theoretical or social reforms. Some of the recent professional literature intended for Adult ESL teachers in Canada has included a focus on the implementation of the PBLA into Adult ESL classes. A Phenomenological Inquiry conducted with five Adult ESL teachers in Manitoba revealed the affective dimensions of large scale educational changes such as feelings of stress, loss of motivation, and lack of autonomy, as well as solutions to some of these issues. Adult ESL teachers are able to provide significant insights borne of personal knowledge and tempered by professional experience prior to any changes. It is vital that educational leaders understand the significant effects of a change in teaching practice and respect the insights of those charged with implementing it if they hope an initiative will achieve long-term success.

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Senate for acceptance, a **MASTER'S THESIS** entitled:

**The Impact of the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment Implementation on  
Manitoba Adult English as a Second Language Teachers: A Phenomenological Inquiry**

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## **Key Terms**

**AESL (AEAL)** - Adult English as a Second (Additional) Language: English language learning to adult newcomers.

**CCLB** - Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks: The national body that determines the standards for the CLBs.

**CLB** - Canadian Language Benchmarks: A task-based curriculum comprised of 12 levels of descriptive language ability reflecting English language proficiency in Canada.

**CLPA** - Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment: An assessment and evaluation tool used in Manitoba to demonstrate the English Language proficiency of adult ESL learners up to 2014.

**C-TESL** – Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language.

**IRCC** - Immigration Refuge Citizenship Canada: A department of the federal government that oversees the implementation of adult English language instruction in Canada.

**LT** – PBLA Lead Teacher – charged with conducting the in-person PBLA training

**LINC** – Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada: Free English language programs available to adult newcomers centred on the Canadian Language Benchmark standards.

**MANSO** - Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organization - the umbrella organization of Adult EAL Programs in Manitoba

**Newcomer** – A person who has legally entered Canada as an immigrant, refugee or through private sponsorship.

**PBLA** - Portfolio-Based Language Assessment – An assessment and evaluation tool used to demonstrate the English Language proficiency of adult ESL learners in Canada since 2014.

**PI** – Phenomenological Inquiry

**RT** – Resource teacher

## **The Impact of the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) Implementation on Manitoba Adult English as a Second Language Teachers**

As a force in people's lives, change is "ubiquitous and relentless, forcing itself on us at every turn" (Fullan, 1994, p. 8). Change is not "linear [and] straightforward", but is a dynamic, iterating (Whelan-Berry & Somerville, 2010, p. 188) and sometimes even chaotic process. It can best be viewed as a spiral where an individual undergoing a change moves both upward and around throughout the change process over time (Prochaska, 2013, p. 11). Change and the transitions associated with incorporating change into practice are commonplace occurrences in large systems and organizations (Bridges, 1986, p. 25). As challenging as change can be for both individuals and organizations, viewed through a more positive lens, change is also fundamentally "essential to learning and growth" (Fullan, 1993, p. 95). Change at the organizational level is complex and the decision to undertake change, particularly on a large scale, should not be made without due consideration to the effects it has on the people involved (Armenakis, 2009, p.135).

Educational systems are not exempt from undergoing fundamental changes. As a public social service, education is exposed to the "constant and ever expanding presence of educational innovation and reform" (Fullan, 1993, p. 14). Educational reform is often driven by the need to keep pace with changes in learning theory, public policy and even public opinion (Fullan, 1993, p. 95). The frequency with which systems change exemplify that education, and by extension teaching, are, perhaps as they should be, in a constant state of adaptation and renewal (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002, p. 948; Tyers & Sillito, 2018, p. 181). As common as change in systems like education is, though, and as valuable as change is perceived to be, all changes are not equally welcomed or adapted to by all. Some educators may appreciate the challenge of learning something new, while others may begrudge it. Some may be enthusiastic about the grass roots initiatives developed within their own program, but balk at changes imposed on them from those

they might see as far removed from the classroom. Regardless of the instigating factor for the change, it is important to note that how a system or organization approaches change can significantly impact how the change is perceived by those charged with implementing it. It is equally important to note that the prevalence of change, even that which is undertaken with the best intentions, does not mitigate the potentially powerful effects of the change on those who are most directly affected by it.

### **Impetus for the Study**

English language instruction, especially for adult learners, has been known to be a slightly nebulous system unto itself; it exists outside the public K-12 school system and varies greatly between provinces and programs. That is not to say it does not have its own structures and outcomes, just that they vary greatly from those created for other school systems. However, this difference does not mean it is immune to the change forces that affect other educational systems. Adult English as a Second Language (AESL) programs in Canada were, historically speaking, left to or perhaps more accurately were allowed to, determine their own course. The curriculum, when there even was one, was determined at the discretion of the individuals and individual programs that offered it. This lack of cohesion sometimes impacted the consistency of AESL instruction and assessment across the country (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks [CCLB], 2014, p. 3). While this flexibility may have contributed to Canadian adult English language programming being a dynamic discipline, it also meant that some aspect or other could be constantly in flux (Tyers & Sillito, 2018, p. 180).

Changes in the AESL system in Canada are generally manifested through changes in the core documents. In the field of AESL in Canada, there have been two core documents that have been used by AESL programs funded through the Immigration Refuge Citizenship Canada

(IRCC): *The Canadian Language Benchmarks* and the *Canadian Language Benchmarks, ESL for Literacy Learners* (later known as *ESL for Adult Literacy Learners* or *ESL for ALL*). Both of the initial ‘working’ versions of these documents were published in 1996 and have come to represent the guiding principles of most AESL programming in Canada. Individuals who teach in AESL programs have been introduced to revised versions of these core documents several times since those first nationally shared documents in the 1990s. With each iteration of these documents, there is evidence of changes in research, methodology, and/or content. Whatever the impetus is behind these new theories or ideas, it is the front line workers, namely teachers, who inevitably struggle most with evolving practices. The experience of teachers implementing a fundamental shift in practice is unique; they, like few others, undertake these often comprehensive changes “while simultaneously bearing their consequences” in the classroom (Craig, 2017, p. 301).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this research project is to reveal how AESL teachers teaching in federally (IRCC) funded programs in Manitoba experienced the training and implementation of a new assessment protocol, the Portfolio-based Language Assessment or PBLA. In order to fully understand the impact of the PBLA training and implementation process that occurred between September of 2015 and June of 2016, I interviewed a number of teachers who participated in the training program. The data collected from the interviews revealed how teachers experienced this change both emotionally and professionally, and provided me with the means “to convey the essence of the experience”, which is always at the heart of this type of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007, p. 254). The duty of helping teaching professionals successfully transition through changing expectations is one of the most important functions of the education system.



The findings of this research contribute to the existing literature on this topic. The findings have the potential to inform educational leaders about the implications of professional change and how they might support teachers through educational reform. Ultimately, the results of this research could offer the means through which educational leaders can accomplish smoother and more effectual transitions while still safeguarding the well-being of teachers.

### **Context of the Study – Sector**

Prior to the 1990s, Adult ESL teaching in Canada as a field was fairly inconsistent (CCLB, 2014, p. 3). In the early 1990s, the Canadian government finally recognized the necessity for a consistent “language policy to address the needs of adult immigrants” (CCLB, 2012, p. II). A working group was charged in 1996 with developing a set of guidelines that eventually came to be known as the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs). The CLBs established were “a set of benchmarks [used] to describe language development in the Canadian context” (CCLB, 2012, p. II). The Canadian Language Benchmark curriculum “provides a common national framework for describing and measuring the communicative ability of ESL learners” that is demonstrated through the “application of language knowledge.... and skill” (CCLB, 2012, p. V).

The primary goal of the task-based CLB framework has always been to unify and standardize AESL programming in Canada in order to make it more consistent from coast to coast to coast. The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB) is funded entirely by Immigration Refugee Citizenship Canada (IRCC), and is the AESL organization in Canada charged with overseeing the implementation and monitoring of the CLB framework (CCLB, 2014, p. 1). The CCLB has been responsible for developing the Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) curriculum for AESL programs in Canada since 1996, and are currently primarily

responsible for determining any changes or additions to how IRCC funded AESL programs function (CCLB, 2012, p. II).

The newest incarnation of the CLBs from 2012 is heavily focused on task-based language acquisition for the purposes of integration into the broader community including the economy, rather than on language focused only on survival or cultural competency. This is evidenced by the primary goals identified in the 2012 document which target the acquisition of language that is “relevant and meaningful to learners within community, work and study settings” (CCLB, 2012, p. IX). The decisions made by the CCLB invariably effect every level of the AESL education system, from teachers to content developers to administrators. One such decision was the formulation of the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment, or PBLA, early in 2010. The PBLA sought to impose a fairly rigid structure on the historically unstructured AESL system in Canada (CCLB, 2014, p. 3).

For teachers who had been teaching in AESL programs for many, many years and who had experienced first-hand the evolutions in AESL programming, the PBLA was something different, though perhaps not entirely new to Manitoba AESL teachers. The introduction of the PBLA followed on the heels of the implementation of the Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment (CLPA), introduced to Manitoba AESL teachers in the early 2000s. However, the CLPA was not particularly successful as it was implemented with insufficient targeted and appropriate training. Furthermore, the CLPA never became a national requirement for IRCC funding, and offered very little in the way of ongoing oversight (CCLB, 2014, p. 2). AESL practitioners were promised that the PBLA would be implemented differently, and would serve as an antidote to the often “ad hoc and inconsistent” programming being offered by AESL programs across the country (CCLB, 2014, p. 3).

## **Context of the Study - Teachers**

All teaching “is highly interpersonal and rests substantially on teachers' sense of care and compassion” (Smylie, 1999, p. 69). Working with students who are vulnerable and dependent on their teachers in complex and significant ways for their success, can be physically and emotionally exhausting (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006 p. 129). This is no less true for Adult ESL (AESL) teachers. AESL teachers often work with highly traumatized learners who have highly interrupted schooling backgrounds (Bow Valley College [BVC], 2009, p. 14). These individuals have often escaped poverty, persecution, war and socio-political strife (BVC, 2009, p. 14), so they are always vulnerable due simply to who they are and what they may have suffered prior to their arrival in this country. As a result of working with such a vulnerable population, AESL teachers are faced with highly emotional student-teacher relationships that inevitably impact their practice and sometimes even their lives (Newell & MacNeil, 2010, p. 58). As Newell and MacNeil explain:

The chronic day-to-day exposure to clients and the distress they experience may become emotionally taxing on...helping professionals, resulting in the experience of conditions known as secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or, ultimately, professional burnout. (2010, p. 58)

Adult ESL teachers are on the front-lines and often bear the brunt of this kind of manifested, second-hand trauma.

The AESL teaching landscape is always changing in order to better meet the needs of its learners, so the expectations of AESL teachers, by necessity, change along with it. The affective dimensions associated with working in this highly emotional environment may be compounded

by ongoing changes to a teacher's professional practice; change is just one more burden that is placed on often over-burdened AESL teachers. As Tyers and Sillito explain:

The exponential growth in the profession, the constant changes in programming, technology, and resources, and the infinite variety of students and their corresponding learning needs, all point to...gaps in professional knowledge and skills that have to be bridged on an ongoing basis. (2018, p. 182)

These evolving expectations can add additional stress to the already stressful and emotionally draining profession that AESL teaching is. Systemic changes in outcomes and expectations are not simply a shift in a way of thinking; they have real-world impact on classroom teachers and their workload. That changes in the practice of teaching will continue to occur may be predictable, but how people respond to those changes is certainly not.

### **Context of the Study - Researcher**

I am a person who appreciates organization and structure. In places structure does not exist, I have been known to construct it. However, that is not the case for all Adult ESL teachers. Some thrive when given structure, while others flourish in what someone like me might perceive as chaos. I have experienced first-hand how different people “create different personal meanings from new experiences” (Craig, 2017, p. 301) many times in my professional career, even when the experience was a shared one. The most recent shared change in teaching practice for AESL teachers across Canada was the implementation of the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment, or the PBLA.

I underwent fairly rigorous training in adopting this new assessment protocol as a classroom teacher just prior to the larger, regional implementation. Completing the training was no simple assignment and required some deep thinking and major adjustments to my own

practice, as well as to the practice of those around me. For me personally, I have developed an appreciation for the PBLA in the years since my training because it helped keep me on track and focused as a teacher. However, I know that many of my peers do not necessarily share that opinion. I know that because I not only experienced the PBLA implementation as a teacher, but also experienced the implementation process training others as a PBLA Lead Teacher (LT).

From my position as a PBLA LT, I watched my co-workers undergo the same intensive and intense training process I had: training in the use of the PBLA. I always tried to be mindful of my own opinion of the PBLA and its implementation (Bourke, 2014, p. 6; Creswell, et al., 2007, p. 254) and could not allow it to erode the kind or level of support I had to give to teachers during the training. So although I may have agreed with them that some aspects of the PBLA were less than ideal, my role as a PBLA LT meant I had to promote its use in the most positive way possible. As a result of the shift in my role from peer to teacher-trainer, the relationship I enjoyed with my colleagues shifted as well. This “moving within social positions” (Bourke, 2014, p. 7) is not always easy. The once peer-relationship that we had enjoyed was transformed by my new leadership position as their trainer and leader (Bourke, 2014, p. 7; Branson, 2015, p. 7). This put me in very unique circumstances as both an insider because I experienced the training phenomenon as a teacher, and as an outsider assigned to oversee others as they experienced the phenomenon (Bourke, 2014, p. 5; Creswell, 2007, p. 132).

In my supervisory role, I led a small team of PBLA Lead Teachers in training our co-workers in the use of the PBLA. We were charged with conducting 27 hours of in-person, nationally developed PBLA training sessions. Throughout the training period, I witnessed teacher responses ranging from reluctance to panic to genuine fear. Attempting to help teachers navigate a fundamental change in their practice, while simultaneously and supportively

reminding them that this specific change is necessary continues to this day to be one of my primary duties. However, my professional goal has always been to do more than that; it has been to help teachers accept that the PBLA, for all its faults, may actually have some benefits to their teaching. Neither of these tasks are undertaken without difficulties. In the face of change, knowing how to approach and interact with each teacher in a way that will be acceptable to them, as well as beneficial to their professional development, has proven to be quite challenging.

### **Significance of the Study**

Because the job of working so closely with newcomer students can be taxing in and of itself, when that emotional work is coupled with a high degree of evolving professional expectations, it is made even more demanding. The emotional toll teaching takes on AESL teachers is often a topic of discussion at conferences and professional networking sessions. Traditionally, frank discussions of this emotional burden rarely seem to carry over into the literature from this field; the bulk of AESL journal articles tend to actively focus on the job of teaching, but focus less so on the teachers themselves. However, a review of the recent literature shows signs that the PBLA implementation has generated, and continues to generate, a lot of discussion within the sector and appears to be a phenomenon deemed worthy of investigation and reflection by the larger AESL community. Through this study, I am hoping to offer a platform for AESL teachers to share their perspectives and illuminate their deeply personal experiences through the course of a significant change in their practice in order to reveal all the emotional and professional repercussions of that change.

### **Literature Review**

There are numerous publications about learning that cover suitable topics for AESL practitioners. These range from learning theory, to adult learning theory, to language learning

theory, all the way to Adult English language learning theory. However, as a recognized profession that borrows from, is influenced by, and yet stands apart from traditional children's education, AESL teaching has had a comparably brief scholarly history. As a result of that, the list of professional, scholarly, peer-reviewed journals that reflect an academic interest in that narrow field might be discovered to be equally brief. However, their limited numbers should not be seen as a reflection of their utility or their significance. In fact, recently there has been an increase in the number of pieces in these journals that are focused on the plight of AESL teachers forced into a top-down change in practice: the PBLA. It seems that the PBLA implementation may have served as a sort of inflection point for AESL teachers. This increase in introspection, may herald an increasing interest in AESL teaching as a distinct profession that is worthy of deeper contemplation, and whose teachers are worthy of respect and consideration.

Internationally speaking, there are a number of widely read journals, such as the *TESOL* (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) *Quarterly*. The *TESOL Quarterly* identifies itself as a scholarly, professional journal and has been in print since 1967. Its issues cover a range of topics and provide perspectives on ESL teaching from English teachers around the globe. However, to identify journals that include a Canadian perspective and that focus on the specifically on the PBLA, I looked closer to home. In terms of Canadian adult ESL publications, there are two main journals. The first is the national adult ESL journal, the *TESL* (Teachers of English as a Second Language) *Canada Journal* that formally published its first issue in June of 1984. *CONTACT*, the AESL journal out of Ontario, is another widely distributed AESL journal and has publications that date back to the early 2000s. Other provinces have their own ESL publications: *TEAL Manitoba Journal* (2010) and *BC TEAL Journal* (2016) to name a few of the more recent entrants into the field.

Some Canadian journals related to AESL teaching might be considered more in the vein of trade papers. They are primarily written by teachers in the field and are anchored in that teacher's professional experience in the classroom, rather than being written by scholars who demonstrate an arm's-length separation from the AESL classroom. As AESL teaching in Canada is still an evolving discipline, some less formal means of communication have been vital in offering teachers a platform to share their feelings and concerns. Specifically in regards to national issues, such as the PBLA implementation, these more informal means of communication have included groups in online social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as large-scale e-mail chains and blogs. These informal means of communication have provided a shared space for AESL teachers to express their concerns and frustrations. Concerns regarding the efficacy of the PBLA must linger not only in the minds of the front-line teachers, but must also be present in the minds of the funders as well. In January of 2021, the IRCC commissioned a nation-wide review of Adult ESL programs that included reflections on the validity and efficacy of the PBLA.

The PBLA has generated a lot of sector specific study and reflection. Perhaps more than any other topic in recent years, AESL sector professionals have felt compelled to speak out, ask questions and share perspectives about the enormous change process they underwent. Articles published in academic journals, graduate theses, trade-style professional publications, as well as informal social media platforms have afforded people involved in AESL in Canada to share their experiences on a local and national level. Some of the critiques of the PBLA focus on the immense expectations placed on teachers for its success and effectiveness (Desyatova, 2018; Holmes, 2015). Some of the literature questions the validity of the PBLA for use with AESL populations (Fox, 2014; Ripley, 2018). Some research questions the veracity of the research



used to justify the change to portfolio-based assessment (Vanderveen, 2018). Other research questions whether the time utilized and stress suffered through the PBLA process is sufficient to justify its implementation (Desyatova, 2018; Haghighi, 2016).

Manitoba has been at the forefront of AESL portfolio-based language assessment in Canada since 2004 due mostly to the efforts of a hand-full of individuals. Primary among these individuals is Joanne Pettis, who has been a longtime advocate of portfolio-based AESL assessment and who has written both of the instructional documents *Portfolio-based Language Assessment (PBLA): Guide for Teachers and Programs (2014)* and *PBLA Practice Guidelines (2019)* for AESL programs in Canada. She briefly shared the history of portfolio assessment in Canada in her *PBLA Practice Guidelines (2019)* document explaining:

In Canada, Manitoba had been using portfolio assessment in adult ESL and ESL Literacy programs for a number of years. Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment (CLPA) was introduced by the provincial government in 2004 and standardized across government-funded programs in 2009. The experience gained through the CLPA project informed the federal government's national (PBLA) portfolio initiative. (p. 2)

It is clear from this summary, that Pettis believed the PBLA to be the logical extension of this earlier iteration, the CLPA. It is also clear from this and other documents she has authored that she was an early enthusiastic proponent of using portfolios to capture and track AESL student progress.

In these two PBLA guides, Pettis identified the PBLA describing it as learner-centered and competency-based (2019, p. 3). She indicated that the protocols used in the PBLA are “systematic, authentic, and collaborative” (Pettis, 2014, p. 7). Pettis stated that she believed the PBLA demonstrated the best features of a variety of portfolio types including “process”,

“evaluation” and “performance” portfolios (2014, p. 10; 2019, p. 9). Some of the benefits of the PBLA Pettis highlighted in both guides, many of which are echoed in later research by other authors (Fox, 2014; Ripley, 2018; Vanderveen, 2018), included the value of goal setting; the ability of the PBLA to provide concrete evidence of student learning; and the positive effect the PBLA had on teacher planning (Pettis, 2014, p. 8).

However, these benefits might have proven to be cold-comfort to teachers. When considered all together, most authors writing about this topic seem to indicate the PBLA represents a significant increase in teacher workload (Desyatova, 2018; Fox, 2014; Ripley, 2018; Vanderveen, 2018). The new duties and responsibilities for a teacher in an IRCC funded program that has implemented the PBLA protocol as outlined in the 2014 instructional document *Portfolio-based Language Assessment (PBLA): Guide for Teachers and Programs*, is summarized by one author like this: “[Teachers are] preparing for class, designing skill-using activities, developing assessment tasks and tools, evaluating the assessments, making self and peer assessments, [and] creating needs assessments and templates for learning reflections” (Haghighi, 2016, p. 116). All this is added to the fact that there is a scarcity of good, adult-appropriate, accessible, literacy-friendly, pre-existing teaching materials, which means that teachers in AESL programs in Canada are often required to tailor-make their own level-appropriate, day-to-day materials. The burden of developing materials that conform to the PBLA expectations represents a significant expenditure of energy and effort. When all that is taken into consideration, the workload for an AESL teacher outlined above becomes even more onerous.

The guide documents produced by Pettis did contain sections where the author predicted some of the challenges the PBLA implementation might offer. In the 2014 iteration, Pettis

acknowledged that an assessment process such as the PBLA inevitably “affects teaching and learning” (p. 8) and that teachers and programs should expect a “period of uncertainty” when implementing it (p. 45). She warned that teachers would likely expect too much of themselves and would “all too quickly become anxious and stressed out” if they did not recognize that reality (p. 45). Pettis postulated that teachers would go through certain stages as they became accustomed to the PBLA, from “hesitant, confused, and frustrated” through feeling “more in control” as they discovered more effective strategies and practices until finally they were able to utilize the PBLA “more effectively and with increasing confidence” (p. 46). Pettis appeared to offer a solitary balm for all the added stress, frustration and energy needed to make the PBLA succeed: time. Her primary advice was that the PBLA implementation should be undertaken slowly and explained simply that “[r]eal change takes time” (p. 45). The necessity expressed by Pettis for teachers to work hard in order for the PBLA to succeed is repeated and even amplified by other voices.

Tara Holmes, an ESL professional and sometime research colleague of Pettis’, contemplated the sustainability of the PBLA in her 2015 article “PBLA: Moving Toward Sustainability” published in the *TESL Canada Journal*. Holmes suggested that teachers were tasked, though perhaps burdened is a more accurate sentiment, with the responsibility to make the PBLA work by saying that “[u]nless instructors are committed through self-agency to a particular change, the likelihood of successful integration...is low” (2015, p. 119). Other authors agreed with Holmes’ assessment that the success of the PBLA would depend heavily on the direct efforts of teachers.

For example, one author stated that the professional development undertaken by teachers to learn how to implement the PBLA successfully revealed that the PBLA relies heavily on each

teacher's "cognitive, interactional, and skill-acquisition labour" (Desyatova, 2018, p. 61).

Another author indicated that the duties required to get the PBLA right require significant time and effort and added that, even worse, in spite of the efforts of individual teachers, without buy-in from teachers across the country, the PBLA may ultimately not be nationally "sustainable" in the long term (Haghighi, 2016, p. 116). The onus, then, appears to be placed firmly on the shoulders of teachers to manage their expectations of their own performance as they make fundamental changes to their practice; meet the expectations of their administrators and their funders; and still meet the many and varied needs of their adult students.

Evidence that it may not be possible to live up to these herculean expectations can be found in numerous studies including one of the most widely cited sources of all, the 2012 government commissioned pilot review by Fox and Fraser. Perhaps other than the documents produced by Pettis, no PBLA-related document has been as scrutinized and referenced as this one. The authors, education experts Fox and Fraser, completed a review of the 2010 PBLA pilot program in 2012 and the resulting report is perhaps the first real reflective piece written about the PBLA and its impact on AESL programs in Canada not written by one of the PBLA's own authors.

Fox and Fraser undertook their study in order to measure and analyze "student and teacher behaviours and perceptions" about the PBLA (as cited in Vanderveen, 2018, p. 7). The most significant findings in their research are similar in tone and content to the many studies that followed it. Firstly, the authors identified the significant increase in the amount of work teachers are required to do to meet all of the requirements of the PBLA as an issue, an issue which they predicted might result in a low levels of teacher participation (as cited in Vanderveen, 2018, p. 7). Secondly, the authors identified that the PBLA did not appear to be any more effective as a

teaching and assessment protocol than any of the ones being used prior to it (as cited in Vanderveen, 2018, p. 9). Thirdly, Fox and Fraser stated that using the PBLA did little to bolster student perceptions of their learning. Learners enrolled in a program using the PBLA during this pilot period indicated they did not feel motivated to review their class work more frequently, did not feel the PBLA had improved their fluency, nor even that this new focus on assessment encouraged them to improve their attendance (as cited in Vanderveen, 2018, p. 7). Fox and Fraser seemed to conclude that for all the money, time and effort spent on developing, piloting and implementing the PBLA nationally, the PBLA was “ineffective [and] unpopular” and “had no effect or a negative effect on [teacher] planning, teaching, and assessment” (as cited in Vanderveen, 2018, p. 7).

In addition to that initial review of the PBLA by Fox and her co-author, Janna Fox published a subsequent article on the effects of the PBLA implementation. Using her own initial review as well as later studies by others, she drew several important conclusions in her article for the May 2014 issue of *Contact*. Fox questioned the validity of the PBLA in terms of its usefulness for teachers and learners by conducting a case study of five individuals who were either classrooms teachers or classroom observers (p. 72). After she analyzed the results of her interviews, Fox came to several specific conclusions about PBLA use in AESL programs in Canada two years after the first review she conducted regarding the PBLA.

On the plus side, she noted that for teachers “there was general acknowledgment that the approach increased the use of rubrics and consistency in the assessment of proficiency using CLB benchmarks” (2014, p. 71). Fox also reported that in this study teachers felt “an increased focus on planning and structuring lessons in relation to the learning outcomes identified in the CLB” as well as increased sense of accountability to students and programs (2014, p. 75). Fox’s

research suggested that “were the PBLA to be used to its true potential and purpose, it would be a dynamic mediating support for learning” (2014, p. 81). However, the results of her study revealed that at that point in time, that potential was not being met. Not only that, but her research also revealed a number of negative effects on teachers.

On the negative side, Fox’s research showed that teachers often felt frustration about taking extensive time to explain the PBLA to their students when they did not feel their students understood the purpose of the PBLA in any meaningful way (2014, p. 76). Fox also recognized that the “use of portfolio assessment, particularly that which results in external (i.e., outside the classroom) review of some kind, can create considerable stress for teachers” (2014, p. 70). Additionally, Fox’s research reported that the teachers in her study identified that, for good or for ill, they were far more focused on assessment now than they were on teaching (2014, p. 79). Fox also indicated that the increased focus on assessment as proscribed by the PBLA rendered the PBLA assessment portfolio, more often than not, merely a hastily assembled showcase of teacher-selected summative assessments (2014, p. 80).

Fox had other findings that were not part of the parameters of her own research, but that have potential significance for this study. These findings, reiterating the findings of her earlier study with Fraser, included a general response from her subjects that the PBLA resulted in “increasing demands on teachers time due to portfolio assessment, excessive work load burdens created for teachers due to a lack of curricular resources” and indicated there were still problems establishing the PBLA as a true indicator of language ability (2014, p. 81). Finally, Fox gave a dire warning that if the PBLA did not undergo some fundamental “rethinking and rearticulating”, it may ultimately become merely a “bulky file of student work” destined to sit at the back of the

classroom, unnoticed and unused (2014, p. 81). Fox, however, has not been the only researcher to identify the significant effects the use of the PBLA has had on AESL teacher practice.

Dan Ripley, an ESL teacher and curriculum developer, has written about the PBLA and its implementation more than once. Most notably for this study, he conducted two separate studies some six years apart to look at the longer-term effects of the PBLA on teacher practice. In a 2012 study, Ripley undertook a study regarding one of the early implementations of the PBLA in a LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) program. He conducted interviews with a four teachers in semi-structured, one-on-one conversations. The teachers were asked 50 questions centered around seven topics directed at reflecting on the use of the PBLA in their classroom. Six years later, Ripley undertook another research project that invited 44 teachers to complete an online survey regarding using the PBLA in their classrooms that included opportunities to respond to open-ended questions. Interestingly, in spite of the passage of six years from the study of one of the pilot programs to the latter study done following the national rollout, both of Ripley's articles studies revealed many of the same benefits and challenges.

The benefits that many teachers identified in the two studies included an improvement in teacher understanding of the CLB levels and an acknowledged an uptick in their use of task-based teaching methods, which are at the core of the adult ESL curriculum framework (Ripley, 2012, pp. 76-78; Ripley, 2018, pp. 16-17). There were other fairly positive responses in the areas around it being a useful tool and somewhat beneficial to developing student independence, as well as in improving consistency between teachers (Ripley, 2012, pp. 76-77; Ripley, 2018, pp. 16-17).

Primary among the negative responses from both of Ripley's studies was a feeling that the PBLA was far more time consuming than their previous teaching and assessment style (2012, p. 78; 2018, p. 17). The specific challenges identified by the teachers in Ripley's later study were particularly focused around the increase in teacher workload, integrating the PBLA with a program's existing curriculum, bulky Language Companion binders, and the burden of on-boarding new teachers who did not complete the extensive in-person training PBLA teacher training (2018, pp. 16-17). Teachers also indicated in the later study that this re-direction of their time and efforts in their eyes diminished their responsiveness to student need and added un-due stress to their jobs (2018, pp. 16-17). Ripley indicated that the teachers who responded to this later survey felt that although portfolio-based learning was appropriate and even beneficial for some kinds of learners at certain CLB levels, it was not appropriate for learners at the beginning of their language acquisition journey, nor those who presented with Literacy needs (2018, p. 17). Finally, many of the teachers in the latter study suggested that the only way for them to successfully achieve the goals of PBLA was to be given pre-made, standardized PBLA assessments (Ripley, 2018, pp. 16-17). For the record, as of this time, there are no officially sanctioned standardized assessments provided to AESL programs in Canada. Ripley's studies are not the only one questioning the validity of the PBLA, nor does he represent the views of its harshest critics.

The negative effects of the PBLA on teacher practice are discussed in some detail by Terry Vanderveen, an English instructor and linguistics specialist. In 2018, Vanderveen reviewed the implementation of the PBLA in classrooms by reading a number of articles, studies and reports written and conducted by others. Through his reading, he identified numerous examples of ways in which the PBLA had worsened the AESL teaching experience. Vanderveen



reiterated teacher responses from the earlier Fox and Fraser study that indicated using the PBLA, at best, had no effect on their teaching, and at worst, had a negative effect on it (2018, p. 7). The teachers in another study Vanderveen reviewed indicated that the PBLA is excessively time consuming and not worth the money, reasoning that the longer it takes students to get through the learning, the longer it takes to raise CLB levels, and the more money it costs in labour and materials (2018, p. 9).

In Vanderveen's article, he also confronted what he deemed to be the lack of supporting research in regards to the purported value of the PBLA. He stated that "the decision to implement PBLA was neither evidence-based nor clear" (2018, p. 9). Vanderveen was very explicit and quite blunt in his disagreement with the notion that the PBLA was a well-formed concept that was strongly rooted in research. He referred to a variety of sources to support his stance including the same research initially used by Pettis to make a case supporting the PBLA. Pettis' claim that the research used to bolster the support for a portfolio-based assessment protocol for AESL learners in Canada, most notably that of Nagy and Stewart (2009) and Makosky (2008), was misleading, Vanderveen explained (2018, p. 6). He openly contradicted the veracity of the statements made by Pettis that the decision to undertake the PBLA implementation was directly based on the explicit recommendations of these particular experts (2018, p. 7).

Vanderveen, having read that research himself, indicated that "these...experts did not support the use of portfolios as standardized assessments" (2018, p. 5). He went on to state that one researcher never even discussed the use of portfolios in AESL classes other than describing them, in Vanderveen's words, as primarily "formative" but also "controversial" (2018, p. 5). Vanderveen went so far as to indicate that some of this very research "specifically warned

against using portfolios as standardized assessments because of their low reliability [and] lack of validity” (2018, p. 5). Vanderveen concluded that implementing a system such as the PBLA was folly because it was not effective in any way, cost or otherwise (2018, p. 5). In fact, Vanderveen’s study of the impact of the PBLA on AESL programs in Canada reached one startling conclusion: 7 years after the PBLA was introduced into government funded AESL programs in Canada, the most consistent and notable aspect of that implementation was the ongoing teacher opposition to it (2018, p. 9).

In her article in the *TESL* (Teachers of English as Second Language) *Canada Journal*, Yuliya Desyatova, who is an ESL educator and academic, questioned the wisdom of the implementation of the PBLA as required professional development for teachers. Desyatova reviewed the PBLA teacher training materials and analyzed the responses on 247 completed teacher surveys. From these responses, Desyatova identified that teachers felt their workload had increased exponentially with the advent of the PBLA (2018, p. 57). She reported that her research indicated the best one could possibly expect is “modest positive outcomes in return for the efforts invested in [the] PBLA” (2018, p. 62). Finally, Desyatova reported that at the extreme negative end of the spectrum of her results, some teachers, devastated by receiving a failing review of the PBLA’s produced in their classrooms, were forced to take stress leaves from their teaching positions (2018, p. 63). Desyatova’s research indicated, as does the research of many others (Fox, 2014; Ripley, 2012; Ripley, 2018; Vanderveen, 2018) that the PBLA was exhausting and time-consuming before, during and after its implementation (2018, p. 62).

Fatemeh Mohammadian Haghighi undertook PBLA-related research as part of her Master’s program at the University of British Columbia. Haghighi’s 2016 thesis was focused on semi-structured interviews she conducted with ten classroom teachers, half of whom also had the

role of PBLA Lead Teacher (LT). Although the purpose of her research was focused primarily on the usefulness of the PBLA itself, she did produce some results that were relevant to this study. First, Haghighi found that because of the “multiple tasks expected of them, all teachers directly or indirectly acknowledged that PBLA implementation has induced undue stress for them on different levels” (2016, p. 90). Her respondents expressed that the variety of teaching and assessment methods they had chosen to employ prior to the PBLA had resulted in “less pressure” on teachers than the PBLA did (2016, p. 90). Haghighi also reported that teachers indicated the PBLA was enormous amount of work (2016, p. 90) and that there were a “lack of instructional and assessment resources” available, which meant more energy needed to be devoted to developing those materials (2016, p. 99). The author agreed with the findings of Ripley (2012) and Vanderveen (2018) and reported that teachers in her study also felt using the PBLA in strict accordance to the guidelines, made it “excessively time-consuming” (Haghighi, 2016, p. 100) and warned that “the PBLA can sometimes impose restrictions on teachers in terms of time constraints and choice of topics to be taught” (2016, p. 122).

However, one area that Haghighi reported on that the other authors did not speak to in as much detail may prove to have value for this study: determining what part the quality of the training played in teachers’ perceptions about professional change, such as the PBLA implementation. In addition to reflections on the usefulness of the PBLA itself, Haghighi’s study also included several targeted questions about the training teachers received while implementing the PBLA. The responses to this section of her research, Haghighi explained, revealed far more varied results than the responses other aspects of the responses. Her results indicated that “the quality of the PBLA training differs from programme to programme, and consequently teachers have divergent perspectives on the PBLA” (2016, p. 112).

Haghighi reported that teachers who participated in a more “practical and hands-on training regarding designing assessment tasks and tools related to their levels seemed to be more pleased with their training compared to those who have received a more theory-driven training” (2016, p. 112). The specific area of training most identified as inadequate by all respondents, according to Haghighi’s research, was in the area of designing appropriate assessment tasks and tools (2016, p. 122). Even those teachers who were generally satisfied with their training still expressed concerns around the need for ongoing, comprehensive support from their programs (2016, p. 118). They explained that this kind of training would help them to “feel confident about the assessment decisions they make” (2016, p. 115). CLB levels can, for some learners, be very high stakes. The participants in Haghighi’s study placed a high premium on accuracy in determining students’ CLB scores as they understood these scores can affect access to educational as well as employment opportunities for their students.

These articles successfully summarize both the benefits and the challenges of using the PBLA in AESL classrooms across Canada as expressed by the teachers and programs charged with making it work. On the plus side, some teachers reported that the PBLA kept them honest, increased their understanding of the CLBs, forced them to ensure their assessments were valid and reliable, and went at least some way to improving the consistency of national language evaluation and CLB scores. On the negative side, the PBLA presented a very steep learning curve for many in the profession, while representing an enormous expenditure of time and energy with little evidence to demonstrate the actual effectiveness of it for student learning.

It is clear that a great deal of the existing research on the PBLA is centered on the benefits, challenges and overall value of the PBLA as an assessment tool for tracking the CLB levels of adult learners enrolled in IRCC funded programs across Canada. The focus of much of

this research has been on the responses of teachers and their impressions of the impact the PBLA has had on their professional practice. However, perhaps not enough attention has been paid to the emotional costs these top-down, fundamental kinds of changes to teacher practice incur. It is in the revealing of those very human, often emotional responses to a fundamental change in work that this study strives to inform administrators and decision-makers of the toll these changes take on front-line workers, classroom teachers, and how they might work to mitigate the effects.

### **Methodology**

Teachers will face changes in their practice numerous times throughout their career: that is a reality. The inevitability of change in education means that teachers everywhere will experience a fundamental shift in their practice at least once in their professional career, but teachers seldom have the chance to reflect on it and discuss the experience beyond complaining in the staff room after a particularly gruelling day in the classroom. The PBLA could and should be viewed as a significant change in the daily practice of AESL teachers in this country. It was formally rolled out nationally in waves over a period of 4+ years and required nearly 30 hours of professional development and hands-on training for thousands of AESL practitioners across Canada.

In this research, ontologically speaking, I am not interested in the PBLA itself, Kant's noumenal event, as it actually was. Instead, I am interested in the training for and implementation of the PBLA into AESL classrooms as teachers personally experienced it. The PBLA implementation was experienced in many different ways by different teachers. Those experiences were most likely influenced by some combination of the following criteria: age of the teacher; his or her background experience; years spent teaching; personal habits; personality traits; as well as learning and teaching preferences. Educational leaders need to know how

changes in teachers' practices affect different teachers differently. Having insights into the physical, emotional and mental cost these shifts in practice can have on working teachers should be viewed as invaluable to educational leaders. The data generated by this research could potentially contribute to a discussion that provides guidance to administrators and larger educational bodies. This discussion may encourage and guide them to be better prepared to face the diverse needs of teachers caught up in the changing landscape of education and assist school leaders in being more thoughtful and supportive through future similar phenomenon.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a constructivist, I believe that the reality of an event can only be defined by those who live through it and/or suffer the consequences of it. The lived experiences of the teachers who went through the PBLA implementation represent its reality. Regardless of the intentions of the funders, the goals of the developers, the hopes of the administrators, and the efforts of the trainers, it is the teachers' experiences, their feelings and perceptions, which inform and define the truth of the event. That population of teachers includes me, as I experienced the implementation of the PBLA not only as a teacher in my own classroom, but also later as a PBLA teacher-trainer, or PBLA Lead Teacher (LT). I know first-hand how challenging and stressful it is to use the PBLA in a classroom.

As a Resource Teacher charged with supervising the PBLA training and the Lead Teachers (LTs), I watched teachers struggle at times to understand how to do the PBLA effectively and incorporate it efficiently into their classrooms. My first-hand experiences had an effect on this research, for good or for ill. I have my own perceptions of the PBLA and how it was implemented, as well as about its lasting effects on teachers, programs and students. That subjectivity undoubtedly informed how I heard and interpreted the responses of the participants

in this study. However, my intimate knowledge and personal experience with this particular phenomenon may also have allowed me to reveal insights which someone less familiar with the PBLA specifically, or AESL as a whole, might not have been able to comprehend or express as fully.

### **Rationale for Phenomenological Inquiry**

In order to be effective, there are some types of qualitative research that specifically lend themselves to studying or illuminating the lived experiences of educators because they are best able to focus on the often subjective and always complicated human interactions that occur among and between people (Tsushima, 2015, p. 105). Phenomenological Inquiry, or PI, is a branch of qualitative research that revolves around documenting the lived-experiences of people in their own words (Creswell, 2007, p. 259). PI best matches the intention of this education research project, and is well-grounded in the field of education. PI represents a constructivist epistemological view of the world, and indicates that the nature of something, including an experience, is determined by those who experience it; reality is socially constructed and defined by what those who lived it deem it to be (Atieno, 2009, p. 15; Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125; Golafshani, 2003, p. 603). Phenomenological Inquiry is “complex, flexible, and multifaceted” enough to perceive the “nuance and complexity” in lived human experiences (Tracy, 2010, p. 841).

Whether a phenomenon arises as a result of an evolution in the thinking of a specific discipline, or from more personal, lived experiences of those involved, a phenomenon that is informative and compelling has the most value (Tracy, 2010, p. 840) in PI research. PI encourages researchers to take into account all the individual and unique human responses to an event and find common threads between them to determine, in as much as possible, the true and

shared nature of the event (Creswell, 2007, p. 254). Giving teachers the chance to share their experiences or tell their stories is vital to our understanding of an event, as “telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process” (Seidman, 2006, p. 7). Using language to share personal stories that symbolize the human experience gets to “the very heart of what it means to be human” (Seidman, 2006, p. 8).

The personal nature of the responses collected in qualitative research, such as PI, are often considered more subjective than the findings of quantitative research (Cooley, 2013, p. 254). They are sometimes viewed with an increased degree of suspicion by researchers who lean toward the apparently more objective numerical results of quantitative research. For example, skeptical researchers may question the validity of data that could be under the influence of the perceptions and experiences of the researcher. That influence, they argue, might interfere when they are conducting interviews and when they are analyzing the research data (Chan, 2013, p. 3). Because of this, qualitative researchers feel more compelled, perhaps more than other scholars do, to prove that their research has academic merit (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). Therefore, when conducting this type of subjective research, one that uses a person as a means of data collection and interpretation, it is important to thoughtfully undertake some precautions to ensure the resulting data has merit.

To effectively conduct a PI, a researcher must demonstrate a deep understanding of the phenomenon; in effect they must be “immersed in it” (Atieno, 2009, p. 14). This immersion contributes to good, revelatory qualitative research. In my research, by beginning with the details, I will strive to build “abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories” (Atieno, 2009, p. 14) which reflect a constructivist way of thinking; the larger meaning of a phenomenon is built from the detailed experiences of it. The reactions of those interviewed will help to construct data



that can be interpreted, and then grouped into like concepts in order to manage the information while still maintaining the ‘content’ in all its complexities and nuances (Atieno, 2009, p. 16).

The valuable data mined from the research interviews is then sculpted and reduced to “significant statements” that accurately describe the true “essence” of the experience (Creswell, 2007, p. 254). The researcher is then free to “construct a theory or a theoretical framework that reflects [the lived] reality” of an event rather than presenting their own assumptions (Atieno, 2009, p. 16). The final goal of PI is to develop “a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals” involved (Creswell, et al., 2007, p. 252). It should be constructed to “take account of the particular characteristics of human experience and to facilitate the investigation of experience” (Polkinghorne, 2015, p. 138).

In the case of this study, the implementation of a portfolio-based language assessment protocol, the PBLA, into federally-funded Adult ESL programs, is the phenomenon under scrutiny. This shift in method of assessment as well as in the associated outcomes was no small task for many AESL teachers teaching in IRCC funded programs. By interviewing Adult ESL teachers regarding the effect of the nation-wide implementation of the PBLA, I had hoped to encourage them to share their experiences honestly, and to facilitate a discussion about those experiences.

## **Research Goals**

Over the last four years, I have played many roles in relation to the PBLA implementation into Adult EAL programs. I have been a practitioner of the PBLA in the classroom as a teacher; I have taught others to use it as a PBLA Lead Teacher; and I continue to directly supervise its use in my program as the Resource department head. Through professional discussions with others, as well as through personal reflection, I have been able to recognize and

define my personal opinions about the PBLA (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). The opinions borne of this multi-faceted experience with the PBLA will allow me to comprehend and identify with the myriad of responses this research will likely engender, while not requiring me to feel personally affronted by the reception or perception of the PBLA since I am not its author. Watching how difficult the change was for some of the teachers and recognizing, often too late, that a different approach to the PBLA training and implementation may have been more effective for some of them has inspired this research (Tracy, 2010, p. 842).

### **Research Questions**

The focus of this research was not AESL programs in general or even the nature of the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment. It was a Phenomenological Inquiry focused on the affective dimensions experienced by teachers through the PBLA training and the subsequent changes to their practice, as well as some of their solutions to the issues. In order to delve into these often personal and emotional responses to this particular change in practice, I asked two fundamental questions about this phenomenon. The first was: “What are the affective dimensions of teachers’ experiences to a fundamental change in their practice, in this case the implementation of the PBLA?” The second research question was: “What could have been done differently by administrators, school leaders, and others involved in educational systems, such as funders and program architects, to help teachers cope more successfully with a large change in their practice, such as the PBLA?”. Since change in education is to be expected, the answers to these questions could inform educational leaders about their responsibility to recognize the significant effect change takes on teachers and to inform themselves about how they can address the impact of that change.

## Limitations and Delimitations

Arguments are sometimes made that qualitative research, such as Phenomenological Inquiry, lacks some of the solidity that quantitative researchers believe makes their own research so effective: measureable, repeatable, and generalizable under the same conditions (Anderson, 2010, p. 2). I have identified some of the limitations associated with qualitative research and offered delimitations as solutions to reduce the negative impact of those perceived limitations.

### *Generalizability and Participant Selection*

One of the common misgivings about this type of qualitative research is that it is not easy to generalize the results from individuals to a larger population. Some researchers assert that often qualitative findings “cannot be extended to wider populations with the same degree of certainty that quantitative analyses can” (Atieno, 2009, p. 17). It is not advisable, however, to try and evaluate qualitative research employing the same methods as those used to evaluate quantitative data since the two methodologies are simply too divergent in how they are conducted and in what their intentions are to be easily compared. Even though generalizability is not a defining characteristic of PI, it might still be possible to somewhat alleviate that concern for those who may harbour it in the case of this study through careful participant selection.

In order to increase the viability of generalizing the findings of this research, there was a deliberate attempt to choose participants for this study who represented the larger AESL teaching population. My goal was to interview 4-6 teachers who shared the same training in PBLA from a number of different programs and who were largely representative of the target teaching population: Adult ESL teachers in Manitoba teaching in federally funded LINC programs. The target sample of this teaching population was intended be large enough to offer a variety of responses and glean an “intense, full, and saturated (description) of the experience under

investigation” (Polkinghorne, 2015, p. 139). However, it was also a small enough group to ensure I had enough time to do all the detailed analysis of the responses required to identify commonalities and shape the findings.

The sample of teachers ultimately selected for the study were chosen purposefully so that their responses, both shared and varied, could fully inform the research project (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). In spite of differences some of their vital statistics, for example their age and years of teaching experience, there was still a lot of continuity and similarities among them as well. The IRCC has quite high standards in terms of who teaches in their LINC certified program, therefore, the pool of teachers from which my participants were selected were homogeneous group in terms of their educational background and ESL training. By inviting participants through the provincial AESL professional organization, I was able to engage individuals from a variety of schools that had instituted the PBLA into their programming. The participants shared a similar level of education (Bachelor’s minimum) and took the CTESL certificate, or equivalent training, at some point in their ESL teaching career. They had also all undergone the PBLA training in their place of employment, as opposed to online as newer teachers in the field are being required to do. This homogeneity in terms of experiencing the phenomenon, as well as in education and training meant the findings of the study is reflective of individual emotional responses to the phenomenon, rather than a reflection of other variables such as the method of the training or their content knowledge.

The majority of the teachers who teach in AESL programs in Manitoba have undergone in-person PBLA training, so they represent an excellent pool of potential subjects. MANSO (Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organization), is the umbrella organization of Adult ESL Programs in Manitoba. It has the capacity to communicate directly to AESL teachers

and programs across the province through its website. This allowed the potential pool of respondents to be wider than that of merely a single program. Widening this pool of subjects increased the depth and breadth of their experiences.

After the call for participants was posted on the MANSO website, potential respondents were asked to complete a quick, self-administered survey about whether or not they were willing to participate in the research and whether or not they met the minimum standards to participate. Their eligibility was determined by answering a few simple questions regarding when they completed their PBLA training, how it was completed (in-person rather than online) and whether or not following their training they actually used the PBLA in an AESL classroom. Once eligibility was determined and the respondents were invited to participate, they were asked to interact with the researcher through personal, not business, e-mails, to protect their identities. The names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms, which ensured the respondents that at no time would any statements or comments be attributed to an identifiable individual. This increased the likelihood of respondents speaking more freely without fear of repercussions or retribution. The group of 5 participants selected represented a wide range of ages and experience and bore some similarity to available AESL demographic data.

Drawing from Valeo & Faez's (2013) research on the experiences of AESL teachers in Ontario, I compared demographic data from the sector to the participants in my study. The respondents who participated in my study can be reasonably seen as representative of the larger AESL teaching population. Although Valeo and Faez's study was focused on teachers newer to the profession, the outcomes bear a close resemblance to the demographic make-up of the AESL population in my personal experience, as well as that of the participants of my study. The research conducted by Valeo and Faez identified that 87% of their respondents to their survey

were female, while 13% were male (2013, p.9). Four out of the five participants in my research were female, or about 80%, while one was male, or about 20%. This indicates there is a similar, though not identical, break-down in gender among my participants and the participants of this much larger study.

Valeo and Faez's research indicated that 45% of their respondents were between 31 and 49 years old, while 30% were 50 or over (2013, p. 9). Their research also indicated that AESL teachers tend to be slightly older and that many (30%) choose to teach AESL as a second career at the age of 50 (p.9). This is consistent with my own experiences with the larger AESL teaching population. However, the respondents in my research appeared to skew slightly younger, with 4 of 5 falling into the 30 to 49 zone and only one falling into the 50+ zone. Nevertheless, the age range is still reasonably in keeping with that of their findings. Finally, Valeo and Faez's research indicated that the majority of their respondents had a Bachelor's degree at minimum (71%) and that 92% had a TESL Canada certificate (2013, p.9). Among my own respondents, 100% had a Bachelor's degree as well as a TESL certificate as those were pre-requisites for participating in the study. These numbers are in keeping with the majority of the individuals from the Valeo/Faez study.

So while the participants in my study did not perfectly reflect the demographic makeup of the Valeo/Faez study, neither were they so totally disparate as to presume my participants could not be in any way representative of the larger AESL teaching population. After reviewing this demographic data, I feel that the respondents I interviewed are fairly reflective of the larger AESL teaching population in terms of age, gender, ESL training, and education. Therefore, the responses shared by the participants in my study may be seen to be at least somewhat reflective of the larger AESL teaching population.

Since this research will be focused on the experiences of teachers who lived through a very specific phenomenon, the implementation of the PBLA in Adult ESL programs in Canada, the generalizability and/or transferability of the results for other teaching contexts may be somewhat limited (Anderson, 2010, p. 2). The research may generate some questions in the reader, such as whether these responses were simply those from particular individuals to this particular event, or whether they were merely the responses of people involved in that field of work at that time. Nevertheless, qualitative data that is thick and rich and collected according to rigorous standards “helps readers to make decisions about the applicability of the findings to other settings or similar contexts” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). Readers are able to draw elements from this type of research that they deem to be applicable under different circumstances and in other contexts. Once appropriate participants were selected, the next vital step was the interview process.

### *Interview Process and Questions*

Personal interviews and “the richness of detail provided...gives insights into the complicated nature of teaching and learning that would be missed through other means” (Cooley, 2013, p. 250). Interviews offer two sources of data to the researcher: the words spoken by the participants, and the emotions demonstrated by them. Interviews allow the interviewee to lead the conversation and open significant avenues for discussion that the researcher may not have not foreseen. This provides new topics for consideration and reflection and can significantly contribute to the breadth of the research. This research was conducted with five teachers who all participated in the same training resulting in a similar shift in their practice (Creswell, 2007, p. 128) and who currently teach (or taught at the time of the PBLA implementation) in federally funded AESL programs in Manitoba. All five teachers were interviewed through one-on-one,

personal interviews which removed any trepidation at being identified or scrutinized for their participation (Creswell, 2007, p. 133). Due to COVID restrictions, the participant interviews were done remotely on the phone or through Google Meet. In two cases, the interviews were audio only, while the other three interviews had both audio and video.

Research indicates that multiple interview sessions are more advantageous and “more likely to produce accounts of sufficient depth and breadth” as participants have time to reconsider and reflect on their responses between the sessions (Polkinghorne, 2015, p. 142). Therefore, teachers were interviewed two separate times with a different focus for each 30-60 minute session (Creswell, 2007, p. 131). The respondents were sent the interview questions prior to the discussion in order to give them time to reflect back on their experiences and feelings, as well as consult any contemporaneous notes they may have taken during the training.

A semi-structured interview was particularly well-suited to this research project because it is “flexible, accessible and intelligible and... capable of disclosing important and often hidden facets of human and organizational behavior” and “proves to be especially valuable if the researchers are to understand the way the interviewees perceive the social world under study” (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 246). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview method ensured it was “guided by identified themes in a consistent and systematic manner interposed with probes designed to elicit more elaborate responses” from respondents (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 246). Providing the opportunity to follow the “conversational threads opened up by the interviewee” ensured the conversation produced an accurate account of the experience being studied and contributed to the richness of the conversation (Polkinghorne, 2015, p. 142). Spontaneity in responses is welcomed and encouraged in PI research, but it was still necessary to have some common frame of reference for the answers so commonalities could be discovered and



identified. The guided aspect of the interviews allowed me to return, when necessary, to the planned questions and ensured my target content was not forgotten or missed (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012, p. 3).

Prior to the interviews, I developed and then revised ten questions for use over the two interview sessions (see Appendix 1). The questions loosely guided the conversations in order to gather vital pieces of information. They anchored the conversations in some common ground, but also left room for the respondents to express in detail what their individual experience had been. For an interview to have real value, “the researcher must ask focusing but not leading questions about [the] situation and [then] listen carefully to the participants” (Chan, 2013, p. 5). Good interview questions “provide openings through which interviewees can contribute their insiders’ perspectives” (Chenail, 2011, p. 255), which kept the conversation focused, but still allowed the respondents their vital freedom of expression (Anderson, 2010, p. 2). The questions were arranged to facilitate a detailed and personal response from each respondent and were meant to enable me to “gain insight...through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues” (Seidman, 2006, p. 14). If the goal of this research was to understand how someone felt about an event, then they had to be able to express their feelings freely (Chenail, 2011, p. 256; Roberts, 2014, p. 2).

The first interview started by clarifying the focus of the research as well as explaining the research process and goals. The interviewees were able to ask questions regarding the process which was intended to allay concerns about the intention of the research or their participation in it, then focused specifically on the experience of the PBLA implementation and how they felt about it. The interview questions asked respondents to reflect on their experiences with and their responses to change, both personal and professional. The interview included inquiries about

their feelings about the PBLA, about how it was implemented and any perceived issues with introducing the PBLA into their classrooms. The second interview began with an offer to add to or change any of their comments from the first interview and allowed for additional reflection on their responses. In addition to follow-up comments on the previous interview, the participants were asked to focus in the second interview on how funders, administrators and other educational leaders undertook the implementation and issues the teachers had with the implementation process. The second interview gave the participants a chance to reflect not only on what was done as well and poorly in the PBLA, but also afforded them the opportunity to make suggestions about how future changes to AESL practice could be undertaken in a more thoughtful and ultimately successful manner.

Effective Phenomenological Inquiry (PI), includes reflection on the data provided not only by the words spoken by the participants, but by what is unspoken. Non-verbal communication reveals deeper aspects of the emotionality of the event. Being forced to conduct these interviews electronically did somewhat curtail my ability to fully observe the participants, however, every effort was made to observe and include non-linguistic responses. The tone of voice used by a participant, the vocal stress apparent in the responses, the moments of laughter as well as silence were deeply revealing. If you are asking people how they felt about something, you must hear them speak of it to get the true depth of that feeling. Only through the personal interaction with the interviewer could one hope to achieve this type of deep and heartfelt response; the affective dimensions of the shared human experience is right at the centre of robust Phenomenological Inquiry.

My instructions for each interview included encouragement for teachers to speak from their hearts and use descriptive language. It is the presence of vivid language full of rich detail

that allows the reader to feel that they themselves “have experienced or could experience the events being described in the study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). My own position as someone who has personally undergone the PBLA training enabled me to respond with sensitivity to the unique ways each participant reflected on their experiences (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 247). As the interviewer, I was able to listen, demonstrate compassion and truly understand the responses of the participants on a very personal level. That level of empathy, however, may contribute to the suspicions of people who question the validity of this type of qualitative research. There may be a tendency for PI to be seen as more subjective because the interviewer is the mechanism through which data is collected (Atieno, 2009, p. 14; Bourke, 2014, p. 2; Creswell, 2007, p. 38). However, there are a number of steps a researcher can take to reduce any negative effects of researcher interference.

#### *Researcher Interference and Bracketing*

Although interviewers may enter into their research with the intention to only represent the ideas of those being interviewed, it is impossible not to acknowledge that the lens through which the entire transaction is viewed is coloured by the personal and sociological stances of both parties (Anderson, 2010, p. 2; Bourke, 2014, p. 3). When a researcher collects data from a person, there is a school of thought that warns that the “assumptions, values, interests, emotions and theories” of the researcher will, for good or ill, inevitably “influence how data are gathered, interpreted, and presented” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 2). These personal stances can be reflected in the questions asked, the follow-up questions added, the responses of the teacher being interviewed, as well as the interviewer’s reactions to those responses (Bourke, 2014, p. 2). If not undertaken with due care, the ‘researcher as instrument’ paradigm could, at best, slightly

impact the findings of the research, or at worst, completely scuttle them (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003, p. 418).

Attempts must always be made to reduce the negative perception of any subjective opinions or pre-conceived notions on the part of the researcher to improve the scholarly validity of the research (Creswell, et al., 2007, p. 254; Groenewald, 2004, p. 50; Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 2). The researcher must undertake ongoing self-analysis to identify their own perceptions regarding the phenomenon before, after and throughout the research process (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). The researcher must recognize in advance their own “biases, goals and foibles” and acknowledge what impact their own feelings may have on the outcome of the research (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). This reflection can help temper a perceived influence of the researcher’s own impressions and increase the perception of the scholarly “rigor of the project” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 2). One way to improve the rigor of the project is to employ ‘bracketing’, a staple of Phenomenological research. Bracketing can go some way to “mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 2).

There is not a true consensus as to when bracketing should occur, what methods should be used to conduct it, nor even what precisely bracketing is (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 3). Researchers must determine for themselves their location “on what is in effect a continuum of what is bracketing” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 5). The pliable nature of bracketing should be seen as a “strength within qualitative research as it can support an array of approaches” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 5) rather than as something that limits the veracity of the participants’ perceptions of the phenomena under investigation.

Of the types of bracketing defined in the literature, the type that best matched the goals of this research project was Reflexive, or Cultural, bracketing (Gearing, 2003, p. 1446). This type of bracketing is most in keeping with a constructivist epistemology, ontological relativism and serves this Phenomenological Inquiry research project particularly well (Gearing, 2003, p. 1446). The Reflexive bracketing model encourages the researcher to honestly reflect on their own views regarding the topic under inquiry in order to “minimize their interference” in the study (Gearing, 2003, p. 1445). Reflexive bracketing encourages the researcher make their thoughts and views about the topic transparent for themselves and consider their own suppositions, both positive and negative, prior to interviewing the research participants (Gearing, 2004, p. 1445). Through this self-reflection I period I had hoped to set aside “as much as possible [my] experiences to take a fresh perspective of the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 254).

Also apropos of this type of bracketing, external influences were deliberately not bracketed out any step of the research process. I was careful throughout the research process not to “remove the context, culture, and environment” of the phenomenon in my own thinking or in my interviews with the participants (Gearing, 2003, p. 1445). In fact, the findings of this research are directly intended for the very individuals and organizations that define the context, determine the culture and influence the environment of AESL programs in Canada. Therefore, being mindful of those influences throughout the research process ensured that I, as the researcher, considered “larger world suppositions (e.g., culture) essential to the phenomenon being investigated” (Gearing, 2003, p. 1445). Bracketing is not the only kind of mitigation afforded to those undertaking this type of research; member-checking also contributes to the veracity of PI research.

### *Data Integrity and Member-Checking*

During this study, I also undertook several important activities to ensure the accuracy of the data gleaned from the responses of these five very different individuals in order to present data that was truly reflective of the experiences of these individuals. In addition to bracketing, I employed member-checking after each interview, which is a technique that contributes to the validity and accuracy of the data produced in PI research. The use of member-checking moves the onus of proving the accuracy of data from the researcher who collected it, back to the participant who provided it (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). By allowing the respondents to edit or revise the interview data, they contribute to the accuracy of it, which in turn contributes to the validity of the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). A vital aspect of the member-checking process is to ensure that participants feel they have ample opportunities to reflect on their statements, clarify any of their responses as well as add any responses they felt had not been given in the interview, but which they felt had merit in the discussion (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

In order to verify the accuracy of the interview transcripts, member-checking was conducted after each of the interview sessions. Recordings were made of each interview and then verbatim transcriptions were produced and shared with the participants to ensure that the words used by the interviewees were accurate, as well as to “allow the voices of research participants/informants to speak” without the lens of the researcher’s interpretation (Groenewald, 2004, p. 48). Following each interview, I sent the participants a copy of the written transcripts to make sure they felt their comments and responses had been accurately represented (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Participants were asked to identify any areas where their responses have been misinterpreted or misunderstood and offer clarification and/or correction (Creswell & Miller,

2000, p. 127). I also offered the participants an opportunity to expound on or add to any of their remarks from either session. These member-checking activities helped the participants to “ascertain if their answers to any questions need[ed] to be rectified, and ensure[d] that the researcher ha[d] not misinterpreted the data” (Chan et al., 2013, p. 5). All of these steps enabled both myself and the participants to feel their thoughts, perspectives and feelings were accurately and fully represented in the transcripts. These revised transcripts produced the most accurate reflection of the teachers’ recollection possible.

### *Validity and Reliability*

It is important to acknowledge that one of the primary challenges to the acceptance of qualitative data are its validity and its reliability. Some argue that the subjective responses in PI are not valid because they cannot be easily measured, quantified or repeated. Others contend that the subjective nature of the responses and a question about how reproducible the results are may seem to diminish its reliability. However, a number of proponents of PI challenge that assertion by explaining that validity and reliability in qualitative research, such as PI, are simply measured in different ways. They contend that PI findings are entirely valid if “the data...collected are sufficiently rich to bring refinement and clarity to understanding an experience” (Polkinghorne, 2015, p. 140). The findings are valid in regards to how they “relate to the honesty and genuineness of the research” (Anderson, 2010, p. 842), and an “examination of trustworthiness” of the research and the resultant data can serve to ensure validity (Golafshani, 2003 p. 601). Therefore, validity can be established through self-reflection, thoroughness and careful consideration of the research (Tracy, 2010, p. 841).

Once validity is established, Lincoln and Guba explain, that validity must be considered sufficient to guarantee the reliability of the data because “there can be no validity without

reliability, a demonstration of the former [validity] is sufficient to establish the latter [reliability]" (as cited in Golafshani, 2003, pp. 601-602). Research that is undertaken with clear intentions, conducted by open and honest researchers who are determined to produce accurate and detailed data that truly reflects the experiences of the respondents is, in fact, both valid and reliable. By utilizing semi-guided questions in the interviews, encouraging descriptive language, undertaking ongoing bracketing activities, and conducting member-checking, the responses from the participants felt honest and thoughtful, revealing in vivid detail the lived experiences of these individuals. Each of these processes conducted throughout the study contributed positively to the reliability and validity of the data. Once the data was collected and checked, I undertook the next steps of analyzing the data to uncover patterns or categories and identify themes.

### **Coding, Categorizing and Themes**

Analyzing data in qualitative research is not a process that consists of disparate and neatly divided steps that occur in a purely linear fashion, but is a complex undertaking. It is vital to recognize that the analysis process must be done well to generate the most meaningful qualitative data possible. Analysis of this type of data is "time-consuming" and "require[es] constant movement between immersion, coding, categorising and [the] creation of themes" (Green et al., 2007, p. 546). Data analysis should take place not after the interview process has been completed, but "alongside the interviews that generate the data" (Green et al., 2007, p. 546). This means the PI research process is something that is constantly folding back on itself before, during and after the data collecting interviews. Ultimately, "[r]igorous analysis of interview data is a necessary component of the research endeavour and is critical to the generation of good evidence" (Green et al., 2007, p. 549).



The first step in this process begins with a full immersion in the interview transcripts. This immersion “brings about clarity of the part played by both the interviewer and the research participant” (Green et al., 2007, p. 549). The interviewer is vital in the analysis process as transcripts may only tell part of the story. The interviewer contributes more than just the words of the interview, the interviewer “witnesses the details that make up the interview context including hesitations, confidence in answering questions, [and] the tone of participants” (Green et al., 2007, p.547). Their first-hand experience of the interview “lays the foundation for connecting disjointed elements into a clearer picture of the issue being investigated” (Green et al., 2007, p. 547).

Coding the results constitutes the next step in the analysis process (Green et al, 2007, p. 548). There is some discussion as to whether human responses can truly be reduced to a simple code like other data can. However, this type of coding aligns extremely well with PI as it encourages the researcher to examine and organize the responses by designating “single words, phrases, or whole paragraphs that contain information relating to each particular point being made” (Green et al, 2007, p. 548), which Creswell identifies as “significant statements” (Creswell, 2007, p. 254). Following the coding step, researchers then identify items that “share a relationship” and from them develop “coherent categories” (Green et al., 2007, p. 548). Like with coding, this step of categorizing the data serves PI well. The categories derived from linking the codes are akin to feelings-based labels for those shared human experiences. However, codes and categories should not be considered the final step in data analysis, as researchers sometimes feel is the case in research projects (Green et al., 2007, p. 548). Although ideas expressed through coding are “useful and convincingly conveyed”, the development of

categories “does not extend to the identification of themes” (Green et al., 2007, p. 548). The identification of specific themes is the final step in data analysis process.

Themes in qualitative research are successful when they are well defined, well described and well-reasoned. When they are, they “keep the [reader] in the text, keep the stories contextualized, and maintain [the] meaning” at the heart of the research (Morse, 2008, p. 727). Themes explain and link categories “until eventually an overriding explanation is arrived at which makes sense of the various patterns that have emerged at the descriptive level” (Green, et al., 2007, p. 549). A credible theme in qualitative research is sometimes described as “a meaningful ‘essence’ that runs through the data” (Morse, 2008, p. 727). This definition of ‘theme’ is closely aligned with the goals of Phenomenological Inquiry.

From such a diverse group of participants, it can be expected that there was diversity in their responses. Individuals respond to events in their own unique way based on past experiences, personality, and their concurrent context. However, in spite of some diverse and unique responses from the participants, there was some common ground and shared perceptions. The themes in this study were arrived at through an in depth study of the interview transcripts. Some of the themes emerged as responses to the interview questions asked directly, while others emerged independently through the course of the interview. Through careful reading and re-reading of the transcripts, I was able to identify patterns and repetitions emerging in the responses. By colour-coding the common words and phrases, I was able to begin connecting those seemingly “disjointed elements” (Green et al., 2007, p. 547) into categories. The final stage of analyzing the data was to determine coherent themes that were informed by the categories identified by the participants. These themes revealed the essence of the shared experience, linking the categories identified in the challenges and recommendation sections.

These themes bring the categories together and highlight the most significant and vital aspects of the data.

### *Developing Significant Texts*

Individuals can take away different impressions from a shared experience because they bring different prior knowledge to an experience as well as deriving unique and personal meanings from their experiences (Craig, 2017, p. 301). A Phenomenological Inquiry (PI) is undertaken in order to gain an understanding of which aspects of a specific experience or phenomenon are shared among potentially diverse individuals (Creswell, et al., 2007, p. 241). Having people share their experiences within the context of PI in order to determine what aspects of their responses may be more universal results in valuable and insightful findings that may be considered to have a bearing on the larger population. Vital to this process is the creation of summary texts that present “a description of the experiences of the individuals studied and their common experiences with the phenomenon” (Creswell, et al., 2007, p. 255). PI allows the researcher to develop statements that enable a reader to truly understand the shared experience – to reveal its “essence” (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 252).

The “textural” description or summary describing what participants experienced during the phenomenon, the training and implementation of the PBLA, is created in order to identify the commonalities among the responses to help the reader understand the complex lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). The “structural” description or summary describing the context and setting in which the phenomenon took place helps the reader to identify and understand what external forces, such as people or events, potentially influenced the respondents’ experience (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). A final text or summary is distilled from the first two texts and strives to represent a “composite” description of the essential structure or

“essence” of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 62; Creswell, et al., 2007, p. 255). These texts or summaries allow a reader to come away from the process feeling as if they truly understood the feelings and lived-experiences of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Phenomenological Inquiry is meant to reveal what the common responses shared by disparate people to a shared event, and it is particularly effective when reflecting the emotional aspects of the human experience. Change is an “affectively laden process” and it is vital for those enacting change to recognize that “emotions...play a central role” in the change process (George, 2001, p. 422). It is only through acknowledging the importance of feelings and the “emotional reactions” of those undergoing the change, that leaders are able to monitor and address challenges inherent in the change process (George, 2001, p. 438). The words people choose to use to describe their inner emotional life have value, and can be written and studied and analyzed in order to reveal the core of their reality. However, there is also valuable research data to be found the unspoken emotions they project through the interviews.

### **Participant Observation**

Facial expressions and body language, vocal changes in tone and tenor, as well as the pauses and silences that occur speak as loudly as words. In-person interviews allow an interviewer to see and note the full range of facial expressions utilized by the interviewee, as well as to make note of body language. Observation in on-line interviews can be, by its nature, somewhat less informative and more limited. As a result of these somewhat limited interactive conditions, I confined my comments on non-verbal responses to what I was able to see in the case of three of the participants and what I could hear for all five of the participants. Despite the limitations of not being in-person, these interviews still allowed me to understand that the

participants in this study were all unique individuals with differences in personality and temperaments, and those differences in personality impacted how they spoke about the PBLA throughout the interview process.

Greg was the least overtly emotional in his responses. His calm but thoughtful facial expressions, his relaxed body posture, his even tones and measured responses seemed to reflect a fairly dispassionate response to the event under discussion. Greg's demeanor indicated that he apparently had, and continues to have, a fairly non-emotional relationship with the PBLA training and classroom implementation. He did use some more emotionally-laden words in the interviews, primarily when sharing the experiences, or his perception of the experiences, of his co-workers. Several times during the course of the two interviews, he shared that his co-workers seemed overwhelmed and stressed often during the PBLA process. He showed some tension when he indicated more than once that the expectations placed on the teachers may have been unrealistic, and that those expectations caused undue stress to his co-workers. He less often acknowledged his own levels of stress and feelings of inadequacy during the training process, choosing instead to express his frustration with the time and energy required to do the PBLA to meet the standard of the funders.

Shauna seemed quite circumspect in her responses, which were thoughtful and well-formed. She had clearly reviewed the questions in advance and given them a lot of deep consideration. Generally using measured tones, she responded not in a way that denied the emotions of the experience, but in a way that indicated she felt that getting upset about the PBLA would likely not improve the situation. Shauna forcefully expressed her concern that this study, as some of the ones prior to it had, would cover only the negative aspects of the PBLA. As a remedy to this, she strove throughout the phone interviews to present, calm professional

responses and reactions to the situation, rather than overly personal or emotional ones.

Nevertheless, there were some instances of tension apparent in her voice. Her responses seemed more emotional when sharing some of her feelings of frustration: frustration with the decision-making motives for and thoughtlessness of those at the top of the PBLA change process, as well as frustration over the lack of representation afforded to a wider array of AESL teachers in that process. Nevertheless, her mostly measured responses seemed to indicate that in spite of some instances of frustration, she was ultimately able to reconcile her approval of the PBLA in theory with her own experience using it.

Nadiya responded to each question passionately and with energy, her emotions seldom concealed, even over the phone. Nadiya, like Shauna, stated that although she felt the PBLA training and implementation had been a challenge, she also felt a professional responsibility to provide a balanced view of the PBLA for this study. Her voice was buoyant and enthusiastic and she maintained a positive tone even when speaking of the challenges of the PBLA training. She identified several areas of concern with the training and implementation, but did so with good humour, laughing often throughout the interviews. To me, Nadiya and her responses represented the best the funders could have hoped for: teachers who would take on the challenge of the PBLA with lots of energy, positivity and professionalism.

Elsa, for her part, was very open with her responses as well. She was very expressive, her face breaking into a smile or a laugh when discussing the demands of the training, though perhaps not quite as quick to laugh as Nadiya over the more difficult aspects. Elsa spoke openly and emotionally about the expansive challenge the PBLA represented in her professional life. Clearly a compassionate and caring teacher whose career exceeded 30 years, Elsa's eyes brightened and brimmed with joy and pride when looking back with bittersweet nostalgia on her

career. However, those same eyes often lowered when she reflected on her feelings of loss and regret, and even a sense of defeat, defeat that she seemed to turn inward. Her voice was often emotional when she seemed to take the blame for what she saw as her failure to perfect the implementations of the PBLA. Had Elsa not verbally shared her lament regarding the overwhelming burden of the PBLA, it would still have been completely evident in the tone of her voice, her facial expressions and her body language.

Daria was, by far, the most varied in her emotional responses. She visibly demonstrated her frustration and disappointment many times throughout the two interviews, but that frustration was turned more outward unlike that of Elsa. When talking about how much time the PBLA took to do and how stressful the experience was even five years after the fact, the tension was still evident in her voice. Daria paused frequently before offering her responses to the questions she felt most strongly about. More often, her narrowed eyes and lips tightened in a way that may have indicated a desire to get the response just right and accurate in order to sufficiently describe the truly overwhelming experience the PBLA implementation had been to Daria and others like her. Her voice often slowed and tightened as she expressed her frustration with how little power she felt she had over her class under the PBLA, perhaps reflecting how rigid and regimented her teaching had become in order to fulfill the expectations placed upon her by the PBLA. She brightened when describing, as Elsa did, the joy she felt in those last two weeks of the term when she could teach what she wanted and not worry about the PBLA. What few positive statements she made about the PBLA seemed to be done a bit reluctantly and with a wry laugh.

Acknowledging differences in temperament and experience and despite some differences in the content, tenor and manner of delivery of their responses, these five very different people shared some common responses to the PBLA training and implementation process.

## Research Question 1 – Affective Dimensions of the PBLA

The research question under scrutiny in the first interview was to investigate responses to this question: “What are the affective dimensions of teachers’ experiences to a fundamental change in their practice, in this case the implementation of the PBLA?”. The responses given by the participants to the first set of interview questions were grouped into the following categories: under pressure; insufficient time; learning curve; great (self)expectations; motivation/demotivation; and sense of loss.

### *Under Pressure*

At the heart of the participants’ experience, and in keeping with earlier research (Desyatova, 2018; Fox, 2014; Haghighi, 2016; Ripley, 2012; Ripley, 2018), a through line linking a number of the emotional responses the participants shared were feelings of stress and anxiety. Daria explained that in the beginning, “there was a lot of swearing and yelling. And, like, yeah, we’re all going down in the same ship guys, what are we going to do about it?” She often felt stressed and overwhelmed, saying, “[I was] overwhelmed by the minutiae. I was overwhelmed by the boxes; I was overwhelmed by the charts; I was overwhelmed by the categories of information.” Daria concluded that stress of the situation manifested in additional emotions. She explained,

I was angry. I was angry that I had to do something that didn’t fit my way of thinking. It didn’t fit my way of processing information; it didn’t fit my way of applying, of learning...I resented having to change something I thought was working okay. I resented having to do it someone else’s way.

Greg identified that “everyone was kind of... a little bit, maybe, there was some anxiety”, which he attributed to the fact that “there was some stress for some teachers because of the extra



workload.” Nadiya added that she experienced some strong emotions when she looked more closely at the large number of PBLA assessments teachers were required to complete for the PBLA saying, “I didn’t like these numbers – I got angry. I got angry about that.” Elsa remarked that inadequacies in her own performance caused her anxiety. Her voice wavered at times as she explained that “the stress of trying to get a portfolio together” and of not living up to her own high standards deeply affected her experience using the PBLA.

Shauna explained the cause of her stress was rooted in uncertainty. She explained it this way:

Where I have a degree of control on how I approach things and how I deal with it and how I do it, but not something that I feel confident about... [is] the most stressful situation. And I do think that PBLA falls into there.

She added the PBLA was:

Really tedious to deal with, because you’re fundamentally not changing anything, you know, in terms of calling it ‘formative and summative’ versus ‘skill using and assessment’ – it doesn’t change what you’re doing, it’s just nitpicking language. So those kinds of changes I found fairly irksome.

Daria concluded that the only way that she and many of her co-workers could deal with the stress of the PBLA was through commiseration; “You know, saying, ‘Okay, we’re all going through this – what are you doing about this? What are you doing?’ And then, yeah, a lot of it was venting. And I just felt better after.” It is clear from these responses that “stress is an endemic part of teachers' work” (Smylie, 1999, p. 80) and those feelings of stress and related emotions were a major affective response to the PBLA. However, there were other factors that added to the burden of the training that also impacted the experience for these teachers.

### *Insufficient Time*

Not surprisingly, and consistent with much of the earlier research (Desyatova, 2018; Fox, 2014; Haghighi, 2016; Ripley, 2012; Ripley, 2018), another of the most consistent contributing factors to feelings of unease was the perceived impact the PBLA had on teachers' sense of time. The participants felt that both during the training and the implementation phases, time management was a significant challenge. Shauna said of the training:

Of course everyone was complaining about time...It took up a lot of class time, it ate up so much class time... We had to spend all this time listening to these recordings and videos and things like that, and it was very time consuming with very minimal payoff in terms of what you were actually gleaning from the different activities and things... I had a lot more work outside of my scheduled work hours, for sure. And my impression was that everyone else was also working way more than their scheduled work hours, primarily to keep up with PBLA...So there were lots of complaints at breaks and lunches and stuff, just about the time-consuming aspect of it.

And of the implementation process, she explained "it was a lot of extra hours to execute [the PBLA] the way that I wanted to be executing it."

Nadiya echoed Shauna's perception that the PBLA was "super time consuming, because you create an assessment that is valid, and it takes a lot of time." She was concerned about achieving a great deal of work in the allotted time, saying, "I was thinking, 'How is it going to be possible for me to have 32 assessments within this time?'" Elsa explained that sometimes one did not even have time think "because you're keeping at [the PBLA] day in and day out." Daria explained the PBLA's impact on her sense of time this way:

I was just angry that a lot of it – not all of it – but a lot of it felt like a waste of my time when I could be doing something more pressing for my students who sat in front of me...I was resentful that that's how my time was being used...I resented my time being used to think about minutiae that was never applied to my real world test.

Greg identified that for teachers new to AESL, time was a serious consideration in regards to the newer online PBLA training that replaced the earlier in-person sessions. He warned, "You tell a teacher 'You have to do this 30-hour training session, [and] do it on your own time'. They're not getting paid, so they're going to be very reluctant. Even excellent teachers are going to be reluctant."

The participants all identified that for themselves, or for a segment of their co-workers, a lack of time was not conducive to successfully achieving all the new learning the PBLA represented. Their responses clearly aligned with research that indicated time, or the lack of it, represented a significant concern for teachers. "Time constraints" can exacerbate other issues teachers are coping with, and can become one more "potent stressor" for teachers on the job (Smylie, 2006, p. 62). The participants responses indicated that not only was a perceived lack of time an issue for them, but also the sheer volume of learning required also impacted their experiences with the PBLA.

### *Learning Curve*

Daria described her experience learning the PBLA content this way: "It was a steep learning curve. It felt like the bar was set very high...I see it more...like a university course." She went on to add:

Changing the way I had to teach – I was scared. I was scared that the way I had learned everything to be was going to be different, and I have to understand a whole new way of

thinking... It was way too much information – it was way too text-heavy, academic information that wasn't applicable.

Greg shared this response regarding the professional learning required for the PBLA:

I think for someone who was more used to, you know, post secondary education or was just still completing courses or coursework, I think it was maybe not as challenging because it was more for – like, some academic things we were doing, right, analysing, interpreting...things like that... But I think for some teachers who have – who were far removed from school, who had been doing their own thing for quite a while, it was just another maybe – it was added stress, because they didn't really want to change too much... And then you could tell that there were a few teachers who were like, 'No, this is not for me; I don't want to do this; this sounds like a lot of work; you're giving me too much work.'... I think for some teachers it was too much, I can think of - for few teachers it was like information overload, and then, you know, turning off.

Nadiya indicated that for her, due to her extensive educational background, "the sessions – they were okay for me ...I had a huge background of knowledge [so] it was not a very difficult thing." However, she described the plight of a new teacher this way: "So guess what happens with people that don't have all this background knowledge, all this experience? How are they going to be effective teachers? It's impossible!" Shauna gave a similar description of her experience, saying, "For me, it was objectively easy to do that because of my background in language arts" and noted that she felt the training consisted of, "a lot of superfluous stuff." Nevertheless, she acknowledged that she, along with her colleagues, still struggled "to discern what the actual, practical requirements were going to be, and what changes needed to be made." Shauna succinctly explained her response this way: "I didn't dislike PBLA because it was hard, I

disliked that it was hard.” Finally, Elsa shared that in spite of her extensive academic background and teaching experience, she found aspects of the PBLA, “a real challenge” but explained it was not for a lack of effort on her part, saying, “...I wanted to do it. I wanted to get a hold of this and perfect it.”

Not being able to comprehend and master this task, or watching their co-workers struggle with it, was in every way and immediately a significant source of frustration for the participants. However, failing to achieve the breadth of learning required to achieve mastery was not the only unfulfilled expectation shared by the participants.

### *Great (Self-)Expectations*

Another common response to this shared experience was the weight of the expectations placed upon everyone involved in the PBLA training. The teachers all felt that those expectations were bound to be failed by someone – them – a student – someone. Nadiya expressed concerns about the weight of these expectations on some of her co-workers. “[W]hen you start something, you’re going to make many mistakes, right? It’s impossible to learn and put everything to practice 100%. That was clear for me.” She went on to say, “I was thinking like, I could not imagine a brand new instructor after 8 weeks of training to understand that. It was extremely difficult. Because...I had a huge background of knowledge [and] I used everything I was learning.”

Elsa stated, “I just found the rubric thing and getting the tasks – enough tasks, enough tasks, the required number” was all but impossible. She went on to express dissatisfaction with her own performance saying, “I never felt like I achieved perfection in what I was doing.”

Shauna shared a similar sentiment:

You know, especially with the quantity of assessments that are required and the portfolios that are required and the amount of time that we have, that's the difficult kind of – no one has tried to do this that made these plans. No one has actually tried to go into a classroom for 200 hours or whatever and tried to have an assessment to give them.

Greg indicated that some teachers fell prey to their own negative expectations, saying, "I think teachers who were negative off the bat or immediately, had a negative feeling about [the PBLA]." He equated potential failure to some negative attitudes saying, "probably 80-90%... [of] people might've been going into it with...a negative opinion immediately. People who had a negative feeling about it – that really affected, you know, how well their [PBLAs] maybe turned out."

Daria expressed what might be the most significant unfulfilled expectation of the PBLA implementation: the impact of the PBLA on students. She explained:

[T]he daunting thought of having to disseminate all this information to stage one literacy students was daunting. It was overwhelming... I felt like they were not capable of handling what was being put upon them, and what was sort of – being put on me to put upon them. They didn't have the capabilities to – at least at my level, I believed at the time – to allow me to be successful in implementing it the way it was designed. I thought to myself that this would be great in a regular stream CLB 4 or 5, but with your Foundations learners, with your Stage 1 literacy learners, it's too much, the expectation was too high.

She went to add:

Those [PBLA] binders are not Literacy-friendly, even though do have a Literacy stream, which really isn't that much different from the Regular stream, binders. In that sense

having a portfolio binder when you're a Foundations student is, it's like – it's beyond them. You know, putting an unrealistic expectation on teachers who then put unrealistic expectations on students. So there's an unrealistic expectation trickle down.

These responses indicate that the failure to meet expectations proved to be an issue. They perceived unrealistic expectations set for their students to be able to comprehend the value of and engage with the PBLA in a meaningful way. They also indicated, in keeping with prior research (Desyatova, 2018; Fox, 2014; Haghighi, 2016; Vanderveen, 2018), that they believed the workload required from teachers to make the PBLA successful created equally unrealistic expectations for them. Unmet expectations inevitably impacted the sense of motivation, or sometimes the lack of it, the participants felt throughout the process.

#### *Motivation/Demotivation*

Having sufficient motivation is perhaps the most “critical variable in producing maintained change” for organizations in the long term (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 76). In regards to motivation in this study, Nadiya lamented, “I saw some people doing things that I was not very happy with. Like, people that were there because some people choose a job just because, and for me education is love!” Shauna identified that for experienced teachers, the training was somewhat ineffective. She illustrated this saying, “Anyone who had been teaching for an extended period of time, I think they felt like, ‘Okay, we already know this.’” She went on to indicate that change for the sake of change can be less than inspiring, explaining that in her mind, the authors “were just changing the lingo arbitrarily because [they] thought it sounded better”.

Greg explained that many his coworkers may have felt “demotivated” during the training period and explained it this way:

You know, some teachers who've been working for so long don't really want a lot of extra things to do, even teachers who have been working for like 10 years...they're willing to adapt and change, and modify things, but they're always hesitant... I think it was a mixed bag in terms of teacher reaction, some teachers I think were 100% on board, some teachers were kind of 50/50. They saw some use to the new portfolios but perhaps they were a little bit stubborn and didn't want to change.

Daria indicated that it was difficult to be motivated by the PBLA since she felt the sessions were "make work projects" and that the PBLA was "a project invented to justify someone's job. I think it was a colossal waste of federal money." She identified one very specific demotivating factor: "I felt like I didn't really understand the purpose of it other than some kind of top-down, centralized control mechanism." For Elsa, the presence of the PBLA was demotivating on an ongoing basis through the school year. She explained with regret that, "My period of joy was always when I handed my report cards in and I got to teach with joy until the new term started." In her mind, the real teaching couldn't start until the PBLA obligations were fulfilled.

Identifying de-motivating issues, such as arbitrary changes made without thought, and for seemingly questionable reasons, could easily diminish someone's sense of motivation. A loss of motivation might then have repercussions on how the teachers' experiences with PBLA were perceived. However, perhaps the most profound shared affective response experienced and expressed by these teachers was a deep sense of loss.

### *Sense of Loss*

All of the participants in this study expressed a sense of loss in response to the implementation of the PBLA. Loss as a significant human experience was not identified as



specifically in much of the earlier research as it was in this study. While the causes of this sense of loss differed from person to person, each felt that the PBLA training and implementation had produced a sense of loss in them. Shauna lamented the loss of valuable class time her students suffered during the training period. She explained: “I...didn’t feel like it was fair for my students to lose the amount of content that they lost to my going to do this training”. Nadiya concurred with this notion sharing that she felt she had lost valuable, student-determined teaching time because she was caught in an assessment loop saying, “Basically you’re going to have a class-assess-a class-asses-a class”.

Greg described some of his coworkers feeling a loss of control over what and how they were teaching. He explained that in his experience, the required PBLA implementation was particularly hard on long time teachers who had been, “doing their own thing for quite a while” and for whom change was a loss of their sense of comfort and familiarity. Daria indicated that she felt teachers had lost the ability to “judge and control what was best for [their] particular group of learners.” She went on to say: “It was taking away the autonomy of teachers and discrediting their professional experience and knowledge and ability to judge what was right in their own classroom.”

Elsa acknowledged she was deeply affected the PBLA. She explained that the PBLA, “largely took the joy out of daily teaching” for her, which is a significant loss in and of itself. Finally, she added that she retired from AESL teaching about two years after the implementation of the PBLA, explaining the correlation this way: “I know it wasn’t the reason I retired. I know it wasn’t. But, I have said that PBLA got the best of me because I never felt that I perfected it.”

Daria identified the impact of decisions like Elsa’s, pinpointing what might be one of the more profound losses related to the PBLA. She explained that the field of AESL in Manitoba

and likely elsewhere “lost some valuable treasures because of [the PBLA].” She described the loss this way:

We had people who had been teaching for 25-30 years who were absolutely amazing at what they did; they were magical. And they said, ‘No way, not at this point in my career, I’m not doing this. I’m not going back to school and starting from scratch,’ and they left our program. And there was a big void.

That situation is just one sad example of the sense of loss experienced by participants throughout the implementation of the PBLA. There was a loss of time with students, a loss of meaningful, student-directed learning, a loss of autonomy, and perhaps the greatest loss, the loss of a generation of teachers who helped to establish AESL in Canada as a distinct and worthy profession. These are not trivial losses by any measure and surely contribute in some way to the perceived experiences of the changes wrought through the PBLA training and implementation.

### *Effects of Change*

At the end of the first interview, I asked each participant if they felt there was correlation between how they dealt with change in their personal life and how they dealt with change in their work life. Since change and the effects of it are at the centre of this research, I wanted to understand if their attitude toward change in general to see if it in any way affected their response to the changes brought by the PBLA. The responses were somewhat varied, but each person openly identified the impact of change on both their personal and professional lives.

Elsa explained, “I know I don’t like personal change. I’m an adult and we don’t like personal change. We find it hard. I always felt, though, that professionally, I would rise to a challenge of change and do my best.” Nadiya indicated a different take on her perception of change:

I like challenges and I like changes. Change is not something that is difficult for me, so every time in my life I had a challenge, I thought, ‘You know what, give it to me. Let me try!’ Because I know I’ll make mistakes no matter what, but I want to learn. I like new things, so that’s why after a certain time of years, I’m like, ‘Okay, I’m ready for a new change.’

Shauna had a very thoughtful response to this question. She focused on a single cause affecting her ability to cope with change and explained:

Whether it’s professional or personal, how it affects me is the degree of control I have. So, if something is completely out of my control and there’s nothing I can do about it, it doesn’t stress me out. If something is completely within my control and I know I can handle it, it doesn’t stress me out... So in one sense, I have a sense of control [over the PBLA] because I could spend extra hours working on it if I wanted to, but I didn’t love that I had to to get to where I wanted to be with it. So that’s sort of – it’s an interesting thing. I guess ultimately the answer is – I treat change and challenges the same way in my professional and personal life, and it all hinges on that aspect of ‘how much control I do have’.

Greg expressed a different sentiment about his response to personal and professional change. He shared that for him age was a factor in his resilience to change:

I think [my response] is quite similar, [but] I think it depends a lot on your age, too. You know, for a new teacher, if you ask them to do something, usually 90% of the time they’re willing to do it, like a complete change – even in your personal life, like, ‘You can’t do this job, you’ve got to do a totally different job’ – I think they’re more willing to do it.

But age, Greg reasoned, was tempered by another factor: the benefit perceived by the change.

He explained his own response to change this way:

I think in my life, I'm at the stage where I'm kind 50/50, so if you told me I had to make a big personal change in my life or a big professional change, I'm going to be hesitant for sure, and I hopefully will see the benefits of this change. Or I will be more reluctant. But I think I'm at the stage where it's going to be a little bit more of a push, probably give you some pushback if I don't see the benefit or the relevance, like okay, you want me to do all this work, but I better see something after, right? So I think I'm at the point where – yeah, I'm willing to change, but I have got to see benefit or meaning behind it. And then I would give 100% to any changes.

Daria also offered a thoughtful, reflective response about her reaction to change in her personal and professional life:

[H]onestly, I don't adapt well to change in a way that most other people do – I usually need a longer buffer zone before I'm ready to accept it and embrace it and just adapt. I've had some pretty major changes in my personal life and, you know, not just your Average Joe changes – and you know what? I got through it. If I feel that at the end of the day, the change is going to be positive, I'm okay with it. Otherwise, I resist it and resent it. So, I mean – I'll accept it because I have to, because it's my job. You know, I'll – eventually I'll embrace it and see the good in it. But...I need to know – why it is that I'm doing this, why am I going through this, what is the purpose. I can tough it out if I know at the end of the day there's going to be a reward. Something positive is going to come. But if I just feel the change imposed on me for no reason and no benefit to me, I'm really not interested in it.

Individuals are more likely to accept and internalize new behaviours, even challenging ones, if they consciously see the value in it (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). All of the participants in this study acknowledged that although change is never easy, they were prepared to undertake this change in their professional life if it felt like it was worth the effort and if it was relevant to their teaching context. This willingness to root out the good in an activity that caused these teachers so much strife is borne out by the responses of the participants in two areas: a perceived sense of improved consistency and of utility regarding the PBLA.

### *Improved Consistency*

In keeping with the findings in some of the earlier research (Fox, 2014; Ripley, 2012; Ripley 2018), all of the participants indicated there were some positive aspects of the PBLA. The participants in this study felt first that, both in theory and in practice, the PBLA had improved consistency in AESL practice where sometimes it felt like there was very little consistency. Elsa stated:

I thought that finally, all the teachers would be on board, that assessment would be consistent... The receiving teacher would accept that student because they would be more alike in terms of skills, they wouldn't want to pass them back to me, or try to push them somewhere else.

Greg had a similar impression:

I think some people were... optimistic, maybe hopeful that the portfolios would be more uniform, the rubrics would be more uniform... So when you pass a portfolio from teacher to teacher, you would see a lot of consistency because I don't think there was a lot of consistency before... So that had to be more uniform, whereas in previous years, teachers

had – you know, kind of done anything... Now I think they're a lot more uniform, so I think that's been good.

Daria also indicated that the potential for increased consistency among teachers through the PBLA caused a slightly positive shift in her attitude toward it:

[T]here was at least, in theory, somewhat of an expectation of uniformity, across the board, where certain things were ideally going to be met with specific wording in rubrics and assignments. That was, to me, the only positive feeling I had, that 'Okay, maybe my 1B in reading is going to be the same as the next teacher's'.

Shauna indicated that at the very least, she “was happy with the sort of nation-wide, consistently implemented system of the assessments.”

Finally, Nadiya indicated that without the strict oversight the PBLA would hopefully provide, there might still be issues with quality and consistency, saying, “[W]e assume people know, but really, we don't know... how individual teachers are doing.” She went on to warn that without oversight of a national standard such as the PBLA, teachers would continue to “have lots of freedom, and that [freedom] is scary. That is very scary.”

The participants in this study identified, as earlier research did (Fox, 2014; Ripley, 2012; Ripley, 2018), that the possibility of increased consistency was one of the few desirous effects of the PBLA. The implementation of the PBLA could, in their view, serve to mitigate the inconsistencies that often exist in AESL programs whether caused by physical distance or philosophical differences. However, consistency was not the only benefit identified by the participants in this study regarding the influence of the PBLA. In a similar way, all the participants identified that in the end, the PBLA and the associated training demonstrated a certain degree of usefulness and efficacy.

### *Sense of Utility*

Daria, who admitted up front that she was not a big proponent of the PBLA, said, “I do want to say – there was a reluctance to admit, but [still] an acceptance of positives.” She recognized that, “in some ways, it was very necessary.” Elsa stated, “I really did appreciate having the [PBLA] when I went to do my report cards. I did like it, I really did...when you’re doing the conference to be able to open it up.” Nadiya identified some appreciation of the usefulness of the PBLA immediately saying, “I really liked [the PBLA] because it was talking about using real life texts [and] I already loved that - I already used that.”

Shauna commented on the PBLA this way, “I liked PBLA from the beginning theoretically. We were essentially already relying on portfolio-style assessment pieces and things like that, so the concept was not new or challenging to me, philosophically or anything like that.” Greg, on the other hand, explained his far more slowly evolving response to the PBLA in this way:

Slowly by slowly I could see...the overall benefit. But in the beginning, I think it was a little bit more...I didn’t see a whole lot of benefit to it in the beginning. But then I think over the years I definitely – yeah, it’s been a little bit better now, so I can kind of see more benefit of it...It’s taken a while to kind of see the benefit, but I think after four years of, you know, doing assessments with the students, getting them familiar with the portfolio, I definitely see more benefit to it. I think it’s helped me be more organized, [and] I think it keeps the students a little bit more organized.

There was some feeling from the participants, much in keeping with prior research (Fox 2014; Ripley, 2012; Ripley, 2018), that the PBLA did have benefits and contributed to both teachers’ and the students’ ability to organize and utilize their teaching and learning.

All of the participants shared at least some appreciation for the PBLA in the areas of consistency and utility. They seemed somewhat reluctant to be too profuse in their praise, but did own that they recognized it as contributing positively to their teaching experience and acknowledged it had value and meaning if it was used well. It is important to note, though, that the two benefits identified by the participants are clearly associated with the presence of the PBLA Language Companion binder itself in the classroom, and are not really related to the method of the PBLA training and implementation. These responses would indicate that for these teachers, the PBLA binder as a mobile purveyor of student achievement gives it some value and utility. However, this positivity does not necessarily extend to the PBLA training or implementation process. Regarding those aspects, the participants offered a primarily negative set of responses.

### *Textural Summary*

The experience shared by the Adult ESL teachers in Manitoba through the training and implementation of the PBLA clearly showed it was not a light burden to shoulder. While the participants were willing to admit there were benefits to the sector from the PBLA, most notably an improvement in the consistency of language skills assessment and increased accountability of programs and teachers, there were far more negative responses expressed. The participants in this study identified a significant amount of stress resulting from the PBLA training and implementation. They identified that they felt a loss of control over their time, both in and out of the classroom, resulting in feelings of resentment and discontent. The participants indicated that they felt there was simply not enough time given to learn it before they had to move on to the next thing. That being the case, they felt that some of the expectations would inevitably not be



met and felt concerned that so much focus on meeting those expectations meant they would always feel they had fallen short.

Going in to a situation feeling you will always fall short must be highly demotivating, and being demotivated must surely have an impact on effectiveness. The participants expressed that these feelings were accompanied by a significant sense of loss. They felt they had lost control over what they taught, and how they taught it. Even worse, the AESL sector lost veteran teachers who felt it would simply be too much for them to take on at that stage of their career. Change, they all agreed, was never easy. Giving up how you have always done things, on the word of someone you do not necessarily trust, when you are not certain the thing you are being asked to change will ultimately be beneficial, nor that you can do them well, is a lot to ask. However, change can be undertaken in a far more successful manner, and had the funders and other s asked for the input of these knowledgeable, experienced and capable teachers, they would have discovered they had a lot of valuable insights to offer.

## **Research Question 2 – Recommendations for Future Changes**

The beating heart of Phenomenological research is sharing the first-person, often emotional responses of individuals involved in a shared experience. These responses inform readers and help them to feel and understand the lived experiences of the participants. However, I do not view these participants as mere passive receptors, only sharing their experiences of the events thrust upon them. Instead, I view the second part of this research as equally valuable. These professionals are potential agents of change. Therefore, the second research question I set out to resolve during the second interview was this: “What could have been done differently by administrators, school leaders, and others involved in education, such as funders and program architects, to help teachers cope more successfully with a large change in their practice, such as

the PBLA?” My goal for the results of this research was not only to acknowledge, “Here is what it felt like”, but also to explain, “Here is how it could be better next time.”

In response to the questions in the second interview, the participants had a variety of excellent suggestions for those involved in the development, delivery and oversight of the PBLA training and implementation that was informed by their own lived experiences with it. The responses have been grouped into several categories: better informed funders; better program design; more effective training; more knowledgeable administrators; and the role of the PBLA Lead Teacher (LT).

### *Better Informed Funders*

The participants offered a number of insights into their perceptions of the funder IRCC(Immigration, Refugee Citizenship Canada)’s level of knowledge and the impact that might have on their ability to make thoughtful decisions about programming. Nadiya indicated that the funders may make better decisions if they were better informed about the nature of the students in each program: “I would like these...people to come spend... a week with us. Sit in one of our classes, see the amount of [work] we do, see how students do, see how we prepare our assessments, and then make the decisions.” She also pointed to what she believed to be a lack of diversity among the individuals charged with making decisions about AESL in Canada. She explained, “[W]hen you don’t have a lot of diversity on your team, it’s very hard” adding that they should have people “that are experienced ESL instructors, [but] that are not only white people. If they have – if they know another language, if the have traveled abroad, not as a tourist, but seeing the reality where these students come from” they might be more understanding about the impact of their decisions. Daria concurred that the funders’ fundamental “lack of

understanding” was a serious issue. Without that understanding, she explained, the funders “may not really not know who our students are.”

Shauna expressed a similar concern about the funders’ dearth of knowledge saying, “There’s a lack of knowledge about education, [and] best practices philosophy...I think just really having a better comprehension of what an ESL classroom looks like...And particularly with the changing demographic” of the student population. Nadiya suggested the funders ought to, at a minimum, “listen to the instructors more.” She stated that she often believed the funder’s attitude to be: “You are well-paid, so you have to do everything we tell you.” Greg also questioned the ability of the funders to truly understand the student population saying: “I know they’re the governing body and they’re the funder, [but] they seem kind of...sometimes...you can tell they’re not educators, they’re more businesspeople, right? [They are] distanced from decisions that are being made.”

The participants clearly expressed their concern about the gap in knowledge and experience among those who decided there would be a change in the course and direction of AESL in Canada. However, the participants also took issue with the architects responsible for creating the PBLA training and implementation program as they experienced it.

### *Better Program Design*

The PBLA as it was presented in the 2015-2016 Cohort training period had several flaws according to the participants in this research that the architects of the program. The participants felt that the designers had made some unfortunate choices in the development of the materials and organization of the training sessions. Primary among their concerns was the fact the training program lacked the flexibility to be responsive to the needs and skills of the teachers and their programs. Greg acknowledged that in terms of time and money, “the one-size-fits all model is

probably the easiest way to go”. However, Shauna observed that a ‘one-size’ model is not always the most effective:

It would be nice if we had sort of an absolute, very comprehensive thing that we could do with really, really new teachers who had not been in a classroom before...And then if we had something that was more suited to people who were experienced teachers – something that was a little more flexible and that allowed them really to sort of assess the more practical aspects of it.

Nadiya suggested the training should begin with a “needs assessment with instructors” to determine their individual and program need. She went on to explain that “for instructors that...don’t have a lot of experience, I’m sure it was very challenging to try and learn so many concepts about education, about assessment, about testing.” Daria argued that the PBLA training “put us in a position where we all had to think the same way. And not all of us think the same way. And teach the same way, so the training really didn’t give flexibility to different teaching styles.” Elsa expressed a similar idea, saying “we felt that it was so proscribed.” She added, “[I]f we had been asked what our needs were, what our expectations were for the training, I think we could’ve given some very concrete examples.”

A second concern expressed by the participants was whether or not the PBLA, as developed, was equally relevant for all programs and students. Daria suggested that regarding the architects, “their ability to design an appropriate PBLA is directly linked to how many years they’ve been out of the classroom.” She went on to suggested that “the architects should’ve done far more consultation with Literacy teachers” to ensure the PBLA was equally valuable to and appropriate for that student population. Shauna also identified early on that,

[The] PBLA...in a Literacy classroom...I don't think we necessarily need to be doing PBLA in literacy classrooms, you know, or at least not all aspects of it...I think that when they were planning this out, they kind of had a typical – whatever that is – ESL class in mind, and they were going to base the expectation on that, most people in most classes would be able to do it this way.

Nadiya had similar thoughts recognizing that the PBLA would be a challenge for teachers working in Literacy classrooms, especially those new to AESL Literacy. “When I started teaching Literacy, there was no way I could put [the PBLA] theory in practice,” she explained. While Elsa reasoned that the architects may have been better informed if they had simply asked a broader range of people about the materials. “[T]hat’s where it shows - that if there had been maybe something sent out, ‘Have a look at this, how do you think this is going to work out for your program?’ and gotten something from the beginning”, she said, indicating that then the PBLA might have been more useful in a wider variety of classrooms. Greg responded, “I think it could’ve been even tailored a little bit more specifically to teachers who teach Literacy, which are often kind of neglected sometimes.”

A third issue discussed by the participants in regards to the weaker aspects of the PBLA was the register of language used in the training materials and supporting documents. Greg described them as “not user-friendly for beginning level teachers” and warned it might be “somewhat daunting” to know all of the acronyms and language in the documents. He suggested that if the concepts were merely more simply stated, it was “going to benefit teachers.” Elsa advised that the documents were “just too wordy”. She went on to point out that that the vocabulary used in the documents and materials is best suited to “academics – and not all [AESL] teachers are academics.” Finally, she suggested that experienced teachers from her

former program “could’ve helped [the architects] with more of the plain language of the document” if only they had been asked.

Nadiya advised a different style of teaching material for the PBLA entirely saying, “I remember when I started teaching, one thing that helped me a lot was to have the step-by-step guides that I could understand and I could apply in my classes.” Nadiya also recognized a vital aspect for learning was missing from the documents, explaining, “[T]here were not real life examples in the document. I believe examples would help the instructors create their own assessments.”

Daria was blunter in her evaluation of the architects’ work, succinctly advising the architects: “Cut the crap. No one’s impressed with your fancy words: Tell me what I have to know, to the point, and let me do it.” She added that the guides were not written by a current teacher and suggested that “perhaps [their] years away from the classroom had affected how practical and relevant the material was.” Shauna explained some of the documents seemed to be “not as intuitive to find the things you were trying to look for” to support her implementation of the PBLA. She also pointed out an unevenness between some of the training and support materials advising that “improving the consistency...[and] making sure their different sections fit in with one another...when multiple people are writing these documents” would be valuable. These suggestions clearly indicate there was room for improvement on behalf of the architects of the PBLA in terms of flexibility, consistency and concision of the training materials and support documents. The training materials were not the only flaw identified by the participants; they took issue with the training sessions as well.

### *More Effective Training*

The participants felt the PBLA training process itself had several shortcomings, most notably regarding the timing and method of the training sessions. Daria advised, “They could’ve – sorry to say it – they could’ve lengthened the training, so that [it was] put it into small, manageable chunks... just not everything at once.” Conversely, Greg stated that “it did take a little long, like it was a long process.” Shauna reflected, “I mean, the training – the training, looking back, I’d kind of look at it as a bit of a necessary evil,” but did suggest she and her coworkers often felt “thwarted” explaining:

I remember feeling very annoyed, and sort of aggravated that we – when we had a topic of discussion that everyone was engaged in... we were sort of being pushed along by our trainer – ‘Okay, we don’t have time for this, we only have 5 minutes of discussion time’ – and then watch this next stupid video.

In regards to the actual make up of how the training sessions were run, and similar to the research from Haghighi (2016), there were issues with the balance between theory and practice in the training. Nadiya explained that if she ran the PBLA training, she “wouldn’t have so many lectures” but would have instead “have more hands-on sessions”. Greg concurred stating perhaps the sessions should have been “two thirds...working with groups, trying things out, discussing, [and] one third...lecture.” Daria also indicated that the training could have been “more hands-on and less...pen and paper.” Nadiya commented that she felt training sessions that saw “instructors to get together” and then “collaborate and share” their teaching and assessment materials would have been the most beneficial. Elsa offered a similar sentiment identifying that having “more time for working together” would be a positive aspect improvement in the training process.

The final aspect the participants felt compelled to identify as a shortcoming in the training concerned the future of PBLA training in Canada. The participants acknowledged that full-staff, in-person training sessions would not likely be feasible going forward. They reasoned that if the PBLA is a requirement for employment in government funded AESL programs, someone should offer comprehensive training in it, and suggested that some responsibility for offering required training, such as the PBLA, may need to fall on the institutions charged with educating AESL teachers in Canada. Shauna explained that for teachers hoping to teach in federally funded LINC programs, “[T]o me it makes sense to at least have programs offer supplementary training for those who are intending to go into that part of the industry and that part of the sector.” Greg concurred explaining, “There could definitely be a course, like to complete your C-TESL. I think if one of the courses was *Introduction to the PBLA* and they go through that training...it’s just so much easier.” While it was clear the architects could have created more effective materials and designed a better training program, there were other flaws a bit closer to home that impacted the PBLA training experience for the participants as well.

#### *More Knowledgeable Administrators*

The participants indicated that they witnessed first hand an apparent lack of first hand knowledge about AESL classrooms and students from many of the stakeholders involved in AESL programming, and administrators were by no means exempt from this concern. Greg lamented, “I think our program admin has a fairly big knowledge gap in terms of EAL. I think there should be more knowledge there.” Elsa indicated, “I don’t know if [Admin] understood how much time those portfolios were taking”, adding, there was “no recognition of the depth of the [PBLA] work” from them. Daria indicated she believed whole programs would benefit from an administrative team who was better informed, suggesting, “It would’ve been really



interesting, and probably a better scenario, had our administrators had to go into the training as well... [They] may have learned a bit about the PBLA themselves...to help us with that.”

Daria also indicated she would have preferred if her “administrator might be more of an advocate for his or her staff” and had “recognize[d] what unrealistic expectations are being placed on their staff.” Shauna added this concern to her experience with administrator issues: “It’s one thing to commiserate with your colleagues [about the PBLA], but when your admin is also resentful of having to implement something, it can really negatively affect the success of that implementation.” Greg stated that there was a communication gap between teachers and administrators in some cases. For example, Greg explained he was being asked to complete a certain missed training session, but stated, “I remember our administration just being a little bit oblivious to that. They didn’t even know I was being asked.” These statements demonstrated that in terms of Administrators, a positive attitude toward the PBLA, some increased knowledge of the PBLA training process, increased involvement, as well as a perceived willingness to advocate for teachers may have contributed significantly to the success of the endeavour in some programs. However, administrators were not the only group identified as contributing to the reception of the PBLA training. The PBLA Lead Teachers also received some fairly significant attention from the participants.

### *Role of Lead Teachers*

Desyatova (2018) shared that the participants in her research identified the LT role as problematic in a number of ways, and many of her findings mirror the findings in this study. Training a small, but select group of teachers who then go on to train their peers is a technique the IRCC and the CCLB have utilized in the past, often referred to as ‘train-the-trainer’. However, unlike in past instances in my experience where the peer trainer was merely conveying

information about something such as identifying changes in a revised core document, the PBLA training required the Lead Teachers to provide direct training and ongoing oversight for their peers throughout the training process and beyond. Employing the train-the-trainer method for the PBLA was seen in some ways considered beneficial, in other ways it was seen as a detriment to the training process. On the positive side of the train-the-trainer method was a recognized familiarity with AESL students and programming. As Shauna explained:

I definitely preferred having people from our program who were also teachers in the classroom as opposed to...people in supervisory roles and things like that. That was really valuable. And also having actual teachers from our program who knew the context we were working in specifically.

Elsa concurred saying:

I knew that each one of the people training me had been in the real classroom. And...if they hadn't moved on to Resource role, they were still in the classroom. And so I knew that they came from where I was, you know, so that was very good.

Shauna and Greg both attributed to their co-workers some concern over how the individuals were selected to be Lead Teachers. Greg suggested, "There might've been a little bit of jealousy there for some teachers" regarding who was chosen to lead. Shauna expanded, explaining:

[T]here was some hurt feelings of who had been chosen to do it, and who wasn't given the opportunity to do it. Which, you know, I was not aware of actually until quite a bit later, that – now I know that some staff was resentful that certain staff were tapped on the shoulder and given this opportunity to ultimately make a little extra cash, and others were not given that opportunity.

When asked about the effectiveness of the train-the-trainer method, Greg remarked that in his experience, not all Lead Teachers (LTs) were created equal, stating:

I think some of the PBLA instructors seemed very confident and competent. A few of the others I found didn't seem as confident, seemed a little bit hesitant, a little bit scared almost... I think – it didn't really fit the personality of some of the PBLA instructors. It just wasn't their thing... You could see some nerves, so I think a few of them were nervous – you could tell that they were doing it for the first time, right? I feel like for every one of them it was the first time, but you could just tell for some of them it was a little bit more – there was probably a little bit more anxiety there.

The participants in this study indicated that the level of comfort demonstrated by different LTs varied, but indicated that even for the confident ones, the PBLA caused a shift in their relationships with their peers. This shift resulted in awkward interactions between colleagues and placed a significant burden of responsibility on the PBLA LTs. Daria described the dilemma of the PBLA Lead Teachers this way:

It created a weird dynamic within the staff. The PBLA LTs, I feel, didn't realize what they were getting themselves into when they signed up for the position. And it kind of put our own colleagues in a weird position where – to where they were – not authorities, but kind of authorities of the PBLA - we call them the PBLA police - and it created an unnecessary dynamic within our own staff.

Nadiya identified a similar issue regarding the responsibilities assigned to the LT position: “I could tell that many people [were] not satisfied. Some lead instructors were acting like managers and police officers, and that's not good.”

Some LTs, perhaps feeling compelled to maintain a feeling of collegiality with their peers, revealed some negative attitudes toward the PBLA during the training process. Nadiya shared this experience: “I don’t know if [the LT] was very excited about the powerpoint presentations, so... yeah, he was like ‘I’m sorry, I have to show you this’.” Nadiya felt in order to maintain his previous level of collegiality with his co-workers, at times the LT in her program may have downplayed his appreciation for the PBLA training. Nadiya posited the theory that because “these instructors didn’t like the PBLA very much”, the LT may have felt obligated to express a dislike for it also in order to maintain their collegial relationships. Daria defended that awkward situation in which LTs found themselves:

They may not have been in favour of what they ended up having to do and deliver. You had a lot of fake smiles and sort of grinning through your teeth where we knew that no one was happy about this. [But] I don’t think they could’ve done anything differently...[They] had to be the puppets. I mean, that was their job. They had to deliver the training.

By way of a solution and seemingly in defence of the LTs who found themselves in an often uncomfortable situation, the participants offered some well-considered advice.

If the LTs were charged with overseeing this shift in practice, the participants felt they should have been afforded some leeway in how to do it. Elsa advised a solution to the dilemma faced by LTs, echoing a suggestion made regarding the architects, by stating, “If the materials themselves were slightly more flexible...[LTs] could do...almost a learning needs assessment from among the teachers to figure out where the gaps were.” She went on to suggest, “I would like to have been asked before we started the sessions, what my needs were... [Then] teachers

would've put that down in plain language what their needs were and are, and what [their] expectations of training" were.

Daria concurred, suggesting that if the LTs had had more agency in determining what was needed in the training for their program and teachers as well as how it was presented, "We would have been more – more engaged! More interested, [or] at least maybe feeling a little more positive about it." Nadiya identified what her own approach to being a LT might have been:

If I were a Lead Teacher...I would find it very hard not to be autonomous and creative and to use my personal touch. I would rather, like – these are the topics, we have these materials available for you so you can use [them] if you want...You can show instructors if they want they to take a look in their own time, but... you have to develop these sessions; according to your style, according to your beliefs.

The participants concluded that if the LTs had the ability to adapt the training materials and sessions, teachers may have felt the PBLA training was more valuable. This responsiveness to teachers and programs may also have alleviated the awkwardness that arose from peers monitoring each other. So although the Lead Teachers were not always successful, the participants generally seemed to give them the benefit of the doubt and owned that it was not an easy task being seen as both 'puppets' and 'police' at various times. PBLA Lead Teachers, most of the participants reasoned, simply did the best with what they were given under difficult circumstances.

### *Structural Summary*

In addition to sharing the affective dimensions of the PBLA, the participants in this study identified several significant, but potentially fixable flaws in the structure surrounding the PBLA, namely in the areas of design, training and implementation of the PBLA program. One of the

primary sources contributing to its flaws for them was a dearth of knowledge. They recognized the funders of the PBLA are a government body that is not made up of educators, but of civil servants who are tasked first with making fiscally responsible decisions, and then with considering sound educational options. However, they reasoned that if the government department had people on staff who knew the AESL classroom and student population more intimately, they might have been more cognizant of the challenges that would arise from the implementation of the PBLA.

The participants also acknowledged that the architects, many of whom are or were educators, may have been out of the classrooms trenches long enough to have forgotten the real day-to-day burden that making fundamental changes represent to classroom teachers. Had the training sessions had a better balance of information dissemination, peer discussions and practical classroom application, they argued, it may have been far more effective.

The participants further identified that in some cases program administrators may not be educators, or may have been out of the classroom for a long time, or may have very little first-hand knowledge or experience with the AESL classroom specifically. If, they explained, program administrators had more hands on training and experience in AESL classrooms, they may have been more supportive and advocated more vigorously for teachers. They also may have benefited from undergoing the PBLA training themselves, the participants added, so the administrators could truly understand their teachers' experiences. Finally, the participants reasoned, all of the change might have been easier to achieve if the Lead Teachers were allowed some leeway to assess what the needs of their teachers and programs were, and then adjust and adapt the training sessions and materials to address those needs in a collegial and inclusive fashion.

Examining the lived experiences of teachers through a fundamental shift in their practice and providing them with a platform to offer informed advice may improve understanding for organizations and systems regarding reform. Truly comprehending the meaning and impact of these experiences by contextualizing them in the larger teaching and learning milieu could provide several valuable insights that may inform their decision-making in the future.

### **Discussion**

There are many causes for changes in education to be undertaken, unfortunately, change imposed by a governing body, such as the IRCC, is often received in a negative way. There can be a perception that “[o]rganizational change routinely occurs in the context of failure of some sort” and that change would not be necessary if people had simply “done their jobs right in the first place” (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 362). When a task that is familiar or expectant, such as how someone has been doing their job, becomes something new and unfamiliar, it can lead to a negative change in people’s feelings about the task (Weick et al., 2005, p. 418). Feelings of failure and fear in the face of the unknown can lead to feelings of distress and mistrust (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1844). Those empowered to make change in educational programs must “acknowledge the fact that increased pressure and stress are put on employees because of...organizational change” (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005, p. 161).

What makes the implementation of a change in education, such as the PBLA, particularly troubling is that as inevitable as change is, the burden of enacting the change does not fall equally on all affected by the change. However necessary or beneficial those in charge believe a change to be, it is the front line workers, namely teachers, who inevitably struggle most with the effects of the change (Craig, 2017, p. 301). Once it is determined that a change, such as the PBLA, should and/or must take place, there are additional and ongoing ramifications of the

undertaking that need to be pondered by those responsible for determining the change. If the professed purpose of professional learning in education is to make a smooth and successful transition, there are several important steps that must be undertaken before, during and after the change is implemented.

The concerns and challenges shared by the participants in this study represent a number of important categories for study. Equally important are the categories created around their solutions and recommendations. These two groups of categories, challenges and recommendations, coalesce to form themes through which the nature of the PBLA training and implementation and its impact on teachers can be discussed. The most prominent themes that emerged from the categories were: top-down vs. bottom-up decision-making; one-size-does not fit all; training deficiencies; train-the-trainer model; and autonomy and agency.

#### *Top-Down vs Bottom-up Decision-making*

Several categories that emerged from the data touched on the problematic nature of allowing individuals who lack first-hand knowledge and current classroom experience to determine the nature of the PBLA assessment initiative. As a result, one of the most significant themes regarding the PBLA that emerged was the use of a top-down decision-making model. Tara Holmes, a passionate supporter of the PBLA, acknowledged some concern over the top-down quality of the PBLA and the imposition of it on hard-working, overburdened teachers who had little or no say in its creation. Holmes identified that decisions made about the PBLA were heavily weighted from the top (2015, p. 117), and acknowledged, that “[l]arge-scale dissemination programs such as PBLA tend out of necessity to be “top-down” rather than “bottom up” (2015, p. 117). She went on to explain that everyone involved in sustaining a system as complex and consuming as the PBLA are deeply affected by it and that its



continuation and success would require “negotiating across competing interests and values” (2015, p. 120). The top-down decision-making model selected by the funders contributed significantly to some of the frustration the participants experienced.

The teachers in this study specifically cited a lack of current, first-hand experience with AESL classrooms and students as a distinct disadvantage at all levels. From funders, whom Greg identified as “business people” rather than “educators”; to architects, whom Daria described as being too far removed from the current AESL classroom; to administrators, who demonstrated a very clear “knowledge gap” regarding AESL according to Greg. The PBLA process from research, to development, to implementation, did not, according to several of the respondents in this study, encourage input from a broad enough cross section of teachers and programs at the national level. It seemed that once the idea had taken hold, that a portfolio-based assessment protocol would be appropriate for all AESL learners, and a course of action was determined, there was no mechanism in place to collect input from teachers throughout the roll out in order to direct potential revisions to the process.

Elsa shared that the primary architect of the PBLA indicated early on in the process that she wanted to interview several of the teachers in Elsa’s program to get feedback on how the PBLA might work with students with lower CLB levels and Literacy needs. However, Elsa reported that to her knowledge, no such interviews ever took place. It appears that in spite of having access to ready, willing and highly experienced teachers who could have been depended upon to contribute meaningful feedback, this individual decided not to ask this particular group for any input. This omission was not the only one considered short-sighted by the individuals involved in this study. The participants made a range of suggestions to improve this flaw, including a suggestion that the architects of the PBLA should have commissioned input from a

wider array of teachers, including teaching veterans, those new to the field, and those working at all levels of the CLB, to pilot and give feedback on this new assessment model.

Research shows that top-down only decision making does not work in complex systems like education because all too often, leaders are impatient and won't wait for meaningful research to be undertaken. They simply want to make immediate decisions with very little input (Fullan, 1993, p. 48). Research also indicates that "offering some choice about how to implement the changes by permitting participation in decision making can engage employees in the change process" more fully (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1850). Ultimately, for a change or reform to succeed, it requires "local motivation, skill, know-how and commitment", and those are things that simply cannot be mandated from the top (Fullan, 1994, p. 13).

For all the faults of top-down modes of change, the participants in this study acknowledged that there is a need to have a body govern and direct large scale changes in complex systems, such as education, because bottom-up only strategies have their own failings. The first issue with bottom-up decision-making revolves around accountability. Organizations that do not insist that teachers remain answerable to someone or something can take on a "laissez-faire" approach and can tend toward "ad hocness" (Fullan, 1994, p. 20), which is a familiar condition that plagued the early days of AESL in Canada; that lack of structure directly led to a call for higher degrees of scrutiny over the field. Some of the participants in this study indicated that even today they have co-workers who only ever meet the absolute minimum standards of the PBLA and only do so because they know there will be some scrutiny from their administrator and/or a PBLA Lead Teacher.

A second issue with bottom-up change is that change can be difficult and challenging. Not surprisingly, most research shows that "people have a strong tendency to resist change"

(Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1844). The individuals at the bottom of a bottom-up decision-making process may lack the impetus to instigate change since they, as front-line workers, will be disproportionately burdened with the responsibility to ensure its success (Fullan, 1994, p. 25; Craig, 2017, p. 301; Holmes, 2015, p. 119). Daria commented many times that the classroom level workload associated with fulfilling the PBLA expectations as well as the prep time required to keep up with its break-neck assessment pace had her feeling “overwhelmed”. The feeling of being overwhelmed by the expectations placed upon likely caused an enormous amount of stress for teachers, and that stress very likely contributed to their sometimes negative attitudes toward the PBLA. Teachers who could clearly see the front-line responsibility they would bear if a significant change in practice were to take place might allow that realization to influence their decisions around what kind of and how much of a change to make. Unfettered decision-making power on the part of teachers might result in what Nadiya described as “scary” amounts of freedom and might result in few, if any changes being undertaken.

It is important to recognize that in education reform there is nothing to be gained by depending solely on either one of these top end or bottom end forces, or by “swinging from one dominance to another” to determine an entire course of action (Fullan, 1993, p. 49). Instead, the most beneficial model might be seen as a “simultaneous top-down bottom-up” model that includes a “two-way relationship of pressure, support and continuous negotiation” (Fullan, 1993, p. 49). At its best, a bottom-up models demonstrate to those at the top what truly contributes to successful changes in programming: a solid rationale for teachers to make the change, the skills and knowledge to do it well, and a commitment to see it through (Fullan, 1994, p. 94).

Empowering teachers to contribute to the decision-making process allows teachers to feel as if

they have some control and choice and may inspire them to work harder to help achieve the goals of the organization (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1845).

In a similar way, some top-down pressure contributes to the success of change as those at the top can “set policy, establish standards, and monitor performance” to ensure that high quality requirements are being met and maintained (Fullan, 1993, p. 33). An experienced push from below that shapes and informs change coupled with fair and responsive guidance from on top increases the chances that an undertaking will be successful and that meaningful and lasting change will occur. The success of an initiative, however, is also dependent on how appropriate the initiative is deemed to be by those charged with undertaking it.

### *One-size Does Not Fit All*

As second theme that draws directly from the categories identified by teachers was the notion of the ‘one-size-fits-all’ model of thinking used by the architects and funders. The one-size-fits-all model of the PBLA meant that the training, however thoughtful its creation was and however well-intentioned its delivery was, had some serious and lasting flaws. Many of the participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction over the notion that one solution could serve such a variety of purposes. There were two specific areas that were particularly ill-considered according to the participants in this study.

The first was the idea that all teachers would require identical training to be equally successful at implementing the PBLA. A mind-set that begins by assuming all teachers will come to professional learning opportunities with precisely the same level and type of need is ill-advised as it makes some serious presumptions (Louws et al., 2017, p. 488). First, it assumes that all teachers have the same breadth of experience, which is patently false. Manitoba teachers had been using the CLPA for 10 years when the PBLA training began, while many other

provinces had not used it at all. It is not reasonable to deliver the exact same training to these groups, so different in their portfolio-based assessment background. As Holmes explained, the way the PBLA training process and implementation was conducted resulted in “fewer opportunities to tailor experiences to individual needs” (2015, p. 117). One should expect that individual teachers in these programs have different levels of experience with portfolios, as well.

As some of the participants in this study commented, a newly graduated teacher from a TESL training program in Manitoba might not have any first-hand experience using portfolios with this student population. Nadiya acknowledged that for someone new to AESL teaching, mastering the PBLA would likely prove to be all but “impossible”. The learning curve for a teacher new to AESL or new to teaching is much steeper, yet they would be expected to undergo the exact same training as teachers who had been using this type of portfolio assessment for years. Shauna’s suggestion of a two-tiered training program suggested a “very comprehensive” program for those new to the field, and another stream for the more experienced that offered some “flexible” programming options. However, the inadequacy of the one-size-fits-all model was not limited to its effects on the teachers.

The second issue that contraindicates the use of a one-size-fits-all model is the value of the PBLA with certain program types and student populations. Assuming that the outcomes in every possible teaching context can be known and addressed through using a single approach or strategy is unwise (Fullan, 1993, p. 35). The participants in this study stated more than once that in their experiences using it, the PBLA has its benefits. However, they tempered that response by adding that it was likely not equally efficacious for every AESL learner and program across the country. Shauna identified the tendency to use a “typical” ESL class as a model for programming decisions was very problematic. She and some of the other participants in this

study explained that not all AESL learners have the same goals or needs. Therefore, it is not realistic for all AESL students to undergo the same assessment protocols. The limitations of a narrow piloting sample and a lack of broad, classroom teacher-level input became quite obvious to many of the participants in very short order; they could clearly see that no one had ever thought about the viability of using the PBLA with certain student populations, most notably and most regrettably, AESL Literacy learners.

Literacy learners, those who lack basic literacy skills in their first language, have very different needs from someone who is educated in their first language and who merely needs to improve their English in order to successfully and fully integrate into Canadian culture (CCLB, 2014, p. 1). Having the same expectations of all these individuals and not considering their needs or goals is unwise because the only outcome will likely be the failure of the implementation on one front or the other. More than one of the participants in this study lamented that the architects may not have done their due diligence in garnering input from experienced AESL literacy teachers. As Daria summed up, the expectations of PBLA assessments were simply “too high” for many students in AESL Literacy programs. In fact, the funding body of AESL programs in Canada, the IRCC, conducted a recent national review of their language programming and they, themselves, acknowledged they still need to address “challenges related to [the] use of PBLA with literacy clients” (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2020, p. 15).

If the architects had undertaken broader and more comprehensive research up front that included more input from experienced AESL Literacy teachers, a lot of pain for teachers and students might have been avoided and they may have developed a more dynamic and adaptive training program that would be responsive to a broader base of students and programs when

implemented. However, the participants felt that the one-size-fits-all approach was merely one of the inadequacies of the PBLA training and implementation.

### *Training Deficiencies*

The construction of the PBLA training and implementation did not provide programs with the option to adapt any aspect of the PBLA training and implementation. However, the lack of flexibility identified by Holmes (2015, p. 117) was not the only short-coming identified by the participants in this study. The participants in this study identified another theme framed around how the training model was determined and how it was undertaken. They stated that many of the elements of the training were dissatisfactory, which could, and likely did, affect their own or their colleagues' emotional responses to the training. As Greg warned, if they started out "negative off the bat" with the PBLA, it would likely affect their performance of it. Although some of these issues were more based on personal preference, for example, the timing of the training roll out, which some thought should be longer and some thought should be more condensed, there were some issues that were a source of concern for all of the participants. Teachers, like other adult learners, look for relevance as a "key ingredient in developing a positive attitude at the outset of a professional development program" (Wlodkowski, 2003, p. 43), just as Greg indicated. Unfortunately, professional learning is "an arena where emotional reactions to instruction can heighten or dampen an individual's desire to learn" (Wlodkowski, 2003, p. 39).

Professional learning can be highly effective when the rationale clearly demonstrates that the learning teachers will be undertaking is important and relevant to their teaching context, and when the feelings and concerns teachers express around the change are acknowledged as legitimate (Gagne, 2000, pp. 1848-1849). When teachers contribute to where professional

learning should be focused and how it is going to take place, there can be a very different outcome. Research indicates that professional learning around educational reform is more successful when it is developed as “a collaborative effort among the various stakeholders, including teachers” (Gregson & Sturko, 2007, p. 3). Professional learning is most successful “when teachers [work] together [to] frame their own learning” (Muijs et al., 2014, p. 249). Teachers, particularly experienced ones, know what they want to learn and know how they want to learn it (Louws et al., 2017, p. 488). The PBLA effectively took away the opportunity for teachers to determine what they got to learn about because the PBLA in all its facets was entirely proscribed. The developers should have at least allow teachers the luxury of determining the most effective way for them to learn it.

A comprehensive and effective training program should “provide enough time and space within their programmes” to enable teachers to assess their own abilities in a way that is more than just “a mechanism for identifying deficiencies in knowledge or skill” (Redwood, et al., 2010, p. 18). In order for teachers to be successful in determining what their needs are, they must be able to “diagnose and become aware of” what their personal goals are in a given learning environment (Louws et al., 2017, p. 488). Teachers are not only best poised to identify where their own deficiencies are, but are also the most capable of determining the most effective ways for those deficits to be filled.

When possible, teachers should be afforded the opportunity to undertake an honest self-assessment in order to identify the gaps in their personal knowledge base in the given topic. The participants in this study indicated they would like to have been offered some sort of mechanism through which they could assess their own learning needs. As Shauna advised, the PBLA training should be done “in a way that sort of let us meet with it where we already were and go



from there.” Then, as long as there is no stigma attached when teachers identify the gaps in their knowledge, they would be able to approach the training materials in a way that is most effective for them.

Haghighi identified in her research that the methods used by individual programs to conduct the training had an impact on its reception. In her study the respondents revealed that the more hands-on the activities were, the more they learned from them and the more positive they felt about the PBLA training (2016, p. 112). Therefore, required professional learning should include some flexibility in a variety of areas. These areas include the environments in which the professional learning is conducted, and the range of activities, such as individual study, peer group and whole group opportunities, in which the teacher-learner can engage (Gregson & Sturko, 2007, p. 6). The participants in this study longed for more “hands-on sessions” and fewer “lectures” as Nadiya suggested. Teachers should be afforded some choice regarding how a learning task is undertaken (Gagne, 2000, p. 1849), especially when they cannot have choice in what learning will be undertaken. A final aspect of the training process that was discussed by the participants in some detail was the role of the peer trainers, known in this context as the PBLA Lead Teachers.

#### *Train-the-Trainer Model*

There was a lot of discussion by the participants in this study, as there was in Desyatova’s study (2018), about the effect of the role of the PBLA Lead Teachers (LTs) as peer trainers. The data regarding the role of the Lead Teachers included the identification by the participants of some significant categories, most notably: how the PBLA Lead Teacher candidates were selected; the qualities exhibited by effective LTs; and the weight of the LT’s responsibilities juxtaposed with their lack of authority.

Several of the participants shared some of their co-workers had expressed dissatisfaction with who had been chosen to do the training and questioned what criteria was used to select the peer trainers or Lead Teachers. That dissatisfaction may have affected the level of enthusiasm presented by those who resented the process that was used, as well as the individuals selected. Greg stated there was some “jealousy” among his staff regarding who was chosen to take on the Lead Teacher role, while Shauna indicated there were some “hurt feelings” among those who weren’t given the “opportunity” to take on the role. Greg also shared that the perceived quality of the lead teachers may have affected the perception of the training experience, saying LTs that projected confidence were more effective than those who seemed “hesitant or scared”. This was not necessarily seen by the participants as a fault of the LTs, but was seen perhaps as a peculiarity of the train-the-trainer model itself.

A final negative aspect identified by the participants in this study regarding the role of the Lead Teachers was also in keeping with some of the findings in Desyatova’s research (2018). The participants in this study indicated that some of their colleagues were dissatisfied at being answerable to individuals who were not their formal supervisors. Daria and Nadiya both used the word “police” to describe the ongoing role of the PBLA LTs, and in a modern context, ‘police’ is not likely being used as a compliment. In the guide documents, the responsibility of reviewing teacher PBLAs falls on the program administrator, who then works in consultation with the LTs to utilize their content knowledge. It appears, however, that not all programs were adhering to this proper delineation of roles, and some LTs were being asked to independently conduct reviews of PBLAs. That type of situation could certainly have caused some resentment in the teacher peer group because asking someone to supervise their colleague’s work – but not to supervise their colleague – may simply be an impossible feat.

Far from being entirely negative, the participants also identified some benefits about peer-training. These benefits were primarily centered on accepting training from colleagues who themselves are currently teaching in an AESL classroom. More than one participant in this study stated that knowing the person training them had recently done the PBLA in their own classroom was seen as a positive. As Elsa reasoned, the people training her were still teaching in a “real classroom” during the training. Shauna concurred, explaining “actual teachers” who understood their teaching context offered a lot of benefits in the training. The participants seemed to feel that learning from teachers who had experienced the PBLA implementation first hand meant they were seen as knowledgeable and experienced in the PBLA, which lent them an air of expert authority (Lunenburg, 2012, p. 4). These teachers, having done the difficult deed themselves, were perhaps seen more as an ally and compatriot than any outsider or non-teacher might have been (Bourke, 2014, p. 5). However, despite the training being conducted by a familiar and current classroom teacher, the PBLA nevertheless contributed to what the participants saw as a reduction in their vital feelings of autonomy over their classrooms.

### *Autonomy and Agency*

A final major theme that emerged from this study is closely related to the top-down/bottom-up decision-making issue, autonomy. Autonomy, a feeling cherished by many teachers, means teachers feel they “have personal on-the-job decision making authority” (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 48) and teachers most value the feeling that they have control over what happens inside their own classroom. Many of the participants expressed that the PBLA affected how they managed their classroom learning and the nature of the PBLA significantly impacted teachers’ feelings. Teachers burdened with the responsibilities of the PBLA felt they had no longer had autonomy over their classrooms.

The CLB's are defined as a task-based curriculum meaning it is focused on developing the skills needed to communicate appropriately in English. The content through which the target skills are taught is not predetermined in the curriculum document, which means teachers can teach any appropriate settlement language content based on their learner's needs or wishes. The implementation of the PBLA did not effect that situation; teachers were still able to determine the content they will teach in their classrooms. However, the assessment requirements of the PBLA made it necessary for teachers to focus intensely on what was pre-planned and could be assessed in keeping with the outcomes of the PBLA. Knowing there is an assessment about X at the end of the week does dampen a teacher's ability to allow students to express curiosity as well as to have their immediate concerns addressed. Several of the teachers in this study indicated that they felt they never had enough time to teach what the students wanted to learn as they were too focused on laying the groundwork for the assessment to come.

Nadiya expressed dissatisfaction about being caught in a PBLA 'teach-assess-teach-assess' cycle where there was no room to make her own decisions about the pace of student learning. Daria expressed feelings of resentment saying she felt her autonomy had been taken away and her professional experience had been discredited and argued that it was teachers to "judge and control" what went on in their classrooms. She also expressed a great deal of frustration over a loss of autonomy of teachers questioning the wisdom of not letting teachers determine "what was right in their own classroom." There is a direct relationship between "teachers who perceive themselves as empowered" and their degree of job satisfaction (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 48). A loss of autonomy can result from a lack of decision-making power over what is done and how, and can lead to feelings of powerlessness and loss of control.

The participants in this study also indicated that they did not feel that they had any agency in the changes their program underwent. If teachers are to take their position as AESL teachers seriously and feel it is a profession worthy of professional behavior, then like other professions, “teachers must have the freedom to prescribe the best treatment for their students” and be given some ability to determine what and how their students learn (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 38). Teachers in Manitoba AESL programs were made aware of the upcoming change in their practice when the Lead Teachers in their program underwent the PBLA training, which was the first step in the train-the-trainer model the PBLA architects adopted. The LTs completed their 6-month training in June of 2015, and then led the peer training beginning in September of 2015. The participants in this study did not believe these LTs asked to give feedback about or reflect on the appropriateness of the training or the PBLA for their teachers or student populations, certainly not its use with Literacy learners. Neither did they feel the LTs were empowered to suggest changes in the protocol. Daria, who in one breath used the word “police” to describe the role of the LTs, in almost the next breath used the word “puppets”. This study showed that many of the participants felt they, and some of their co-workers, were at times just going through the motions and doing what they were told in the absence of true understanding of the new assessment model. The most successful changes occur when “every person working in an enterprise [is] committed to making continuous improvements [and are] change agents” who share a common purpose (Fullan, 1993, p. 50).

There was a missed opportunity for the architects to demonstrate that professional AESL teachers should be genuinely heard, which is vital to teacher, and by extension programming, success. Daria lamented that the architects did not consult experienced AESL Literacy teachers more, even when, as Elsa stated, they had ample opportunity to do so. Respect goes a long way

to reducing the anxiety and fear teachers have in the face of professional change (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1850). Suggestions and feedback provided by the people on the front lines must not only be heard by funders and architects, but must also be acted upon by them. Keeping teachers “informed about upcoming changes and explaining the need for the changes can help people to envision future outcomes for the organization” (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1850). Some respondents in this study indicated that not fully understanding the rationale for the change, and in some cases questioned, as did Vanderveen (2018), the validity of the evidence used to justify the use of portfolio-based assessment in AESL. This lack of understanding, or “purpose” for the change was felt by teachers in this study, such as Daria, and resulted in feelings of dissatisfaction with the whole process. Unfortunately, both the training materials and the makeup of the PBLA were fait accompli by the time Manitoba AESL programs embarked on their training sessions.

When teachers have no agency and feel a loss of autonomy regarding how changes are made or what the changes themselves are, they end up feeling “coerced” into simply accepting the changes (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1843). In the absence of a thoughtful and well-researched rationale for change, teachers may become less and less interested in putting a true effort in to making the required change (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1843). Administrators or architects who offer insufficient explanations for why changes are being made may not be able to expect anything more than “superficial compliance” to the new working model (Fullan, 1994, p. 25). What’s more, research indicates that compliance with a change that is based not on a full understanding of the need for the change, but on fear of repercussions will likely require far more continuous oversight if it is going to be done well on an ongoing basis (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1843).

Justifying to teachers that there is a need for change and backing it up with relevant evidence is vital to securing their ongoing cooperation (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1845).

Considering how teachers learn best, from whom they learn best, and what materials are most effective to their learning is vital (Wlodkowski, 2003, p. 43). Understanding which methodologies should be employed, what activities need to be undertaken, and what environments are most conducive to professional learning are also important aspects to consider (Wlodkowski, 2003, p. 43). Finally, acknowledging that undertaking a fundamental change is likely to have personal and emotional consequences, and then building in supports to address their fears can engender trust and improve the change experience (Gagne et al., 2000, p. 1850). All of these considerations and concerns must be addressed and answered if the goal truly is to make a change as successful as possible.

### **Implications for School Leadership Practice**

The nature of the PBLA training and ongoing implementation impacts every aspect of a school from students, to teachers, to school leaders. The findings in this study have been primarily focused on the experiences of teachers tasked with implementing the PBLA into their classrooms. However, there are also several significant implications for leadership practice at the school level that arose from the discussion about the PBLA, specifically regarding administrators and PBLA Lead Teachers. The participants in this study subjected the performance of both of these roles to a fair amount of scrutiny, but they also offered numerous suggestions for ways to them to improve the performance of their duties.

One criticism from the participants concerning program administrators was that they sometimes showed a lack of interest in, expressed indifference to, or demonstrated irritation with the initial PBLA training and ongoing focus on the PBLA in AESL classrooms. Professional change is often difficult as evidenced by the findings in this study as well as other studies. If the person who is directly asking you to undertake a significant change does not demonstrate a level

of respect for that change themselves, it can be demotivating and result in poor performance of the task. School leaders have “strong and positive influences on staff members’ motivations” (Leithwood et al, 2008, p. 32), so when they are disinterested in a topic or worse, actively express disdain for it, it can directly influence the responses of teachers to the topic. School leadership can be constructive and even transformative when school leaders provide “inspirational motivation” to teachers in the face of educational reform (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 375). Demonstrating a positive attitude and actively supporting the rationale given for a reform would provide the encouragement and motivation teachers need to get the required task done.

A second criticism of program administrators, but one with the most obvious solution, was for administrators to better familiarize themselves with what is going on in their teachers’ classrooms. Administrators would benefit greatly from taking the time to get to know the students and share teachers lived experiences, especially considering with the immense pressures put on teachers working with this type of student population. Administrators might also witness how challenging it is for teachers to meet the high expectations placed upon them by educational reforms, such as the PBLA. Some first-hand experience would enable school administrators to develop and then demonstrate a high level of “emotional understanding” regarding their teachers’ experiences, which is vital to successful leadership (Leithwood et al, 2008, p. 33). As a result of this increased classroom-level participation, they may also be viewed by teachers as more of an ally and less as one more person from above putting pressure on them to perform a difficult task. It might not be feasible for administrators to learn everything teachers know about their content areas, like the PBLA or AESL (Leithwood et al, 2008, p. 32), but administrators could at the very least ensure they comprehend enough to be genuinely empathetic to their teachers. Involved and active administrators contribute to building the capacity of their staff



(Leithwood et al, 2008, p. 32) and work alongside teachers to “accomplish organizational goals for teaching and learning” (Marks & Printy 2003, p. 377). Therefore, administrators who not only take full advantage of training opportunities, such as PBLA administrator training sessions that were offered, but who also participate in teacher training sessions can become better informed about initiatives like the PBLA, and be more actively involved to ensure their success.

A final aspect of the PBLA that has implications for school leadership practice was the lack of flexibility in the PBLA; more than one participant lamented the ‘one-size-fits-all’ model utilized by the architects. However, according to some of the participants, that ‘one-size-fits-all’ model also seemed to be employed by some administrators. Good leadership practice encourages school leaders to recognize that teachers are unique and to acknowledge that each teacher’s response to stimuli, such as change, will be equally unique (Craig, 2017, p. 301). The journey through change is comprised of multiple transitions that are complex and complicated (Bridges, 1986, p. 25), and school leaders must be cognitive that each individual will move through and around these steps at their own pace. A leader who recognizes individual teacher need and addresses those needs thoughtfully is better able to “integrate the functional and the personal” aspects of their leadership (Leithwood et al, 2008, p. 30). Providing “individualized consideration” for their staff increases each person’s opportunities to be successful, which in turn increases the opportunities for the entire undertaking to be more successful (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 375). In the case of the PBLA, demonstrating this “high degree” of sensitivity and working hard to support and buffer each staff member, as needed, against outside influences and distractions (Leithwood et al, 2008, p. 30) could have improved some aspects of the teachers’ experience. Administrators, though, are not the only school leaders who impacted the PBLA training and implementation experience of teachers.

One of the topics most discussed in relation to teachers' lived experiences through the PBLA, and one over which several participants in this study expressed concern, was the peer trainer method employed by IRCC. A peer trainer, known in the PBLA as a Lead Teacher, was a complex role that was developed by the PBLA architects to provide onsite support for teachers through the training process as well as on an ongoing basis afterward. However, despite their best intentions for LTs to be accepted by teachers because they were trusted, familiar and supportive individuals, which was often the case, the role proved to be far more complicated than the architects or the Lead Teachers probably imagined it would be. Lead Teachers, like other 'middle-managers', endure relationships that require on one hand "hierarchical authority and responsibility", but that, on the other hand, must be "oriented towards collegiality and shared responsibility" (Branson et al., 2015, p. 7). They are "set apart structurally from [their] colleagues, yet [are] expected to work closely alongside those colleagues" (Branson et al., 2015, p. 2) to maintain positive and constructive relationships.

For the most part, the participants expressed that they were supportive of and sympathized with the awkward position the Lead Teachers (LTs) were often put in. Some lamented that the LTs were mere 'puppets' doomed to convey a message that they may not have believed in, using materials they may not have appreciated, to their unwilling and even occasionally belligerent peers and colleagues. Conversely, and in spite of their own professed sympathies for the difficulties of the LTs, some of the participants explained that in their programs, the LTs were often unflatteringly described as 'police' charged with judging and ruling over the fates of their co-workers. Some of the participants also expressed concerns that the LTs only had slightly more training than other teachers, had less teaching experience in some cases, and did not necessarily appear to be any more adept at the PBLA than were the teachers

they were tasked with training. Research shows that success in an undertaking requires leaders to be able to demonstrate “deep expertise” in their content area (Goodall, 2012, p. 1), and warns that someone identified as an ‘expert’ must maintain their expert standing through continued effective performance in that role (Goodall, 2012, p. 21), which is not easy to do as the LT role was initially conceived.

It might be more effective, as some of the participants in this study suggested, for the bulk of the training to be delivered by professional teachers from outside of the program. These individuals would have intimate knowledge of the AESL classroom as teachers, but they would also undergo more exhaustive training than the LTs did. They may perhaps even have participated in the development of new training programs, such as the PBLA. The outside experts would be better poised to shoulder the burden of most of the negative responses and complaints, since they would be teaching strangers, not their peers. They might simply wear the ‘expert’ mantle more easily than the LTs ever could. Being unburdened by many of the instructional aspects of the training might reduce the pressure on the LTs to be all-knowing and allow them to maintain those vital personal relationships. After all, the greatest indicator of their likelihood of success is anchored in maintaining positive relationships with their colleagues (Branson et al., 2015, p. 15), which is no small feat.

Perhaps the role of the peer trainer, or Lead Teacher, needs to be re-imagined if this kind of training protocol is to be used again in the future. This re-imagining of the role might reduce the intense scrutiny on their performance, relieve the stressful burden of the role, and allow the LTs to contribute in a more meaningful way. The LT role could be more akin to the role of a child birth doula in that they would be charged with providing “emotional, practical and informational support and care” (Canadian Women’s Health Network, n.d.) to teachers. Ideally,

LTs would be carefully selected by their administrators based on a demonstration of traits important for any supportive role, such as the ability to listen actively and empathize. An effective LT, like a doula, would build relationships and be “skilled in communicating with a variety of people with different needs and perspectives” (Gilliland, 2002, p. 768). Lead Teachers would have more leeway to be responsive and supportive to the actual and individual needs of their co-workers in their teaching practice. Allowed to focus their energies elsewhere, the Lead Teachers might then be seen neither as a helpless puppet nor as an interfering police officer. They might instead be seen as they were intended to be seen, like a doula, as sympathetic supporters who “contribute unique knowledge, caring hearts, and dedication” to their task (Gilliland, 2002, p. 768). They would help to develop and maintain a “supportive [and] collaborative” (Fullan, 1993, p. 84) learning environment that is focused on effective teaching and learning practice (Fullan, 1993, p. 85). Ideally, those vital lived-experiences with the PBLA would become shared experiences for the teachers, LTs and administrators alike. This shared experience would promote collaboration in building and maintaining a sense of community (Fullan, 1993, p. 85), which would surely contribute to everyone’s success.

### **Future Research**

The affective dimensions of the PBLA training and implementation process were significant for teachers. As the AESL sector continues to evolve as a professional field, more changes to every aspect of it can be expected. The participants in the study thoughtfully identified several areas for meaningful improvement regarding the PBLA. However, this study revealed other areas that AESL educators and scholars might determine are worth looking at in future research that might impact this type of reform or change going forward.

Organizational change is imposed on individuals at the bottom from sources at the top, often in response to research or shifts in thinking. However, the change itself is only one facet of the change process. One of the primary assumptions of the PBLA supporting documents espoused by the author was that time and practice would improve teachers' feelings about the PBLA training and implementation (Pettis, 2014, p. 45). This study does demonstrate that in the latter years of the PBLA implementation, as opposed to the earlier training years, the teachers interviewed for this study were far more accepting about the presence of the PBLA in their teaching. They were even willing, if sometimes begrudgingly, to acknowledge there was some genuine worth in the PBLA. It might be valuable to understand how much of this current acceptance is based on teachers truly seeing the merit of the PBLA, and how much is attributable to teachers simply giving up on fighting the inevitable – accepting the bit and bridle, if you will. Understanding if and how the long term success of an undertaking is impacted if the staff is merely demonstrating compliance with the expectations placed on them, as opposed to accepting and embracing the shift in practice as beneficial for both them and their learners, could have merit for those planning to implement future changes.

Another concern expressed by several of the participants in this study concerned the potential inadequacy of the programs selected to pilot the PBLA. The federal government funds thousands of Adult ESL programs across the country and each of these programs serves a different student population. Some programs serve seniors who want to learn English while also building a personal and social community. Some programs serve professional newcomers with high levels of education and English who are seeking qualification recognition. Still other programs serve adults who have little English, are not educated in their first language, and who need both English language and basic literacy skills development. Recognizing the diversity in

their potential student population means the funders and architects could have assured the programs used to pilot the PBLA were equally diverse in their make-up. Perhaps a re-thinking of how programs and teachers are selected for piloting educational changes for this type of large scale reform might be valuable research.

Finally, organizations have recently become increasingly driven by data in their decision-making processes. Many organizations rationalize their actions by attributing their decision-making process as responsive to ‘the data’. Under the current government in Manitoba, for example, there have been and continue to be some fundamental decisions made in several significant public services such as health (specifically nursing), education (including AESL), and child care based on relevant ‘data’. These three professions share one significant aspect other than that they currently find themselves under the knife in tough economic times – they seem to have a disproportionately female employee base. Determining whether or not there is a correlation between organizations prone to undertaking top-down decision-making process versus bottom-up ones based on the gender make-up of the profession warrants further study.

### **Conclusion**

At the outset of this Phenomenological Inquiry, my goal was to answer two research questions. The first research question I posed was: “What are the affective dimensions of teachers’ experiences to a fundamental change in their practice, in this case the implementation of the PBLA?”. The Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) training and implementation was a complex and multi-faceted process that involved a number of stakeholders in every step of its planning, development and national implementation. I believe this study demonstrated some of the emotional responses teachers had to the training and implementation of the PBLA in their Adult ESL classrooms. The findings revealed that at its essence, the

experience was significant and deeply affected how teachers approached their work and identified the ways in which it impacted their job performance during and after the implementation.

The teacher participants in this study identified several key challenges with the PBLA training and implementation process, many of which were in keeping with the findings of prior research. For the teachers, the PBLA represented another stress added to the already taxing, and emotionally draining job of being an Adult ESL teacher. They indicated the change produced stress, uncertainty, disappointment and contributed to a lack of motivation and, most significantly, a profound sense of loss. They indicated that the PBLA, however good its intentions, resulted in an increased work-load, undue feelings frustration, and an erosion in their sense of professional autonomy. The study revealed that the PBLA training and implementation as it was undertaken negatively impacted their teaching experience and, by extension, had the potential to impact their job performance. The participants in this study concluded that change should not be undertaken without due consideration of how significantly it will impact those who will be forced to implement the change and then suffer the direct consequences of it.

The second part of this study was intended to answer my other research question, “What could have been done differently by administrators, school leaders, and others involved in educational systems, such as funders and program architects, do to help teachers cope more successfully with a large change in their practice, such as the PBLA?” The participants in this research came up with several significant statements regarding what they perceived as the failure of the PBLA training and implementation process, attributing it to several specific parties.

First, the participants indicated that individuals and organizations charged with developing this type of program change would be well served by having some staff who have

had recent first-hand exposure to and experience with AESL classrooms and students. A lack of current classroom experience on the part of those who developed the materials was also identified as an issue with the development of the training protocol. A lack of understanding regarding current AESL student populations on the part of those who oversaw the implementation, from the architects, to the funders, to their own administrators, was another serious issue that negatively impacted the teachers experience with the PBLA. Finally, they felt that classrooms teachers, who are the ones with the first-hand experience and knowledge, were not sufficiently consulted regarding the efficacy of the PBLA for their learners. Had they been consulted, the participants in this study felt that teachers like them could have significantly contributed to the quality, effectiveness and success of the PBLA implementation.

Second, the participants in the study also indicated that there should have been direct input from a broader range of teachers and programs in determining what a new assessment model for AESL programs might have looked like. By providing a mechanism, such as an online portal or in-person focus groups, through which a broader population of teachers could have offered suggestions help to determine the course for change would likely have mitigated the overriding influence of top-down decision-making and empowered teachers to feel and act like true agents of change. The thoughtful and experienced suggestions offered by the participants in this study may have resulted in a decrease in feelings of dissatisfaction and an increase in feelings of acceptance and, by extension, success, in future shifts in practice. That things change was not an issue for these individuals; they all expressed acceptance that everything in life and work is subject to change. However, it was the motivation for and the manner and method of the change that affected their response to the implementation of the PBLA.



Reducing the stress and fatigue caused by significant changes in teacher practice requires educational leaders to be thoughtful about how training is developed and implemented. It is vital that those in power acknowledge the real emotional cost that the loss of autonomy, increased work-load, and lack of agency has on teachers. Demonstrating respect for the expertise of teachers and being responsive to their needs means educational leaders may need to consult teachers more, justify why a change or reform is occurring and then use their input to determine the most effective means to implement the change. If these changes are more thoughtfully undertaken, it may improve the experience and result in a smoother and less disruptive shift in practice. Since change is inevitable and teachers are always on the front lines of change, it behooves those in charge to listen to the first-hand experiences of teachers and respect their informed advice; the true success of any endeavour may, in the end, depend on it.

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## **Thesis Interview Questions (Appendix 1)**

### **Interview 1**

Interview 1 is focused on you and your perception about how you responded to the change the PBLA training and implementation brought about. Please feel free to review your training materials or other contemporaneous notes as a refresher about the PBLA training and your experience with it.

#### *Interview Questions*

#### **Participant Overview**

1. Describe yourself in a few sentences in terms of your teaching education, training and experience.

#### **Thinking back to the early days of the PBLA:**

2. How did you feel about the PBLA process as you experienced it during the training and implementation stages?
3. What aspects of the PBLA, if any, influenced your feelings about it? (Time, training, etc.)
4. Do you think your feelings about it in any way affected your proficiency with the PBLA?

#### **Reflective Questions**

5. Do you think your response to the PBLA change is similar to your responses about change in general?
6. Do you deal with personal change differently than you do professional change?

### **Interview 2**

Interview 2 is focused on your perceptions of the PBLA training and implementation looking back on it now. Please feel free to review your training assignments or other contemporaneous notes as a refresher.

#### *Interview Questions*

1. Is there anything you would like to add to last week's transcript after conducting member-checking?
2. How do you feel about the PBLA implementation process you went through between Sept 2015 and June 2016?
3. How do you feel about the PBLA itself now that you have been using it for 4 years?
4. Could any of these people or groups have done anything different or better? If so, what?
  - 1) PBLA architects (i.e. CCLB)
  - 2) Writers of the PBLA training materials
  - 3) Writers of the PBLA guideline documents
  - 4) The Lead Teachers who conducted the training
  - 5) The program administrators
  - 6) The program funders
5. Is there anything you would like to say or any comment you would like to make about anything not covered by these interviews?