

EL in Action Learning Site: One Teacher's Journey From Novice to Humble Expert

By Kristen Cacciatore (Telescope Networker)

It was the Friday afternoon before April break, and **Nia Reid-Patterson's** third-floor classroom at the Conley Elementary School in Roslindale was hot – really hot – thanks to some unusually warm spring weather. Outside the window, the sun was shining and vacation awaited. These were not the most conducive conditions for serious academic work, but Nia and her 6th-grade ELA inclusion students were unfazed. They were working in pairs to describe the main character's point of view in *Two Roads* by Joseph Bruchac, a historical novel in which twelve-year-old protagonist Cal discovers his Native American heritage as he and his father travel the country and endure many hardships. Students were eager to share their ideas and quotes to support their ideas during the whole-class share-out.



Nia's class was using the Expeditionary Learning (EL) grades 3-6 English Language Arts curriculum the district recently adopted. Her journey with the curriculum had begun only seven months earlier, at the beginning of the 2022-23 school year. It was a daunting task, starting with a totally new, complex curriculum she received just before the year began and delivering it in an inclusion setting without another teacher or paraprofessional. Nia recalled, "I received the boxes with all of the materials at 5 o'clock in the afternoon the day before school started! There was so much and I felt overwhelmed. And there was no pacing guide at all from the district at that point. But I just got started." She was transparent with students, "I told my students that it was my first time with the curriculum and if something isn't working then we will talk about it and do something different." The first six weeks were especially challenging, because, "I didn't know the curriculum and I didn't know my learners. And because we had just adopted EL, the students hadn't learned things in fourth grade that the sixth grade curriculum assumed they knew, like Greek and Latin prefixes."

As the year went on, Nia found that EL got a little easier, though, "I was still spending so much time planning!" But she was motivated to continue, because she noticed that students were making gains, including the students who were significantly below grade level at the beginning of the year. Near the end of the school year, she reflected on their growth, "I see that every student is reading and writing and talking with each other about what they are reading and I just feel so proud of them. They are finding their voices."

Nia described the learning journey for one student in her class, "He came to me as an ELD 4 student, and at first he just completely refused to write. Once I convinced him to write something, he would just pick random quotes from the text as 'evidence'. It was a long, slow process, but now he is able to really dive deep

into the text and identify characters' struggles. He was able to explain what cultural genocide is from the book and connect it to things happening in Boston. He can write full essays and participates in class discussions. Now he is one of my 'roving reporters' who goes around the room to check in with other students and help them answer questions using evidence from the text."

In the middle of the school year, others started to notice and admire the work Nia and her colleagues at the Conley were doing with the EL curriculum. **Stacie Withington**, an ELA program director, said, "I was so excited at the Tier 1 learning that was taking place at the school in all rooms. The Tier 1 accessibility for all students was such a showcase of love. Teachers were making the curriculum their own while also keeping the fidelity and standards based learning at the forefront." Nia's class was featured on the BPS Twitter and the superintendent dropped by for a visit.

Soon thereafter, Telescope Networkers **Kadian Simmonds** and **Mark Lonergan** observed Nia's class that warm Friday in April with admiration. It was hard for them to believe that Nia was in her first year of implementing a new curriculum. They were looking for a teacher who was finding success with EL because they had been hearing from many teachers that it was a big challenge to implement. Seeing that Nia and her students were clearly in an EL groove, they quickly determined that this classroom presented a powerful opportunity for professional learning for other BPS teachers. And thus the "EL in Action" Learning Site was born.

Four weeks later, eight BPS 6th grade teachers from schools around the district convened at the Conley for a day of learning and collaboration. The stage had been set the afternoon before when the group came together on Zoom to share their own experiences and challenges with implementing the EL curriculum in their classrooms and schools. Participant **Kat Hepburn**, a 6th-grade inclusion teacher at the Clap Elementary school, explained that she wanted to learn what parts of the huge EL curriculum to prioritize. Her Clap colleague **Sarah Moore**, a learning specialist, added, "This is our first year of full implementation and we are in the process of learning what works, what doesn't, and where there is room to make adjustments that fit the needs of *all* of our students." **Victor Joyner**, a 6th-grade teacher at the Manning Elementary school, was focused on both the pacing of the EL modules and inclusive supports that would provide access for all students. The group spent several minutes talking about what made the curriculum intimidating and challenging to use. All agreed that they were excited to see how another BPS colleague was using it.

On the morning of the Learning Site, the group met in the bright and cheerful Conley art room for a pre-observation meeting. Kadian helped each participant choose an observation focus from the six components of successful practice she and Nia had identified – close reading routines, intentional grouping, authentic texts, planning with the student lens in mind, addressing all four language domains, and explicit instruction in metacognition. Then the group walked upstairs to Nia's room for a 45-minute classroom observation, where, fortunately for all, air conditioning had been recently installed.

Students were tasked with writing a summary of one chapter of *Two Roads*. After Nia reviewed the criteria for a high-quality summary, students worked diligently, writing in their workbooks, referring to the text and their success checklists, and talking quietly with their partners. Nia sat in the back at one of the student

tables, providing support to a group of four students through occasional prompting and affirmation. After about 25 minutes, Nia and her students transitioned to peer review of their partner's summary. Students made substantive suggestions to each other, critiquing their identification of central ideas and pushing each other to use more descriptive language.

Back in the art room after the observation, participants were abuzz about what they had seen. They recalled that every student was engaged in the learning activities, how confident the students were as they described their work, and how eager they were to give and receive feedback from each other about their writing. Victor expressed interest in learning more about the checklist Nia had given the students so they could monitor their own progress. Kat wondered if Nia was having students read the whole book or if she had strategies to move students through the material without doing so.

After lunch, the group spent an hour debriefing with Nia. Each of the small groups presented their observations and appreciations related to their focus, then asked Nia an excavating question to get at the "how and why" of her successful practice, such as, "How do you decide which parts of the EL curriculum to prioritize?" Nia shared her approach to unpacking the curriculum, scaffolding for struggling readers and writers, and building community during the wide-ranging conversation. "This is my first year with EL so I am learning as I go. It's a process and I tell students that if something isn't working then we will talk about it and do something different," she told the group. She emphasized the importance of knowing students and respecting them as people, saying, "Really knowing who they are is so important, not just checking boxes. I tell students, 'We're family in here. Sometimes we can't stand each other but we're together all year and we are here to support each other.'" She spoke passionately about high expectations for students, "They have to know that you believe in them, that they can do the work. Because they can!"

The dialogue also included specific strategies for developing students' content knowledge; for example, how to help students identify themes in literature and to distinguish between central ideas and themes. Nia also talked about her strategy for building student skills over time by gradually adding components and complexity, as she had with peer feedback and summary writing tasks. When one participant asked how she's handling some of the challenging themes in the text like racism, Nia explained that she doesn't shy away from conversations about potentially sensitive topics with students, saying, "Sometimes when we shelter students we do them more harm." The debrief ended with participants sharing their gratitude for the experience and for Nia's incredible work.

After the debrief, each participant reflected on their big takeaways and formulated a plan to put their learning into action in their own context. Victor zeroed in on evaluation, saying, "I will find more authentic opportunities for students to evaluate models of writing and peer writing." Kat made short- and long-term plans to build student independence both for the remainder of the school year and more holistically in the fall. Sarah was also thinking about student independence, noting, "I need to think about how to build routines for reading text for understanding because I do not see all students able to do that independently."

At the end of the session, everyone had the chance to share what made the Learning Site experience a professional learning success. Several mentioned the opportunity to observe a classroom for a long time and

see the lesson develop. Other highlights were the debrief protocol and length, which fostered a deep, meaningful conversation. Most important of all was Nia's openness. As Kat said, "Nia's responses to our questions were so helpful!" Overall, it was an inspiring experience for all and provided a big boost of optimism as participants looked ahead to implementing EL in their classrooms next year.

Nia found the experience of being a host teacher both motivating and gratifying, explaining, "Planning for the Learning Site really pushed me to look ahead further in the curriculum, because I knew that I wanted the visitors to see a particular type of lesson on this set date three weeks ahead. And I had been planning only about a week at a time." She also noted that it was a positive experience for her students. "They enjoyed hearing the thank you notes (participants wrote) – it builds their confidence and their ability to work independently and it makes them proud to be models." In summary, she said "I enjoyed the experience and making connections with other sixth grade teachers, because this is a single-strand school. It made me think that I am doing stuff right if other teachers see that. And it felt good to help other teachers see the curriculum in action because I wish I had had that when I was starting."

