

Nested coaching links learning from coach to leader to teacher



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Keisha, an urban principal from California, and Jason, a principal from rural North Carolina, serve different communities, but they both realize that systemic inequities prevent students from fully realizing their potential. Over the course of a year, Keisha and Jason met regularly as part of a group and in one-to-one sessions with a leadership coach. Together, they engaged in a set of collaborative processes that cultivate instructional leadership that leads to more equitable teaching.

Keisha and Jason are part of Project I4, a federally funded SEED (Supporting Effective Educator Development) grant, a partnership

between East Carolina University and the Institute for Educational Leadership. Project I4 is a cohort-based, yearlong professional learning experience aimed at reimagining instructional leadership through an equity lens.

Specifically, school leader participants build capacity to document evidence-based, equitable academic discourse during classroom observations. To support this, we implemented a nested coaching structure, which creates a vital through line from coaches to school leaders to teachers to impact student outcomes.

Our professional learning design relies on the people closest to the work positioned to be learning partners in

addressing school change efforts that bolster equitable student outcomes (Grubb & Tredway, 2010). The model supports school leaders as instructional leaders to work more effectively with teachers in the context of their own schools with a focus on improving teachers' equitable classroom practices. Together, they cultivate stronger relational trust and identify opportunities for more equitable practices.

Two interdependent principles guide our work. First, **nested coaching networks are essential**. Even the best of us need coaches to become our personal best (Gawande, 2011). Second, **an equity focus is fundamental**. If we want equitable

outcomes, then the work we engage in as leaders and teachers must model equitable practices.

In Project I4, professional development is not an event. Rather, it is daily enactment of professional learning that focuses on teachers and leaders working together to develop the collective knowledge, will, and skill to engage in meaningful and durable learning (Hawley & Valli, 1999). The project design inspires school leaders to embed a professional development process that can continue long after their participation in Project I4.

NESTED COACHING MODEL

The Project I4 design draws on learning communities called networked improvement communities (Bryk et al., 2015), groups of educators with a common focus using “disciplined methods of improvement research to develop, test, and refine interventions” (p. 144).

Four characteristics distinguish networked improvement communities from traditional professional learning communities or communities of practice that are widespread in schools today. Networked improvement communities:

1. Focus on a clearly defined measurable aim or outcome;
2. Offer a theory of improvement based on root cause analysis;
3. Engage the improvement research that seeks reliable, contextualized solutions; and
4. Practice rapid action, reflection, and refinement of interventions.

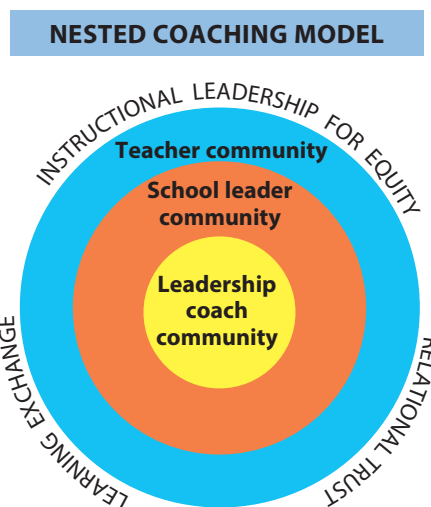
Embedded in the Project I4 coaching model is an equity-centered focus. The coaching director facilitates leadership coach learning, the coaches work with school leaders, the school leaders work with teachers, and the teachers with students to improve

equitable learning.

Here’s how the coaching model works with these three interconnected groups:

- **Leadership coaches:** A coaching director meets with leadership coaches at monthly meetings. Together, they calibrate instructional and equity coaching (Aguilar, 2020). Using common protocols, they collaboratively design the monthly school leader community meetings.
- **School leaders:** Leadership coaches meet monthly with groups of six and in one-to-one sessions. The protocols support leaders to reflect on theory and make plans for application to facilitate what Freire (1970) calls *praxis* (reflect in order to act) that leads to substantive change.
- **Teachers:** School leaders facilitate teacher communities that focus on classroom academic discourse and include groups of three to five teachers and possibly a school-based instructional coach or another administrator.

The nested coaching model is a supportive mechanism for bringing instructional and equity leadership



to life. The model uses three key approaches to impact leader actions, teacher practices, and student outcomes:

- Facilitate **learning exchanges** to democratize learning spaces and amplify local voices.
- Cultivate **relational trust** as a vital resource for deprivatizing professional learning.
- Center **instructional leadership for equity** in evidence-based observations and conversations about academic discourse.

COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGES

Local voices are frequently overlooked in school reform. Too often, meetings focus on covering agenda items without setting the professional learning table in a way that invites others to participate. Community learning exchanges are an antidote to these typical school meetings (Guajardo et al., 2016). They are democratized professional spaces where people have honest dialogue about equitable practices for student learning.

We design and model community learning exchanges as spaces that generate the necessary conditions for having courageous conversations about opportunity gaps, inequitable practices, and teacher-driven instruction.

Community learning exchanges are built on the fundamental principle that any genuine improvement effort must honor the context of place and the wisdom of local people.

Our program devotes time to investigating place and people in the very context in which students seek to improve. To do so, we embed the community learning exchange pedagogical approaches — gracious space, circles, learning walks, digital stories — in all professional learning.

In learning exchanges, we use a consistent set of protocols, including a common agenda. The agendas for each group and meeting begin with self-care, vis-à-vis dynamic mindfulness and personal narratives (Militello et al., 2020; Bose et al., 2016). Next, they focus on specific content, such as math instruction or academic discourse. This approach strengthens the group culture, opens up channels of transparency and risk-taking, and provides a platform for discussing controversial and difficult issues, including issues of equity.

For example, using a protocol, Keisha, Jason, and Vivian, the leadership coach, each identified five memorable professional learning experiences and shared them with their learning community members. “As a coach, listening to stories provided me insights into how each individual learns best and how we as a collective could move forward to focus on the work,” Vivian said.

Protocols generate equitable dialogue that we expect to transfer to classrooms. “I have used the protocols to set up conversations about practices,” Jason said. “As a result, I observed teachers in our school [learning community] having conversations with each other that I have never seen before. Then I observed them using them in classrooms and saw that they were trying out practices they had not tried before.”

RELATIONAL TRUST

Trust matters to foster high-quality relationships among leaders, teachers, students, and community members (Bryk et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Building relational trust is an intentional act. Our coaching model focuses on cultivating relational trust because we have found that leaders who facilitate by listening are better-situated to lead the equity charge.

In the first school leader community learning exchange, Vivian used a protocol that focused specifically on leadership. The protocol created space for storytelling about early experiences in leadership and how those

PROJECT I4 RESOURCES

- P14 website: education.ecu.edu/projecti4
- Guide for effective conversations: tinyurl.com/3dfoongp
- Project I4 tools: education.ecu.edu/projecti4/cohort-ii/spring2021/resources/
- Learning exchange protocols: iel.org/protocols

experiences informed participants’ values about leadership.

Jason told the group about being a high school student council president, and Keisha spoke about her role as eldest child. “The stories were deep and compelling,” Vivian said. “I was pleasantly surprised just how quickly the leaders were able to share with one another.”

In turn, Keisha and Jason used the protocol in the teacher community learning exchange that they led. Jason noted the power of the protocol: “This activity cultivated trust and demonstrated to the teachers in the [community] that I was serious about making the [community] a team where we were all equal and valuable members.”

Not only do we consistently engage in relational trust, but we measure it. Participants use the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL), a nationally validated formative assessment tool that focuses on leadership as a collaborative function in a school (Blitz et al., 2014). Items in the assessment emphasize leadership as a practice rather than individual traits to encourage school leaders and their teams to focus on collaborative leadership and school improvement planning. The CALL data from the first year of the project indicate that relational trust showed statistically significant improvement.

Trust creates space to focus on evidence-based practice, and the CALL

data helped build this trust. “The more intentional I was about relational trust, the more I was able to have important conversations about practice,” Keisha said. “After we analyzed the classroom evidence together, the teacher asked if I could come back the next day to observe. I saw marked student engagement improvements the next day.”

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY

We believe that leadership for equity is instructional leadership and vice versa. Our professional learning structure focuses on evidenced-based observations and post-observation conversations with teachers that address the recurring equity issues of academic engagement and rigor.

Our approach counteracts the traditional approach to walk-through tools in which the observers leap to decisions about what the teacher should change without a grounding in specific classroom evidence. Instead, our evidenced-based tools shift the post-observation meeting from principal feedback to collaborative conversations between the teacher and the principal.

The tools, while not new, have been redesigned so that the principal can conduct a brief observation, analyze the evidence, and have a post conversation in three time blocks that total about 45 minutes.

For example, hand-raising is by far the most common method for calling on students and arguably the least effective for promoting equity (Hamilton, 2019). Jason used the Project I4 calling-on tool to collect and analyze evidence in two classrooms, shared the evidence with the teachers, then had conversations with teachers.

In the first case, the teacher only called on white students to model math problems for the class. He described another classroom: “During a 15-minute lesson segment, I saw evidence of repeated and sustained conversations with only two students, while 12 students got no feedback from the teacher.”

In using another tool for collecting evidence on equitable access, the Project I4 question form tool, Keisha observed mostly yes-or-no questions, and think time was nonexistent. “Many (teachers) were asking questions that only required simple answers and no explanation of how the student arrived at an answer,” she said. By changing question form to include appropriate think time and coupling that with more equitable calling-on strategies, equitable student responses increased engagement and learning.

Keisha’s conversations with teachers were revealing. “The tools led to discussions that informed teachers about their practices,” she said. “Many teachers were surprised that they called on the same students frequently and that they usually were looking for students to give the correct answers. That led to a conversation about how the teacher wanted to shift to using other structures for engaging students and professional learning sessions on equitable strategies.”

By providing evidence to teachers about academic discourse, principals like Keisha and Jason, with the support of Vivian, collect specific evidence and then use the evidence to guide conversations with, rather than feedback to, teachers.

Jason noted how his role changed. “Before using the tools, I would often struggle to identify the most appropriate and needed next step for improvement,” he said. “I actually did not know how to have a conversation with a teacher and not just tell the teacher what to do. The data allowed the teacher and me to reflect together and for her to develop a reasonable and feasible next step.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS SUPERGLUE

Project I4 addresses a juggernaut of school reform: how to change teacher practice. To do so, it reimagines professional development as a daily, interactive, and useful process. The nested coaching structure

creates democratic learning spaces characterized by relational trust. Then, by using observations and conversations to collect and analyze evidence with teachers in the context of those trusting relationships, we create a safe space for conversations about equity.

Participating school leaders tell us they now know how to lead for equity in a more meaningful way that is connected to their roles as instructional leaders. Keisha said, “Given the opportunity to learn in a welcoming, high-expectation, culturally respectful, and appreciative environment, educators not only teach, but learn from and with each other, no matter their beliefs, backgrounds, or previous experiences.” Jason described his experience as “the most invigorating of any I have experienced in my 26-year career.”

Reform that sticks comes from the inside. The leadership actions that we cultivate through Project I4 are like the superglue of professional development: relational trust, nested coaching structures, evidence-based tools, and effective conversations. If school leaders work with teachers in their schools to address local concerns and engage in community learning exchange processes, they can build stronger internal capacity for change.

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