Chapter 14
Small Chunks, Deep Learning: Micro-Credentials for Equity-Driven Instructional Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Project I⁴ is a cohort-based, year-long program incorporating micro-credential experiences as a key element of learning for school leaders. The project focuses the micro-credential (MC) design, implementation, and study on a central aspect of a school leader's work: classroom observations and post-observation conversations. The leaders learn to observe academic discourse in STEM classrooms. To fully engage in the learning from the MC, leaders collect observational evidence on equitable instructional practices and use the evidence to have coaching post-observation conversations with teachers with the aim of changing instructional practices in classrooms. In the authors' model, a key component for the MC experiences is the opportunity for school leaders to work with leadership coaches in equity-centered networked improvement communities (EC-NICs) of 5-6 persons. This chapter presents a qualitative review of 10 school leaders from the first Project I⁴ cohort.

INTRODUCTION

Micro-credentials provide substantial opportunities for higher education to reconceptualize learning opportunities for current and potential students and practitioners (Gibson et al., 2016; Gibson & Knezek, 2011; Matthews et al., 2018; Milligan & Kennedy, 2017; Ghasia et al., 2019; Digital Promise, 2016a).

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Educators in the K-12 environment currently utilize micro-credentials to support their professional development. However, staff in colleges and universities currently do not embrace them as a large-scale learning tool. A team from the Department of Educational Leadership (LEED) at East Carolina University (ECU) and the Institute of Educational Leadership (IEL) not only embraced the concept but created a micro-credential program for school leaders. The program, Project I^4, aims to cultivate equity-driven instructional leaders by leveraging evidence-based observations and effective post-observation conversations with teachers. Funded through a research grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Education, Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED), Project I^4 is a one-year, university-based, cohort program resulting in the first micro-credential digital badge authorized by ECU.

In Project I^4, we provide personalized and authentic learning experiences for school leaders by focusing on equitable instructional leadership. The team specifically created the micro-credential to support improved principal observation skills and post-observation conversations to ensure rigorous, equitable academic discourse in STEM classrooms. By concentrating instructional leadership on supporting teachers to use equitable calling-on and questioning strategies, we have designed an effective pathway for school leaders to cultivate the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for equity-driven instructional leaders (Berry et al., 2016; Digital Promise, 2016b; Finkelstein et al., 2013; Matthews et al., 2018; Milligan & Kennedy 2017; Tredway et al., 2021).

The initial Project I^4 micro-credential design included: 1) evidence-based observations; 2) post-observation conversations; and 3) academic tasks and discourse in STEM classrooms. The micro-credential experience included support from a leadership coach who facilitated a network of four to five school leaders in an Equity Centered Networked Improvement Community (EC-NIC) (Bryk et al., 2010). Coaches met with these peer support network groups and held monthly 1:1 coaching sessions with each participant. In turn, each participant created an EC-NIC with school community-based staff. The school-based EC-NIC met monthly as a group and in individual 1:1 meetings between the school leader and the staff member. The Project I^4 participant facilitated the school-based meetings, creating a nested coaching model. We designed the EC-NIC meetings to cultivate the knowledge and skills embedded in the micro-credential as well as provide much needed peer support for leaders trying to disrupt inequities in their school (Theoharis, 2010).

The 1:1 coaching experience supported school leaders implementing new practices for observation and post-observation conversations. Analysis of school-based artifacts such as completed observation notes and videos of post-observation conversations provided a focus for each 1:1 coaching session and served as micro-credential assessments. Finally, we enhanced the micro-credential experience by engaging in virtual Community Learning Exchanges (CLE) throughout the year (Guajardo et al., 2016). In these experiences, all participants (74 in cohort 1 and 68 in cohort 2) engaged in relational trust activities and equitable practice tools with members from other EC-NICs. Figure 1 shows the micro-credential design elements utilized by the project team: new content, authentic practice, reflection, and authentic assessment.

In this chapter, we present an analysis of ten school leaders from the first Project I^4 cohort, including their experiences with a leadership coach and EC-NIC in the micro-credential program. We discuss the salient extant literature and the methodology framing the study. The findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the Project I^4 process for implementing micro-credentials in a university setting. Our assertions and discussion highlight understanding of our primary research question: How do university faculty utilize micro-credentials to transfer knowledge, skills, and dispositions of equity-driven instructional leadership of school leaders into the school setting?