

# Advancing Leadership Development in Early Years Education via Digitally Mediated Professional Learning: Perspectives and Experiences of 24 UK Training Providers

## Appendix – Descriptive Case Studies

Kayla Halls, Middlesex University

Mona Sakr, Middlesex University

Kerris Cooper, Education Policy Institute

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# Introduction

In the main report on this research, we presented experiences and perspectives on DMPL for leadership development via a thematic analysis based on interviews with 24 UK training providers. Of the 24 providers that we interviewed, 20 had developed DMLD on a large enough scale to warrant close individual attention in the form of a series of descriptive case studies. We therefore present these 20 descriptive case studies as an appendix to the main report. These are intended to showcase the particular opportunities, challenges and learning according to individual providers. In addition to interview responses from providers, the descriptive case studies draw on participants' experiences (as gathered through short interviews and surveys) and internal documentation, such as DMLD training packages and/or internal evaluation. Focusing closely on specific cases can offer another form of learning about DMLD across the EY sector and we hope that this appendix to the main report is helpful in sparking further dialogue and exploration. We have not named individual providers but instead used codes LD1 – LD20. Details within each descriptive case study are likely to jeopardise anonymity (e.g. where a particular named programme is only offered by one provider) and this was explained verbally and in writing to each provider presented here. We have used codes to draw more attention to the particular learning from each organisation rather than the status or positioning of the provider in question. In creating the codes, LD is intended to stand for 'Leadership Development' and the numbers have been randomly assigned, loosely based on when we began to gather data from the provider.

# LD1

LD1 is a national education charity based in England that supports EY through secondary education professionals who work with disadvantaged children. They believe that effective LD creates effective leaders which can change children's lives. For over 10 years, the organisation has provided evidence-based leadership development to education professionals ranging from new teachers to CEOs.

## **Leadership Development at LD1**

LD1 delivers an assortment of National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) to thousands of school leaders with general content tailored to EY professionals on the course. These programmes take a distributed approach to leadership as they empower anyone who aims to catalyse change in their settings. Currently LD1 is one of several organisations who have partnered with the DfE to deliver the *National Professional Qualification in Early Years Leadership (NPQEYL)*. This 18-month programme will address the specific needs of EY leaders by exploring topics such as: culture, implementation, child development, professional learning, effective early years education, SEND, curriculum and assessment, management, and working partnerships. Each of these nine courses will last six weeks.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD1**

When considering the values of LD1, the organisation aims to make general leadership knowledge accessible and relatable to EY professionals. Prior to the pandemic, LD1 delivered the majority of their programmes face-to-face with supplementary learning management systems. Covid19 catalysed their movement to online delivery; now, their large, contracted programmes are delivered 70% online. The NPQs, which are delivered predominantly online, have asynchronous modules which have roughly an hour of weekly work. Participants use learning management systems to access readings and videos which provide basic content knowledge. The programme participants then reflect on how the information applies to their settings. The NPQs also have sense making clinics which are two hours long. In these, facilitators model how the theory discussed functions in daily practice by using examples, allowing for in-depth exemplification which LD1 sees as central to good DMPL. Finally, the NPQs have conferences and peer support/group sessions or coaching throughout. These forms of digital mediation encourage the leaders to reflect on how the content applies to their daily practice.

## **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*"How do teachers and practitioners access the learning they need to do when they're busy? No one is rich on time in education." - LD1*

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD1 raised the following points:

- DMPL should fit with participants' busy schedules. For example, LD1 often provides videos instead of readings as these deliver information more quickly. Two participants noted that DMPL was time efficient due to eliminating the

barrier of travel, allowing them to foster leadership skills without upending their daily lives.

- Conferences should be broken down into manageable chunks to prevent burnout.
- Synchronous sessions incorporate relationality into DMLD. Interviewed participants noted that having conversations with peers and coaches supported their reflection on practice.
- Programmes should reach a wide variety of people at once, whether in large cities or rural villages, using the same high-quality content. However, the programmes should make the content relevant to each person's individual context through exemplification.
- Facilitators can easily refer to their notes when presenting over video calls and conferences, making it possible to deliver accurate information to the participants.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD1 raised the following concerns:

- Exemplifying how general leadership theory links to EY in DMLD takes ample consideration.
- It is difficult for facilitators to “read the room” during DMLD, making it hard to gauge the understanding and engagement of participants.
- Facilitators find it challenging to build a sense of community without the informal elements of face-to-face meetings such as chatting over tea or catching up in the carpark.
- A participant noted that internet connection can be an issue for learners, creating stress around DMLD.

### **Moving Forward**

Moving forward, LD1 would like to see the sector shift from an emergency mindset into a reflective one that considers what constitutes effective practice in DMPL. Additionally, they hope the *NPQEYL* will be applicable and meaningful for EY leaders by exemplifying and supporting their needs. Furthermore, they would like the content of the *NPQEYL* to be applicable in all settings, whether it be nurseries in small, rural areas or reception classrooms in large, metropolitan cities. This requires DMPL providers to reflect on how evidence and research might function across different contexts.

### **Take-Aways from LD1**

- When EY professionals are enrolled in leadership development programmes, providers should explicitly exemplify how the information relates to EY. Additionally, programmes should ensure that the content is applicable for leaders in a variety of contexts.
- DMLD is accessible because it can be incorporated into busy schedules. This allows more leaders to build leadership knowledge that can shape effective practice, supporting children.

## LD2

LD2 is a private organisation that provides training for EY professionals. Managed by three team members, LD2 is based in England with programme participants hailing from all over the globe including the UK, Hong Kong, and Oman. LD2 developed its own learning platform for their programmes which champion pedagogical leadership among EY professionals with a focus on health and wellbeing.

### **Leadership Development at LD2**

#### ***PANCo***

The *PANCo* program is an accredited Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE) level 4 digital training course which develops an understanding of physical activity, nutrition, and emotional wellbeing amongst its participants. *PANCos*, or Physical Activity and Nutrition Coordinators, strive to promote healthy practices within their EY settings. Programme participants are EY professionals, team leaders, or managers who can effect change in their settings, taking a distributed view of leadership. In distributed leadership models, all staff members are empowered to solve problems and influence changes, making leadership something accessible to everyone as opposed to just those in a standard leadership role (Douglas, 2019). To date, this programme has reached over 2,000 participants across the UK, Hong Kong, and Oman.

#### ***Positive Leadership***

Rooted in positive psychology, the *Positive Leadership* course is an Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) accredited Level 3 digital training course that fosters empathetic leadership skills and wellbeing. With a focus on pedagogical conversations, strengths-based approaches, and self-awareness, this course uses practice-based assignments and learning coaches to develop practical tools to implement positive leadership within settings. The participants are senior EY educators, team leaders, and deputy managers/managers who have the ability to influence change in their settings.

### **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD2**

*PANCo* and *Positive Leadership* centre reflective professional development that grounds theory in the daily practice of leaders. Both programmes occur asynchronously over the course of three months, allowing participants to access the bite-sized training modules as it fits their schedule. For *PANCo*, digital training elements include: video resources, reflective journals, project portfolio building, diagnostic tools, and the Start Life Well self-assessment tool. The *Positive Learning* course follows a similar format to *PANCo*, utilising workplace inquiry, e-workbooks, diagnostic tools, and an EY policy timeline. The project portfolios and workplace inquiries ground the content of each programme in participants' specific settings, fostering practical knowledge through implementation. The diagnostic assessments invite participants to reflect on their leadership skills, the wellbeing of a setting, or their role as a mentor, providing tangible data for them to reference throughout and beyond the course. There are also evaluations of impact that chart progress throughout. *PANCo* and the *Positive Learning* course incorporate virtual tutors and personal learning coaches (respectively) who provide consistent support and one-on-one

communication. The *Positive Learning* course also utilises discussion forums to forge peer-to-peer connections that supplement learning.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*“You could just do a section at a time. It never felt too overwhelming that you just didn’t want to pick it up... The flexibility of it being online was amazing and I think that’s the only way I could have done it really.”*

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD2 raised the following points:

- To promote wellbeing and prevent exhaustion, DMPL should be broken into bite-sized chunks.
- The flexibility of the asynchronous course enabled participants to access professional learning they could not have done otherwise. LD2 fostered this flexibility by having participants guide their learning through scaffolded content and an easy-to-navigate platform.
- Relational connection is important in DMPL as it fosters collaborative learning communities made of peers, other EY settings, and EY experts to create supportive networks for leaders. One-on-one support is also useful as participants can voice their questions to coaches.
- LD2 and interviewed participants believed that DMPL should have measurable outcomes, providing tangible data for programme providers and participants to reference as they improve their practice.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

LD2 raised a number of questions and concerns about the current situation regarding DMPL for leadership development:

- DMPL with the elements described above are expensive to produce and maintain.
- Unlike LD2, many DMPLs may not evaluate or measure impact past short quizzes, leading the sector to wonder if most DMPL can be labelled effective and what this effectiveness entails.
- Some leaders within the EY sector may not consider themselves tech savvy, creating a mental block to participating in DMPL.
- Limited access to hardware and internet, along with technological glitches, makes it difficult for some participants to engage in virtual training.
- Relationships are integral to learning; however, LD2 and interviewed participants noted that virtual networks and asynchronous courses do not quite replace the nuances of in-person training. While participants could receive support in LD2’s programmes, they shared that they did not have collaborative discussions.

### **Moving Forward**

*“I think once you can blend both, if you do it well, it doesn’t just enhance learning. I think it contributes to deeper learning.” - LD2*

As LD2 considers the future, they advocate for a blended approach to DMPL that synthesises the benefits of face-to-face learning with the benefits of online learning to create targeted, effective programmes. When considering the thoughts of programme participants, they noted that DMLD should include follow up sessions, allowing leaders to receive continual support. Participants also noted the importance of DMLD championing distributed leadership models, ensuring that all staff members can provide high quality care to children.

### **Take-Aways from LD2**

- It is important to remember the relational nature of learning in asynchronous DMLD. To foster strong connections, incorporating coaches and peer-to-peer connection may prove useful.
- To support learners as they navigate asynchronous content, programmes should have bitesize chunks of scaffolded information that incorporates self-reflection and ties to daily practice.
- Tangible data in the form of diagnostic tools or project portfolios can create a sense of credibility as leaders implement change in their settings during and after courses.



## LD3

LD3 is a large UK charity with branches in England, Scotland, and Wales. They provide resources as well as online and face-to-face training for their over 20,000 members from private, voluntary and independent (PVI) nurseries. This case study focuses on the English and Welsh branch. In England, the training courses are delivered to over 30,000 EY practitioners each year; in Wales, the charity works with the Welsh government to provide resources and professional development to nurseries and practitioners. Both branches deliver leadership programmes online and face-to-face.

### **Leadership Development at LD3**

#### ***England***

The *Early Years Leaders Programme* which is funded by the Greater London Authority (GLA) subscribes to a distributed leadership model. This London-based, 18-month programme identified aspiring leaders with a level 3 or above who had the ability to facilitate change in their settings. LD3 used a variety of coaching methods including one-to-one sessions, triad sessions, and networking between all participants and coaches to help them reach their leadership goals. Based on the coaching sessions, the aspiring leaders' needs were identified, and workshops were delivered every quarter to address these needs.

LD3 also delivers *Maths Champions*, which is accessible across England, Scotland, and Wales. This course, which is funded by the Education Endowment Foundation, was developed in 2015. The *Maths Champions* programme aims to improve practitioners' ability to change environments, language, and pedagogy in accordance with children's maths needs. The participants begin with a self-assessment on their confidence with maths; based on this, action plans are developed and over the 12-month course, they expand their pedagogical knowledge, and apply their learning to practice. A coach, or Maths Champion, supports them throughout this process.

#### ***Wales***

The Welsh branch of the organisation has a leadership programme called the *Foundation Phase Excellence Network (FPEN)*. *FPEN* supports partnership working and child transitions in EY by fostering connections between leaders and managers in Wales. Delivered over 12 months, LD3 offers a variety of services to this end: one-to-one meetings focused on self-improvement or group meetings with a nursery and a local school; networking with managers and leaders across Wales; trainings based on the leader's improvement goals; and events with talks from inspectorates or people from specific initiatives.

### **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD3**

#### ***England***

The *Early Years Leaders Programme*, which began prior to Covid19, was initially designed for face-to-face learning; however, the pandemic prompted a shift to online delivery. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, about half of the initial participants completed the course. Once online, the course involved one-to-one coaching (2 per term), triad coaching (1 per term), and networking between all participants and coaches (1 per term). This programme used Adobe Classroom to facilitate engagement and dialogue using features such as the whiteboard, chat rooms, and breakout rooms. This programme was externally evaluated using a mixed methods

approach, and the report noted that, of the participants who completed the course, over 80% felt a self-reported increase in leadership skills. Additionally, just under two-thirds felt they had created partnerships in the EY sector. Finally, 89% felt they improved practice in their settings (regarding staffing, child provision, policies and systems, etc.). These results indicate that dialogic, relational DMLD has the potential to produce powerful results within the EY sector.

For *Maths Champions*, every element of the professional learning is online. In accordance with the organisation's belief in relational DMPL through coaching, each participant has their own Maths Champion mentor. Over 12 months, the participants access online training modules, monthly webinars, and one-to-one meetings to support their progress through an action plan. They also have access to the virtual Basic Key Skills Builder to improve personal maths skills, as well as an online resource of 500 exemplary maths activities they can use in the classroom. Finally, *Maths Champions* disseminates online video training on maths pedagogy from LD3 throughout the year for the participants to access. This programme was externally evaluated using a randomised controlled trial with 108 nurseries. The report indicated that many staff members felt their confidence had improved; additionally, the report tentatively identified a two-months progress increase in children. This study is currently being replicated with the hope of LD3 that this will strengthen the evidence around the positive impact of the programme.

### **Wales**

Prior to Covid19, *FPEN* was predominately delivered face-to-face. However, lockdown catalysed its shift to all-online delivery. LD3 uses Zoom for their virtual synchronous sessions since it works for a variety of meeting formats, ranging from *FPEN*'s one-to-one meetings to their large-scale events. They often use the poll function to capture participant understanding during a Zoom session as a formative assessment, which then guides how they approach the rest of the session, creating a tailored experience for participants. LD3 also uses Adobe Classroom for much of the training as it allows for deeper exploration of content. For example, the interactive nature of Adobe Classroom can mimic the face-to-face nature of "table top" activities, facilitating high engagement levels. These delivery modes align with the discursive emphasis of LD3 along with the creation of strong networks.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*"Our members were saying, 'It's an absolute lifeline. I don't want to send my practitioners back out again. I don't have to get cover.'"*

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD3 raised the following points:

- It is difficult for EY leaders to leave their setting for professional learning, due to travel costs and ratio. Therefore, DMLD enables busy leaders to attend training that would otherwise be inaccessible.
- DMLD can remove geographical barriers; for example, leaders on opposite coasts of Wales can converse about leadership, creating wide-reaching, diverse communities of learning.
- Reflected in LD3's *Early Years Leaders Programme* and *Maths Champions*, dialogic, active relationships are vital in DMLD, enabling leaders to receive bespoke support that can be reflected upon and applied in practice. When

considering LD3's reports, it is fair to state that one-to-one coaching relationships (as seen in *Maths Champions* and directly evaluated in the *Early Years Leaders Programme* report) and networking (as seen in *FPEN* and directly evaluated in the *Early Years Leaders Programme* report) support high quality DMLD.

- Interviewed participants valued the reflective aspects of DMLD, as facilitated through informative content and discussions; this supported them in making changes in their settings.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD3 raised the following concerns:

- There is limited funding for small organisations to offer DMLD.
- Interviewed participants and LD3 shared that building and maintaining networks requires a lot more effort online than in person. However, the Wales branch has done this in *FPEN*, leading me to posit that networking must be purposefully built into DMPL models to be effective.
- Workforce challenges still make it difficult to get staff off the floor and into DMPL – even though DMPL is more flexible than face to face delivery.

### **Moving Forward**

Moving forward, LD3 would like to see a blended approach that maintains the relational element of in person professional learning while harnessing the accessibility of DMLD. Blended learning also refers to having asynchronous pre-reading materials before synchronous sessions, enabling leaders to consider the material ahead of time and show up ready for discussion. Finally, LD3 highlighted the importance of reaching aspiring leaders within organisations, not just those in positional leadership roles. When considering the desires of interviewed participants, they would like to see more management courses that support them with the day-to-day nuances of managing settings. One participant also shared that they would like to see more diverse programme creators, facilitators, and coaches, allowing for a richer perspective on leadership development.

### **Take-Aways from LD3**

- Dialogic relationships in DMLD can occur through coaching and peer-to-peer networks. This can create bespoke, supportive experiences for LD, and by extension, child outcomes.
- DMLD allows more participants to access professional learning as it fits with their schedules, addressing the specific concerns of the EY sector, such as ratios. It also widens the networks created, breaking geographical boundaries and forming more diverse learning communities.
- External evaluations are vital in indicating whether programmes are effectively supporting leaders, and by extension, children; additionally, tying these programmes to child outcomes can help providers truly determine whether their leadership provision is effective.

# LD4

LD4 is a social enterprise that has provided comprehensive school support services in England since 2013 to support outcomes for all children. Recognized as the UK's largest school company, LD4 has many leadership programmes, some of which are EY specific. These EY improvement offers consist of a variety of courses and resources targeted at schools and PVI settings.

## **Leadership Development at LD4**

This case study focuses on two of LD4's leadership programmes: The *Early Years Phase Leaders Programme* and the *Leading and Managing EYFS for PVI Providers Programme*. These programmes take a positional view of leadership by providing professional learning to those in traditional leadership positions, such as managers and phase leaders. The programmes provide training that empowers leaders to work on managerial tasks such as operations and quality improvement. Both programmes start by briefly studying leadership theory and the differences between leading and managing. They also offer practical tools for leading daily operations and managing EY settings. The *Early Years Phase Leaders Programme* is specifically for leaders in charge of the EYFS phase in primary schools, helping them to monitor provision quality. This programme supports about 100 phase leaders in a single seminar. The *Leading and Managing EYFS for PVI Providers Programme* is a year-long and serves 30-50 participants. It shares what can be expected in the year of a leader and provides information on performance management, supervision, operational elements, Ofsted management requirements, statutory requirements, and leadership.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD4**

Prior to Covid19, LD4 was slowly starting to shift their professional learning online in an effort to reduce carbon emissions; however, Covid19 massively sped up their transition. Since moving online, the content has been converted into bite-sized chunks, creating a manageable, scaffolded approach to DMPL. LD4 values practical leadership development programmes that facilitate dialogue and the formation of leadership networks. Therefore, the programmes are primarily delivered synchronously over Livestorm, which is a platform for webinars and meetings that centres participant engagement. Breakout rooms facilitate dialogue concerning specific scenarios; activities create an interactive, discursive experience that can be reflected on and applied within their own settings. Livestorm also enables the use of polls, Q & A, file-sharing and collaborative whiteboards.

## **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*"Because our reach has widened and we can have a broader mix of settings on a session, it means that when they go into these breakout groups, particularly in the leadership training, then they are networking with people from different areas of the county."- LD4*

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD4 raised the following points:

- The information provided should be easily implemented within leaders' daily practice.
- It should be easier for school leaders and aspiring leaders to access as they do not have to leave the setting for a full day (which could affect staffing and ratios).

Additionally, DMPL is often more cost effective, meaning more schools can access the trainings.

- Short online sessions help participants remain engaged, preventing exhaustion and burnout.
- Synchronous DMLD creates reciprocal dialogue and builds relationships between participants and facilitators.
- Breakout rooms nurture relationships, dialogue, and reflection between participants, something that interviewed leaders noted as essential in their development. This helps leaders in school and PVI settings create a network that goes beyond their local area, diminishing the competitiveness that is pervasive within the sector. With schools, similar localities have similar challenges, allowing the leaders to collaborate on possible solutions.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD4 raised the following concerns:

- In online sessions, it is easier for participants to become passive; therefore, sessions must intentionally facilitate active engagement.
- The recruitment and retention crisis makes it difficult for managers to release aspiring leaders for professional learning. Because EY tends to get leaders from their staff, the staffing crisis may eventually cause a leadership shortage.
- Participants found technical difficulties challenging at times, hindering engagement.
- The interviewed participants found themselves easily distracted when accessing training during the school day, meaning they were less engaged than in face-to-face sessions.
- Learners found it harder to get immediate feedback due to the fast-paced nature of DMLD.

### **Moving Forward**

Moving forward, LD4 would like DMLD to incorporate asynchronous pre-reading materials prior to synchronous sessions to provoke leaders' thinking prior to discussions, enabling them to have deeper dialogues. Additionally, LD4 would like the DfE to have a specific set of statutory requirements that state what leadership and management training should look like, ensuring consistency and high-quality information in programmes across the sector. Interviewed participants shared that they would like more networking opportunities to support their development, along with in-person site visits to encourage practical implementation.

### **Take-Aways from LD4**

- Synchronous programmes may be valuable when building relationships through DMLD by facilitating dialogues, networks, and collaborative leadership communities.
- DMLD should directly apply to leaders' settings, enabling them to make changes that create effective provision.
- DMLD should be available to both current and aspirational leaders.

## LD5

LD5 is the one of the largest EY membership organisations in England with over 14,000 members and nearly a third of all registered settings in the country having accessed at least one of their courses. It became an educational charity two years after its founding in 1961 and has been a prominent voice in the sector ever since. In alignment with the organisation's mission, LD5 provides training services to EY leaders to empower them to work effectively with children and families across England.

### **Leadership Development at LD5**

LD5's offers three types of non-accredited leadership development: *Virtual Classrooms*, *Spotlights*, and *Alliance Connect*. The *Virtual Classrooms* can hold up to 16 participants as it provides two three-hour sessions that give a detailed overview of a topic. *Spotlights* are one-hour sessions that provide an in-depth exploration of a small element of a larger topic. Finally, *Alliance Connect* brings together up to 300 people from across the EY sector, providing a networking opportunity. It also allows LD5 to see what the sector wants in terms of leadership development or general professional learning.

### **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD5**

LD5 started shifting their professional learning online from around 2015 due to policy changes surrounding funding. As a national organisation with limited infrastructure, having a mix of face-to-face and online delivery was cost effective. However, since the pandemic, they have transitioned the non-accredited programmes to predominantly online delivery. The *Virtual Classrooms* have pre-readings that stimulate dialogue whilst in the Zoom session, breakout rooms, whiteboards, the chat bar, and flip charts are used to facilitate active dialogues between participants. The facilitator intentionally builds in moments of personal and collaborative reflection throughout the session. After the conclusion of the session, the participants receive virtual resources and a certificate of attendance.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*"You've got to try and present it in a way that is responsive to and accessible by the person you're trying to support.... [Additionally], the best early years practice is a collective effort of collegiate reflection... it's that opportunity to reflect and share experience [that] is vital to an effective learning environment."- LD5*

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD5 raised the following points:

- Online sessions allow nurseries to access high-quality, expert-led professional learning, providing professional learning opportunities in an easy and effective way.
- DMPL has allowed LD5 to reach a wider audience, specifically leaders in rural settings.
- DMPL enables LD5 to deliver trainings at times that fit with busy leaders' scheduling needs.
- Programmes should be intentionally structured to encourage continuous engagement, allowing learners to be active in their learning, stay on top of their

work, and participate in discussions. This could be through *Alliance Connect* sessions that are created specifically for networking or making intentional use of features like breakout rooms.

- Discussion is foundational to effective learning, creating meaningful learning for leaders.
- When facilitators know their learners and make space for their voices, DMPL can provide bespoke, tailored leadership development that meet leaders' needs.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD5 raised the following concerns:

- Technical difficulties and reliable internet access pose a barrier.
- It can be hard for facilitators to encourage active engagement with course material when they are not in the same physical space as learners.
- Due to the busy nature of EY, it becomes very easy to let DMLD slip to the backburner.
- If participants are nervous about the delivery method, it will limit their engagement with the content. Therefore, organisations must help move participants from hesitancy to confidence.

### **Moving Forward**

*“What’s been more of a challenge is how do we know if it’s making any difference to practice? What are the outcomes, and more importantly, what’s the impact?”- LD5*

Moving forward, DMLD must evaluate the impact it has on leadership outcomes, and more importantly, child outcomes, to determine effectiveness. Additionally, relationships need to stay at the centre of DMLD. LD5 suggested creating a culture of learning by having participants meet in person during an induction period prior to DMLD. This would allow them to have a common knowledge base as well as strong relationships that can encourage engagement when they move online. Finally, it is up to the sector to harness the many technological advances that are available and channel them into high quality, effective leadership development. LD5 mentioned the possibilities of virtual and augmented reality as a way to practice difficult leadership scenarios with no risk to children.

### **Take-Aways from LD5**

- The heart of effective DMLD should be accessibility, responsiveness, and relationships.
- DMLD needs to be measured for effectiveness to evaluate the tangible impacts on leadership, staff, and child outcomes.
- How can we harness new technological advances and apply them to DMLD in the EY sector?

## LD6

LD6 is the largest non-profit early years organisation in Northern Ireland. Founded in 1965, they provide resources and training for parents, childcare providers, employers, and local authorities. Their leadership offerings, described below, support their mission to develop high-quality services for young children.

### **Leadership Development at LD6**

Primarily taking a positional view of leadership, LD6 has four leadership programmes accredited by the Institute of Leadership and Management. The *Leadership and Outcomes* course discusses governance of organisations, legal setups, financial management, responsibilities of boards, and the leadership of practice across five sessions. In January-February 2022, 13 participants completed and passed all sessions. The *Compassionate Leadership* course helps leaders respond to stress during times of crisis so they can be the best leaders for the children in their setting. Held once a week for four weeks in January-February 2022, 23 participants completed and passed all of the 3-hour sessions; all participants also self-reportedly described knowledge increases. The *Coaching and Mentoring* programme provides flexible, bespoke support to leaders over two sessions. It teaches leaders how to facilitate professional learning for staff members with a large focus on relationships between leaders and staff. Finally, *Leading Resilience* has two three-hour sessions that supports leaders in building resilience during difficult times, such as financial stress of staff shortages, by nurturing their strengths to overcome challenges. Between December 2021 and February 2022, 15 participants completed and passed all sessions; all participants also self-reportedly described knowledge increases.

LD6 also delivered an *Early Years Development Framework* project between 2020 and 2021. The project consisted of two strands, the first of which is relevant to this topic. Over 4 sessions, 7 settings focused on leadership and succession planning. Committee members, leaders, and staff attended a combination of the sessions to identify their settings' needs and come up with a solid succession plan based on the setting's strengths and needs.

### **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD6**

The Covid19 pandemic prompted LD6 to move all of its programmes online and they have remained online to this point. The organisation shares that, without the pressure of this global event, they would probably still primarily have face-to-face delivery. The online sessions were designed for interaction, and therefore were held synchronously over Zoom and Teams. However, a few of the sessions that were more lecture based took a webinar format. As far as tools for delivery, the organisation is currently experimenting with quizzes and whiteboards to increase engagement.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*"I think you can't lose sight of the importance of that dialogue."*

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD6 raised the following points:

- Programmes should hold ample space for interaction and conversations as sharing experiences with facilitators and peers is integral to high quality leadership development.



- Programmes should have practical elements that apply to leaders' work in settings with children and staff, making the content fit with their daily practice.
- DMPL is more accessible within the busy schedules of the EY sector as it eliminates the need to travel. A surveyed participant also noted the importance of session times not interfering with leaders' daily responsibilities, meeting the needs of the EY sector.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD6 raised the following concerns:

- The nature of EY is hands-on and interactive. Therefore, the face-to-face, conversational element of leadership training provides necessary experiences for the daily practices of leaders, such as having conversations with a variety of stakeholders.
- It can be harder to generate active participation and challenge learners through a screen.
- There is a lack of informal conversations online; however, these informal conversations often support formal learning processes, creating connections between facilitators and peers.
- When specifically considering Northern Ireland, the country is focusing on several things, including succession planning due to an ageing workforce. They are also concerned about digital literacy skills across generations, a concern raised in many areas of the UK, creating a barrier to advancing DMPL in EY.
- Another challenge for Northern Ireland is a lack of infrastructure. Many settings and individuals do not have the hardware or internet access to take advantage of DMPL.
- LD6 encourages the sector to ponder possible unintended consequences of DMPL, both positive and negative, so we may prepare for the future.

### **Moving Forward**

*"[If] you can get people in the room, you really can challenge them because they can work with each other... They can share experiences and you can facilitate that. I think that's much more difficult online."*

Moving forward, LD6 would like to see a blended approach where the sector harnesses new technological advances while ensuring that face-to-face elements are weaved throughout programmes so as not to lose sight of the richness of human contact in learning. Additionally, the organisation wants the delivery methods to fit the content of programmes to ensure the best possible delivery. Finally, the organisation notes that pre-reading materials may be useful for stimulating conversations that are held online, ensuring that dialogue is central to DMPL.

### **Take-Aways from LD6**

- Conversations are the heart of leadership learning, and therefore should be foundational to the programmes within the EY sector.
- What are positive and challenging consequences of DMPL that the sector is not aware of yet?

## LD7

LD7 is a small non-profit organisation that was founded in February 2020 that focuses on supporting aspiring and current EY leaders. They provide training programmes, consultancy, and member-based resources to develop effective EY leaders across England.

### **Leadership Development at LD7**

The *Leadership Excel Programme* aims to support nurseries with succession planning by developing aspiring and emerging EY leaders. The 13-week online course is an introduction to leadership that discusses what a leader is, management theory, and distributed approaches to leadership so participants can become adequately prepared for future roles. These topics are grounded in the context of the EY sector and the aspiring leaders' settings, creating a practical framework of leadership knowledge. Additionally, the course is kept to a small group to ensure participants can receive bespoke support, giving aspiring leaders the tools they need to lead effectively.

### **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD7**

In the *Leadership Excel Programme*, LD7 values providing bespoke support to leaders so they can implement their learning in their settings. This programme was created during the pandemic, and therefore was always online. The course is delivered over Zoom and Teams using resources such as PowerPoint and Canva to facilitate engagement and interaction. LD7 also noted that those platforms cater to diverse learning styles by using tools such as music, videos, and whiteboards. LD7 values relationships in leadership learning, as the conversations that occur are what create reflective, bespoke support for aspiring leaders. Therefore, LD7 uses synchronous sessions; the organisation only pre-records items that do not require conversation such as leadership theory or legislative facts. Learners' complete homework and gap tasks prior to the synchronous sessions to prepare for discussions.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD7 raised the following points:

- Programmes should acknowledge and meet a variety of learners' needs by utilising the resources available, such as music, videos, and other software.
- Synchronous sessions support the overall values of conversations and bespoke support, creating a space for candid and practical leadership discussions to occur. There are many programmes such as Canva and PowerPoint that can facilitate this.

*"I think that the possibilities are sort of endless with the digital learning that somebody can do."- LD7*

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*"[With in-person learning], there's something about the relationship, the holding someone to account, and the observation of progression."- LD7*

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD7 raised the following concerns:

- With asynchronous learning, there is a lower level of accountability. People can cruise through modules without truly pausing to reflect on the information. Additionally, it's harder to tell if participants are absorbing the content, reflecting, and applying it if asynchronous learning consists solely of readings, videos, and knowledge checks. Therefore, programmes that are solely asynchronous, lacking any form of conversation, are hard to measure in effectiveness.
- Time is a barrier to advancing DMLD. Leaders are in ratio, trying to retain staff, and running around nurseries to help with day-to-day duties. Therefore, it is hard for them to carve out time and space for their own professional development.

### **Moving Forward**

Moving forward, LD7 would like to see the sector create more bespoke leadership development programmes where leaders can guide their learning. With online programmes, LD7 believes content can often become rigid and prescriptive, losing touch with the foundationally responsive nature of high-quality learning. Therefore, future guidance should remind organisations that programmes should seek out and respond to the daily needs of leaders.

### **Take-Aways from LD7**

- To provide bespoke leadership that can have tangible effects on leaders' practice, there must be a strong interactive and conversational element in place.
- Programmes must mesh with EY leaders' busy schedules, acknowledging and flowing with the hectic nature of the sector.

## LD8

LD8 is a small, private organisation that provides training courses and consultancy focused on anti-racism for the EY sector in England and Wales. Founded in 2020, LD8 encourages the sector to question why minoritized communities are underrepresented in leadership positions across all four nations and to work to incorporate anti-racism into leadership practices. LD8's programmes support the sector in this endeavour.

### **Leadership Development at LD8**

LD8's one-to-one consultancy and webinars centre ample reflection, discussion, and one-to-one dialogue on anti-racist leadership and practice. Each of these initiatives begin with personal reflection regarding social identity because the personal opinions and experiences of leaders feed into professional practice. Additionally, both initiatives support EY professionals ranging from practitioners to leaders, taking a distributed view of leadership that views anti-racist practice as everyone's responsibility. The virtual consultancy provides bespoke support over 30-minute sessions and addresses anti-racist leadership within specific settings. Practitioners and leaders can access this service as often as they'd like to support change in their settings. LD8 also offers a three-part webinar series. The CEO begins by physically going into settings to assess the environment and practices; this assessment then shapes the online or face-to-face webinars that occur every two weeks or once a month. The gap between sessions allows participants to reflect on their practice. These webinars are delivered to between 10 and 25 people from the same organisation.

### **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning in LD8's Programmes**

LD8 was founded during the pandemic; therefore, all the programmes began online and have slowly incorporated face-to-face elements, taking the opposite route of most organisations. For the consultancy and webinars, a typical Zoom session will incorporate elements of reflection, dialogue, and one-to-one conversation. The webinars also use videos and readings. These sessions of 10-25 people do not use breakout rooms as this format can be difficult for neurodivergent individuals. Additionally, the facilitator prefers to provoke thought from all attendees, avoiding the phenomenon of 'white silence', whereby those in minoritized communities feel that they cannot openly share their experiences and perspectives. Therefore, the limited number of people makes intimate, whole group discussions entirely possible.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD8 raised the following points:

- Organisations should understand how racism play into EY leadership, empowering them to create holistic programmes that champion anti-racist leadership practices.
- Programmes should connect people of different racialized identities from all parts of the world. For example, predominantly white areas in the UK can use video calls to connect with those from countries such as Uganda who are racialized as black and brown, widening their perspectives by creating rich environments for dialogue.

- Facilitators must be engaging and confident to maintain learner engagement. Facilitators may also consider not recording sessions to encourage honest conversation and respect the experiences of attendees.
- Having breaks in between sessions gives EY professionals ample time for reflection.
- The interviewed participant found DMLD easier to access than face-to-face learning since she lives in a remote location; additionally, she could focus from the comfort of home without distractions.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD8 raised the following concerns:

- DMPL is not accessible on an equitable basis because technology access is often divided by socioeconomic status (which is tied to other identity markers) and can therefore be exclusionary.
- Technical difficulties and low confidence with technology can create a barrier to DMLD.
- Facilitators must be intentional in maintaining participant engagement. Some may need specific training on how to do this.
- With face-to-face delivery, it was possible to have small group discussions where the facilitator floated between tables and could add to or challenge discussions; this does not translate well to Zoom, making the facilitators role in a breakout room difficult.
- When trying to progress anti-racist DMLD, the biggest barrier is power dynamics. If the sector is unwilling to acknowledge how racism and power struggles prevent the global majority from reaching leadership positions in EY, there will never be change.

### **Moving Forward**

*“Nothing will ever take away from the essential necessity of humans connecting with people... but the power of technology just opens up a global perspective that we wouldn’t ordinarily have access to. [Therefore, good DMPL is], not to erase the human experience of interaction, but it’s recognizing that two things can exist at the same time.”- LD8*

Moving forward, LD8 believes that organisations should centre relationships and dialogue in DMLD. Leaders need to connect with each other and reflect with each other to apply what they have learned to practice. LD8 also noted that DMLD should acknowledge and support a variety of communication styles by using multiple delivery approaches, allowing programmes to incorporate more voices and reach more people with leadership development. Most importantly, LD8 encourages the EY sector to incorporate the voices of the minoritized communities in leadership spaces.

### **Take-Aways from LD8**

- Facilitators must intentionally engage participants during DMPL while centring dialogue, reflection, and bespoke support.
- DMLD has innate ties to power dynamics. When creating DMLD, organisations must ask themselves how diverse voices are supported in the space.

# LD9

## Introduction

LD9 is the regulator for the Social Service workforce in Scotland. Established in 2001, they protect the public by registering social service workers, setting standards for practice, conduct, training and education and by supporting them to improve their professional development. LD9 publishes the national codes of practice for people working in social services and their employers and are the national lead for workforce development and planning for social services in Scotland. As of 3 October, 2022, there are 164442 individuals registered with LD9.

The expansion of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) in Scotland is a key driver and, LD9 works with the Scottish Government and key partners, promoting career opportunities and defining routes into these roles, as well as career pathways and progression for the sector. LD9 also uses registration data for Day Care of Children to monitor numbers in the workforce to support future workforce planning and analysis.

## Leadership Development at LD9

LD9 provides open-access asynchronous leadership resources to the social service workforce which includes people who work in social care, social work and early years. The organisation views leadership as distributed, meaning that everyone at every level of EY has leadership capability, no matter their role. While some content is targeted at positional leaders, it can be accessed by anyone at any point in their leadership journey. The main leadership resource hub, *Step into Leadership*, has a large variety of resources; on this page, there is a link to *23 Things Leadership* which creates a straightforward navigational pathway through some of LD9's resources, dividing the resource into bite-sized chunks. The resource looks at what leadership is, who the participant is as a leader, the leadership capabilities, self-leadership, supporting leadership of the self and others, and evaluation of impact. The different sections are connected to Open Badges, or digital certificates (see below). LD9 has also recently created a leadership resource called *23 Things Early Learning and Childcare Leadership* which specifically focuses on EY.

## Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD9

According to the Care Inspectorate, there has been a steady 18.5% increase of the use of LD9's resources between 2015 and 2020, indicating that DMPL was on the rise prior to the pandemic. *23 Things Leadership* and *23 Things Early Learning and Childcare Leadership* draw on research conducted by the organisation about what makes a good leader in the social services sector.

LD9's asynchronous resources (comprising video clips, readings, and external resources) value flexibility and reflection. Learners can jump to the specific resource they need, review parts as a refresher, or go through the resource step-by-step. Additionally, it can be accessed at any time and as often as leaders would like, fitting with busy schedules. *23 Things Leadership* and *23 Things Early Learning and Childcare Leadership* has Open Badges. These are digital certificates that leaders receive when they submit a written reflection on one of the 'things' and how it applies to their practice. There was a large increase in the uptake of Open Badges during the pandemic.

## Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD9 raised the following points:

- Generic resources should prompt reflection, ensuring that the content, while applying to a wide range of fields, is applied within each leader's specific EY setting. A participant noted how the general nature of the content made the resources applicable in a wide range of her roles, from practitioner to manager and beyond EY.
- Based on organisation feedback, general resources need to exemplify EY-specific leadership in order to be effectively applied to professional practice via reflection.
- Asynchronous resources are best delivered through a guided learning platform using bite-sized chunks of information, enabling participants to easily navigate the large resource hub.
- Participants shared that the asynchronous format was flexible and fits well with their schedules.

## Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD9 raised the following concerns:

- Large platforms can be incredibly difficult for leaders to navigate. This makes it important that guided resource hubs are clearly scaffolded, making it possible for learners to independently navigate to content that is directly applicable to them.
- Participants noted that there was a lack of discussion with the asynchronous resources. With the relational and hands-on nature of EY, DMPLD needs to create connections between participants so conversations around practice can occur.

## Moving Forward

Moving forward, interviewed participants would like the sector to develop a specific resource for practitioners who have been promoted to leadership positions as there tends to be a large skills gap. Additionally, the practitioners would like to see networking opportunities within the EY sector as well as across health and care sectors, allowing for rich discourse from a variety of perspectives. LD9 notes that immersive experiences such as VR that place leaders in contextual situations where they can apply theory could be useful.

*"[Leadership development] needs to be rooted in the reality of practice."- LD9*

## Take-Aways from LD9

- The EY sector must address the issue of digital exclusion in order for a wide array of leaders and practitioners to access DMPL.
- The sector should consider valuing asynchronous resources as a catalyst for reflection that supports leaders in thinking about how to change their daily practice.

# LD10

LD10 is an education charity that was founded in 1977. They offer support to families and professional learning to registered childminders, nannies, and nursery workers in England and Wales, ensuring that all children receive high quality care. This case study focuses on the leadership provision for the English branch of the charity.

## **Leadership Development at LD10**

LD10 offers 15–20-minute courses to their members through their online learning platform, some of which are targeted at EY professionals in positional leadership roles. These courses are for first-time EY leaders, as well as EY leaders who may want a refresher. Their *Leadership and Management course* helps childminders (with an assistant) and nursery managers understand how inspection frameworks are used in childcare settings. LD10 also offers a *Leading and Managing Your Setting course* that is comprised of several modules. One of these modules provides information on effective inductions and the legal requirements that accompany that process. Another considers effective supervisions and how leaders can support staff in becoming independent and self-aware as they navigate their daily practice. Finally, LD10 has a resource hub on their membership portal that provides information on leadership topics such as partnerships, finance, and business planning.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD10**

*“There’s not a set ‘you do this, then you do this’ and we monitor you along the way. It’s very much self-directed.”- LD10*

LD10’s asynchronous resources are self-directed; in other words, the participants decide what they access and when they access it. Additionally, none of the resources have evaluations, prerequisites, or commitments, making the platform incredibly flexible, aligning with individual leader’s needs. The CEY Smart online platform holds the 15–20-minute interactive, bite-sized courses on leadership and management described above. These self-directed, asynchronous courses include elements such as videos and quizzes as well as “Hashtags”. The first “Hashtag” is #Signpost which includes links to resources that can extend learning. The next is #ReflectOn; this element challenges leaders to reflect on the content in relation to their practice. The final “Hashtag” is #DoOneThing which recommends something that leaders can apply in their practice that day. The membership portal holds readings, videos, guides, and downloadable resources about leadership (along with other EY topics) that can support daily practice. These resources existed prior to the pandemic but were accessed more during Covid19 lockdowns. Therefore, the platforms were developed at a quicker pace to accommodate demand.

## **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD10 raised the following points:

- The organisation caters to a lot of childminders who do not have dedicated professional learning time. Therefore, the flexibility of asynchronous resources works well for them.
- Online learning can break down geographical barriers by allowing people who could not normally access face-to-face training to get involved.



## Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development

*“I think the advantages of something face-to-face is you have that interaction. You also have the opportunity to gain different perspectives, different viewpoints, things you might have missed or not thought of... There’s something about that peer-on-peer support as well. With a group of people collectively doing something together, I think that has such value and such momentum.”- LD10*

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD10 raised the following concerns:

- Participants miss out on the face-to-face support of someone encouraging reflection and challenging thinking.
- Participants do not engage in peer conversations which are important to learning.
- Without synchronous or face-to-face learning, participants may not be as motivated to fully engage with the content and apply what they learned to practice.
- Many EY professionals may have difficulty accessing technology; alternatively, different learning styles may find it hard to engage with online learning.
- Funding is often scarce in the sector- both for providers looking to deliver DMLD and funding for leaders to access it, creating a barrier to advancing DMLD.

## Moving Forward

Moving forward, LD10 thinks a hybrid model may help accommodate the large array of learning needs across the sector. Specifically, at LD10, the organisation would like to offer more informal leadership and management resources to support EY practitioners and leaders. They believe that their informal resources offer a much-needed support to formal, large-scale leadership programmes by reinforcing the learning leaders have already done. Finally, it is important to remember the needs of childminders and nannies as we consider DMLD. These EY professionals make up a valuable part of the sector, so their needs should be considered moving forward, ensuring all professionals have access to high quality LD.

## Take-Aways from LD10

- Asynchronous resources provide a supplement to the full-on leadership programmes available in the sector, creating an accessible pathway for introducing or refreshing leadership knowledge.
- When considering the future of DMLD, it is important to include all EY professionals in the conversation, not just those in nurseries and schools. This means considering the nuances of their practice and how to make DMLD accessible to them, whether it be through programme/resource availability, or the content itself.

# LD11

LD11 is an education charity based in Wales. Established in 1971, this organisation fosters the Welsh language in children as they play, learn, and develop. They have 200 staff across the organisation dedicated to this vision, 50 of which are in the training and learning department. This department provides professional learning for childcare providers to support the implementation of their vision across Wales.

## **Leadership Development at LD11**

LD11 offers a wide array of professional learning for EY professionals currently in or aspiring to positional leadership roles. The first leadership programme is a series of four full-day sessions for just over 20 of LD11's managers and lead officers. The sessions explored topics such as defining leadership and management, managing time and wellbeing, managing from afar, and providing constructive feedback. This was delivered over four months using Teams and Portal Training. The series was revisited three months later as a refresher and is now being developed into a level 4 and 5 leadership and management course. Next, the *Level 4 and 5 in Leadership and Management in Children's Care, Play, Learning and Development (CCPLD)* has been accredited by the Welsh Joint Education Committee and the City and Guilds Board. This programme for aspiring and experienced EY leaders will be delivered in biweekly workshops. The workshop component runs for half a day, and the afternoons are dedicated to one-to-one breakouts.

*"We found out that there was a reluctance to share information, to share experience... you know, 'but what I do in my setting, is it good enough?'" - LD11*

The organisation previously delivered a course called *Developing Skills to Conduct Effective Professional Conversations* to nursery managers, supporting them in sharing good practice with colleagues and staff. The programme, which was delivered in Welsh, had three 1.5-hour sessions: two for information, and one where participants shared their experiences applying their learning to practice, helping them build confidence in their communication skills. Finally, LD11 delivered *Meithrin Gyrfa*, which focused on encouraging careers by supporting leaders in their ability to use Welsh in a professional setting. Delivered from January 2022, the programme had six full-day sessions over six months. It increased participants' confidence to use written and spoken Welsh in their practice, whether it be to apply for jobs or in leadership roles; it also encouraged participants to acquire their level 4 and 5 in Leadership and Management. The course began with a skill test so the facilitator and participants knew where they needed support. Then, the Portal training (with some Zoom elements) focused on Welsh language skills, professional conversation, writing in Welsh, leadership and management, and leaders' health and wellbeing. Because 8-10 people took part, it allowed for personalised, one-to-one coaching.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD11**

Since moving their professional learning online over the last two years, LD11 has seen an increase in members attending their programmes. LD11 delivers synchronous training between 1:00 pm and 3:00 pm so EY staff can be back in the classroom to release children. Alternatively, they deliver training between 6:00 pm and 8:00 pm once people are in the comfort of their homes. This is very specific to the needs of the EY sector. Shifting focus to the digital elements of the programmes, LD11 uses Portal

Training, a private company that delivers training using web conferencing and assignments. LD11 also uses Teams to facilitate webinars; however, if the organisation wants to use breakout rooms, they use Zoom. These synchronous platforms align with the organisation's values of interaction and dialogue in professional learning. It is also worth noting that LD11 uses preparation materials (such as PowerPoints, local papers, and booklets) before *Meithrin Gyrfa's* live sessions, providing learners with resources that stimulate discussion.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD11 raised the following points:

- A participant of *Meithrin Gyrfa* shared that the online delivery enabled her participation; otherwise, it would have been challenging to carve out time for professional learning.
- DMLD removes geographical barriers, allowing leaders to share experiences with others outside their local authority, generating innovative thinking and improving practice across Wales.
- Programmes should foster conversation, whether through sessions dedicated to sharing experiences or one-to-one coaching. A participant shared how one-to-one coaching created a tailored experience for her, making the content practical to her leadership needs.
- Preparation materials support conversations with peers and facilitators.
- Facilitators have flexibility to quickly adapt course materials during a break, making it possible to accurately and effectively meet the specific needs of learners.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD11 raised the following concerns:

- Some nursery settings do not have access to hardware and software.
- Low salaries across the sector means that many EY professionals have multiple jobs and cannot access training opportunities in their free time.
- EY is not always valued as a professional workforce. Because of this, practitioners are not always willing to engage with higher level leadership qualifications.
- Some individuals become passive in online settings, stifling dialogue that is essential to learning.

### **Moving Forward**

Moving forward, LD11 wants aspiring leaders to access DMLD so they can prepare for future leadership roles. Additionally, when thinking about hybrid delivery, the organisation finds it important to balance the values of accessibility (often exemplified online) and dialogue (often exemplified face-to-face). Finally, with synchronous online learning, LD11 deemed it necessary to develop a strategy that inspires confidence in participants who default to passive engagement.

*“Our practitioners and our staff like to come face-to-face in live sessions where they can ask questions and where that engagement happens.”- LD11*

### **Take-Aways from LD11**

- Smaller sessions may allow for bespoke leadership support and for leaders to share their expertise with their peers, creating a dialogic learning environment.
- DMLD reaches more people across the sector by removing geographical barriers.
- Training should be at times that meet the sector's specific needs (i.e., not during drop off and pick up).

# LD12

LD12 is a large social enterprise that offers support to early years through secondary schools in England. Founded in 2002, LD12 works to end inequality in education by providing professional learning for teachers and leaders, enabling them to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed.

## **Leadership Development at LD12**

LD12 has two main leadership offerings: the NPQs and the *Leadership Development Programme*. The NPQs, which can be delivered through LD12 or a delivery partner take a largely positional approach to LD. There are NPQs in *middle leadership (NPQML)*, *senior leadership (NPQSL)*, and *headship (NPQH)*, along with other specialty areas such as *leading literacy (NPQLL)*. While the NPQs are offered to educational professionals of all grade levels, there are EY professionals on each course. Each NPQ has an EY development lead who contextualises the broad information to the sphere of EY, making the content applicable to leaders' daily professional lives. The *NPQEYL*, which will be specifically targeted at EY practitioners and EY leaders, is currently in development.

The *Leadership Development Programme* recruits high achieving initial teacher trainees from universities and places them in high-need schools to develop their pedagogical leadership skills; the programme also accepts individuals changing careers. The two-year programme begins in June with the summer institute. This takes five weeks full time or nine weeks part time; learning occurs online with two days in an employment school and a week observing and teaching. In September, the students teach in disadvantaged schools and complete assignments on EY specific topics. At the close of the first year, participants are awarded Qualified Teacher Status. In the second year, participants explore topics that have more of a leadership focus, such as working collaboratively and how to present development ideas to senior leadership. Participants may also start leading a subject of the EY phase of their school. At the end of the second year, learners are awarded a postgraduate qualification in education and leadership.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD12**

When they first started to deliver the NPQs, LD12 took a blended approach but the pandemic led them to shift delivery online. Now, however, there are a few in person seminars and conferences alongside online delivery. The NPQs have 10 asynchronous learning modules located on Brightspace. These have quizzes, discussion boards, reflection activities, and portfolios; it also houses videos, voice memos, and notetaking. After each learning module, there is a Zoom seminar with 30 people where participants discuss their practice. LD12 uses reactions, breakout rooms, and chat bars to support engagement. After the seminars, the leaders reflect on their practice and, through coaching, arrive at solutions to problems they identify.

*"I get maximum engagement from my programme members because of the conversations we have; they see it is very much one-to-one bespoke."- LD12*

The *Leadership Development Programme* was delivered face-to-face prior to Covid19 and shifted online with the onset of the pandemic. In 2022, they were able to return to schools to teach. The summer institute consists of self-study, virtual seminars, and practice sessions with peers. For the entirety of the programme, the asynchronous

learning modules are held on Brightspace. The modules, which consist of readings, pre-recorded videos, and activities, are broken into bite-sized chunks, making it easy to complete in leaders' free time. These modules are the basis of three two-hour Zoom sessions where leaders reflect on their learning. Leaders can also participate in hour-long informal talks with programme graduates called "huddles." Finally, trainees use Iris Connect and Steplab to reflect on their teaching. Post Covid19, LD12 has begun to provide three face-to-face sessions each year to support networking.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD12 raised the following points:

- Organisations can create networks of learning that transcend local communities.
- When using asynchronous learning, it is important to prioritise connections; this may mean incorporating live elements that provide immediate feedback and networking opportunities.
- Professional learning needs to fit the busy schedules of leaders.
- DMPL has made professional learning more inclusive for neurodivergent learners, particularly with recordings which allow learners to fast forward, rewind, slow down, speed up content, and use subtitles.
- Synchronous and asynchronous content should be approached differently. For example, synchronous programmes need more staff since there are more moving parts such as breakout rooms and chat bars.
- Organisations need to train facilitators on how to coach online, reviewing elements such as body language and active listening to build a strong relationship with learners.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD12 raised the following concerns:

- With the hands-on nature of EY, it can be tricky to convey hands-on concepts through a screen. Therefore, the sector must consider how to make online experiences just as immersive as face-to-face learning, possibly making use of technology such as 360 images and simulations.
- EY leaders may lose their sense of place. There is a risk of getting caught up in widening geographical connections and forgetting to chat with nurseries down the road, learning from those who face the same struggles.
- It can be challenging to build strong relationships and network online.
- Facilitators find that some learners seem less committed online because it is easy for DMPL to fall to the side as other responsibilities start building up.
- Leaders may not be able to fully carve out time to solely focus on DMPL, causing distractions.

*"How do we create a culture and support people and their seniors to prioritise time and headspace and effort, but without it being by getting in your car and driving to the training venue?" - LD12*

## **Moving Forward**

As DMLD takes hold across the sector, organisations need to make a concerted effort to ensure all EY leaders have knowledge of and access to technology, amplifying a democratic spread of voices as leaders share best practice. When considering the elements of DMLD, LD12 believes it should blend asynchronous and synchronous learning, using the benefits of each to supplement the other.

### **Take-Aways from LD12**

- How can we encourage leaders to fully focus on and engage with DMLD?
- Blending asynchronous and synchronous learning may prove effective when conducting leadership development online. This allows the professional learning to remain accessible while emphasising relational, discursive, and reflective components that can actively support changes to practise.
- DMLD may be more accessible for neurodivergent leaders.

# LD13

## Introduction

LD13 is an education charity based in Wales that champions playwork. The organisation has provided training to playworkers for over 20 years as part of their mission to promote play for Welsh children. They provide playwork qualifications (NCFE CACHE accredited), professional learning, and workshops.

## Leadership Development at LD13

LD13 offers a Level 5 qualification in *Leadership and Management for Playwork*. The qualification aims to help aspiring and current leaders implement the playwork ethos in settings. Through the qualification, leaders are empowered to understand playwork principles, risk assessments, communication with families and staff, supervisions, conflict management, and more. For leaders and aspiring leaders to access this course, they need to have a Level 3; therefore, as more playworkers complete their level 3, more playworkers have pursued their level 5, creating an upsurge in interest.

## Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD13

LD13's programmes began face-to-face; however, Covid19 catalysed their shift to virtual platforms. The organisation found that online delivery was more convenient for workers, leading to a dramatic increase in attendance (from four people in a face-to-face session to 28 people in a virtual session). The organisation uses a variety of delivery methods, including webinars and podcasts. The programmes value high levels of engagement that align with learners' needs; therefore, during synchronous Zoom sessions, the facilitators use breakout rooms for discussion and Mentimeter to increase interaction. Mentimeter is an interactive platform used during Zoom sessions with features such as polls, quizzes, and word clouds, leading to high levels of engagement with peers and content. It is also worth mentioning that LD13 uses surveys to adapt delivery/content in accordance with the feedback. Outside of the Zoom sessions, LD13 uses virtual portfolios, comprised of questions and answers, to organise assignments. These can be accessed anytime, anywhere, unlike paper portfolios. Additionally, paper items such as risk assessments can be uploaded to the portfolios, meeting the learning preferences of a variety of participants.

## Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD13 raised the following points:

- To facilitate engagement that aligns with learners' needs, software such as Mentimeter may be useful, as the interactive format provides an engaging, interactive space for learning.
- DMPLD should align with the workdays of playworkers. LD13 posited that, because playworkers can join professional learning after work from the comfort of their home, this may have contributed to the increase in attendance mentioned above.
- In virtual sessions, learners and facilitators can have all the resources they need to engage readily accessible. This meets the learning needs of a variety of leaders and enables facilitators to be prepared and adapt easily to the needs of participants.



- DMLD should incorporate experts into sessions, providing the best support for specific topics or learners. For example, LD13 can include Welsh language experts in programmes where there is a high number of Welsh speakers, meeting the needs of the participants. This was much harder to do in face-to-face learning due to the logistics of travel and cost.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD13 raised the following concerns:

- Often, high level leadership courses require participants to have a level 3. Therefore, the recruitment and retention crisis has troubling implications for creating new leaders. To ensure the sector is getting more aspiring leaders in professional learning and DMLD, we need to also support new practitioners in getting their level 3 qualifications.
- Technology glitches and technology access can pose barriers to accessing DMLD. Wales, in particular, has patches of unreliable or non-existent internet access, meaning leaders in those areas will be excluded from DMLD.
- Some programmes may simply be better delivered face-to-face due to logistics or the content.

### **Moving Forward**

*“I think it’s taking a measured approach; I think you don’t want to use digital just because you can. Every time you plan, it should be considered: ‘Is it necessary?’ And, equally, ‘Is it necessary to be face-to-face?’”- LD13*

Moving forward, LD13 would like organisations to consider the content of their programmes as they decide on delivery. By intentionally fitting the delivery method to the content, organisations will be able to provide the most effective DMLD to the EY and playwork sector.

### **Take-Aways from LD13**

- Playwork is an important voice in discussions of DMLD for the EY sector. When considering the work being done in Wales, other countries in the UK can learn from their practice, both for playwork and professional learning.
- The recruitment and retention crisis will eventually feed into leadership development if we do not address it. Therefore, as we consider good practice for DMLD, we must ground the findings in the scope of the reality of the sector if we want lasting progress.

# LD14

LD14 is a small private leadership and management training organisation in Scotland that opened right before the pandemic in 2019. Their vision is to support leaders and managers in the EY sector by helping them develop the skills they need to address daily challenges and do their job effectively. The founder offers consultancy, an aspiring leaders programme, a subscription service and a leadership and management programme; this case study focuses on the last two offerings.

## **Leadership Development at LD14**

LD14 has a distributed view of leadership where nursery leaders and managers empower staff members to contribute to the nursery's vision and work together to usher in changes. This is reflected in the *Leadership and Management Programme* as well as the 12-month subscription service. The *Leadership and Management Programme* is a synchronous course that can be delivered online or face-to-face over the course of 6 weeks, 8 weeks, or three full days. The programme starts by helping positional leaders create a collective vision for the nursery; the responsibility of this vision is then delegated to the corresponding staff members, creating a distributed leadership approach. The remaining sessions consider distributive leadership, verbal and nonverbal communication, reflection, monitoring practice, professional development for staff, building a successful learning and team culture, and powerful partnerships. Switching focus to the 12-month subscription, LD14 sends out asynchronous resources on a monthly basis comprised of readings, videos, and exercises in a Microsoft Sway (an interactive newsletter) that helps leaders develop their practice. The subscription also comes with a small gift that can be given to nursery teams, such as thank you gifts. The engaging and reflective newsletters explore topics such as managing change, communicating with teams, caring for and leading oneself, and many others.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD14**

The organisation was developed right before the pandemic, meaning their original offerings were face-to-face. Now, however, LD14 offers a choice of virtual and face-to-face trainings. The founder noticed that many leaders are currently accustomed to online delivery and prefer this platform; however, she believes that some content is better taught face-to-face, such as reading body language. To address this, some of her workshops are only offered in person. The organisation values engaging, bespoke support that centres interaction; therefore, certain activities are tweaked based on the delivery method to optimise these values. For example, in the *Leadership and Management Programme*, which is delivered over Zoom, sessions are kept short to prevent participant burnout and maximise engagement. LD14 also uses Slido which allows participants to answer questions on their phone as they pop up, eliciting engagement. The organisation also uses Microsoft Sway for presentations, Thinkific to annotate pictures, and Microsoft Forms for feedback.

## **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD14 raised the following points:

- Learners can often feel nervous when attending DMLD. However, with online sessions, participants can leave their camera off, giving them a chance to get used to the learning environment in a low-pressure way. Facilitators can help

build confidence by slowly encouraging active participation while still respecting the learner's feelings, preparing them for more interaction as the programme progresses.

- Facilitators can alter content and delivery to meet a wide range of learning needs and preferences, creating bespoke support. When learners' needs are met, they can then engage in interactive learning experiences.
- It is important to emphasise the interactive, dialogic nature of leadership training. Because learning comes from conversations, the previously mentioned elements support leaders in becoming comfortable enough to share their thoughts and engage with others.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD14 raised the following concerns:

- It can be very difficult to elicit active, dialogic engagement when some leaders are still building their digital literacy and confidence with technology.
- It is harder to facilitate conversations and build connections with DMLD, potentially lowering the quality of learning.

### **Moving Forward**

Moving forward, LD14 would like to see the sector use more digital technology in face-to-face professional learning, making use of the wide array of available resources. By doing this, organisations can take the benefits from online learning and incorporate them into face-to-face teaching. Additionally, organisations should consider which platform is suitable for the content and audience they are teaching to create the best experience.

### **Take-Aways from LD14**

- EY organisations that deliver DMLD should consider using a variety of programmes to facilitate engagement. While platforms such as Zoom have features for interaction built in, there are dozens of programmes available to help elicit participant engagement.
- Interaction is foundational in leadership learning; therefore, all the tools used in DMLD should be focused on this goal.
- How can we build EY leader's confidence to actively engage in DMLD?

# LD15

## Introduction

LD15 is a private nursery group that was founded in England in 2008. Across all 131 nurseries, the organisation aims to provide flexible childcare that focuses on the interests of the unique children in their settings. To reach this goal, LD15 has an in-house training branch that offers apprenticeships, trainings, and leadership development for staff to ensure a high-quality workforce.

## Leadership Development at LD15

For leadership development, LD15 offers a *Level 5 Advanced Practitioner Apprenticeship* that is available to room leaders, deputy managers, and first in charge managers with a level 3. This two-year programme, which takes a positional view of leadership, is delivered over Zoom and Teams with in-person observations. Using rolling enrolment, LD15 places new attenders in cohorts where they work together to implement different projects that improve practice. The leaders meet monthly as a group and individually to explore how to lead a team and improve pedagogical practice. The highly reflective programme does not have a pre-set curriculum; instead, leaders explore topics such as leadership style, finances, quality teaching, and self-reflection in ways that are meaningful to their specific daily practice. Then, they complete assignments such as posters, reflective papers, observations, and action research projects on topics meaningful to their setting. These action research projects stem from the interests of leaders. This shows that the organisation values reflective leadership development that is practical to the roles of leaders. At the conclusion of the course, the participants are externally assessed.

## Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD15

The Level 5 apprenticeship was designed post Covid19, meaning it was always meant to be delivered virtually. While making use of portfolios, readings, and virtual tasks, the programme's synchronous meetings are held over Zoom and Teams. The organisation has found that more mature learners are happier with virtual delivery as it is more accessible with their busy schedules. However, some also miss face-to-face; therefore, this programme will be moved to a blended approach in the future.

## Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD15 raised the following points:

- DMPLD has enabled them to deliver the same high-quality trainings and programmes across all 131 nurseries, enabling them to reach more leaders at once.
- DMPLD can be delivered on a rolling basis, allowing for frequent professional learning opportunities.
- A recent survey at LD15 revealed that learners self-reportedly focus better at home due to it being more comfortable with less distractions. Because DMPLD lets leaders access professional learning when and how it works for them, LD15 has noticed higher attendance than in training centres.
- Organisations should intentionally hold space for small group dialogues that are essential to reflective, practical learning.

- The content of DMLD should be directly applicable to leaders' settings. LD15 exemplifies this through the action research projects, described above.

*"It's about doing things at the right time for people and making sure that they're not distracted by different things, and that they can engage... You're not just watching a seminar somewhere. You are expected to participate and be the voice in that conversation."- LD15*

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*"I think some of the good stuff happens when people are sitting around the table together... I always call them 'coffee conversations.'"- LD15*

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD15 raised the following concerns:

- The lack of informal conversation in DMLD poses a challenge. Informal "coffee conversations" are foundational to formal learning, encouraging relationships that pave the way for honest, reflective, and challenging discussions that can improve practice.
- Sometimes, there is less engagement online than they would face-to-face. Therefore, to combat this, organisations should ensure that people feel comfortable in online sessions. This could mean having smaller sessions or starting programmes with a face-to-face element.
- Some participants tend to dominate online synchronous sessions, edging out less confident speakers. This should be kept in mind when planning learning to ensure there is a democratic spread of voices.
- Due to the nature of EY, leaders are constantly being pulled back into numbers. Therefore, it is harder for leaders to focus on DMLD.
- Some leaders may not have access to reliable internet connection or the necessary hardware for DMLD, effectively shutting them out from upscaling their practice.

### **Moving Forward**

Moving forward, LD15 thinks offering a mix of face-to-face and online professional learning ensures that trainings meet a wide range of learning preferences and uses leader's time effectively. For example, short but necessary meetings can be done online, cutting out travel time and cost while enabling learners to receive the information they need. For online sessions, the organisation believes the sector needs to make trainings more engaging by teaching facilitators how to deliver effective virtual sessions. Another way to boost engagement could be having some in person sessions to build relationships between learners. From LD15's personal experience, she found that once those relationships are established, online sessions may be more interactive.

### **Take-Aways from LD15**

- Interaction in leadership development often leads to reflection. Reflection is the first step in implementing practical changes to leadership practice, making interaction an important component of DMLD.
- To increase interaction during DMLD, the sector may want to consider having a few in person sessions to stimulate better dialogue online.

# LD16

LD16 is an EY charity that was founded in 1961. They are the largest umbrella organisation for EY sector membership services in Wales and represent more than 700 Welsh EY providers.

## **Leadership Development at LD16**

While LD16 has a range of professional learning on offer, the programme *Lead and Inspire* is targeted at aspiring and current leaders. The topics discussed in the programme emerge through discussion between leaders participating, creating a tailored approach to leadership development. The programme aims to forge a network of leaders that provide each other with peer support. There are 7 full day Touchpoint meetings over the course of a year which are put on by LD16 and a third-party training provider. The first Touchpoint began with introducing the participants, discussing their challenges, exploring what it means to be a change leader, and identifying what they wanted to discuss moving forward. This created a flexible road map for future sessions that evolves each time they meet. The following sessions began with an introduction for the day, content based on previous discussions, reflection on how to practically apply the training to their settings, and what they would like to discuss moving forward.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD16**

*Lead and Inspire* is held over Zoom; while LD16 has considered moving the programme face-to-face, logistics make the transition difficult. Now that attitudes towards DMLD in the EY sector have begun to shift from resistance to familiarity, the organisation has noticed an uptick in attendance across their programmes. In accordance with their value of networking, the programme uses an ample number of breakout rooms for discussion in response to prompts. The programme also has a practical reflection component through which leaders make decisions about specific actions to take in their setting.

## **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*“As a leader, [it can be quite] insular because you're in your own little bubble and you're working on your priorities as you see them... It's really difficult to find that headspace to come out of that and then to continue with networks.”- LD16*

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD16 raised the following points:

- The layout of Wales can often make travel for face-to-face professional learning difficult due to sheer space between villages and cities as well as the cost and time of travel. Therefore, the provider and participants shared that DMLD is more accessible.
- DMLD allows for bespoke topics that arise from leaders' conversations, ensuring that the programme meets the needs of the individual attenders.
- DMLD needs to incorporate networking, which creates space for dialogue. Participants noted that they enjoyed discussing ideas with a wide variety of people across vast geographical areas.
- To create rapport and a sense of trust between participants for authentic conversations, there need to be multiple sessions with the same attenders.

- EY leaders do not usually have protected professional learning time, so programmes need to be flexible.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD16 raised the following concerns:

- “Turn and talk” opportunities are lost. These one-to-one peer chats help build participant confidence to then share in a larger space.
- Participants miss the connection that occurs from being in the same room, something that may not be replicated over a screen.
- It’s hard for facilitators to gauge engagement when they cannot see people or pick up on the energy of a room.
- Attitudes towards technology can become a hinderance. If individuals are reluctant to engage with online learning or are unsure of how to use programmes, they will not get as much from it.
- People may be more likely to not show up to online sessions without notice.

### **Moving Forward**

*“Across many, many cultures and countries, what was common and binding is the fact that people would come together and share stories. That’s been our methodology for hundreds of thousands of years of evolution. Whether it’s around a campfire, whether it’s around coffee and biscuits, or whether it’s around a big board table, people come together and share experiences. I think we’re just trying to work out how that fits on our digital platform.”- LD16*

It is important to remember that good leadership development revolves around good conversations. Therefore, when considering how the EY sector wants DMLD to develop, we must question how to continue high quality conversations in a digital format. Additionally, moving forward, DMLD should move past the binary of online or face-to-face learning and evolve into an approach that blends both, creating a wide spectrum of delivery that meets learners' specific needs. Finally, when considering the EY sector as a whole, LD16 would like to see protected days for professional learning for the EY sector, as in the education sector, allowing more leaders to engage in DMLD.

### **Take-Aways from LD16**

- Providers need to hold the space for dialogue in DMLD.
- ‘Canned’ leadership theory is no longer enough; instead, the topics of DMLD need to come from leaders' needs and actively work to meet their needs.

# LD17

LD17 is a maintained nursery school and early years provision, research base, and training provider in England that was founded in 1983. The centre's overarching vision is to improve outcomes for all children aged from birth to five years old, especially those who are considered vulnerable. To meet this goal, they have a training offer for EY professionals that has educated upwards of 900-degree level students.

## **Leadership Development at LD17**

LD17's level 4-7 practice-based degree programmes can be delivered online or face-to-face. The programmes take a distributed view of leadership where all EY professionals, no matter their role, are leaders. Therefore, leadership modules are integrated into the wider content of the *Early Childhood & Education (Integrated Working with Families and Children)* degrees to explore the participant as an individual, the participant in relation to others, and how to be a leader. The level 5 Foundation degree, which is two years in length and requires a level 3, has a module called *Leaderful Learning* which views leadership as "what you do and how you do it" as opposed to confined to a positional leadership role. The module considers topics such as managing change, leading change, and leading versus managing. Participants are assessed by conducting a virtual focus group with work colleagues and reflecting on their leadership style after the experience. The level 6 BA Honours top up, which is one year and requires the foundation degree, has a module called *Leaderful Practice*. This explores leadership theories as well as supervisions, coaching, and mentoring. The assignment has the EY professionals consider a change they have made in their setting and whether it aligns with leadership theories. Finally, the MA level 7 is targeted at a variety of positional EY leaders, whether they manage nurseries or work in policy. The programme runs part time for two years and nine months. The *Leading in Integrated Teams* module helps leaders share their leadership values and display leadership skills in their practice. With a large emphasis on reflection, the assessment for this module is a self-reflective journal where leaders contemplate what motivates, challenges, and excites them about leadership as well as how they shift between different leadership styles. After journaling, they are then asked to lead in their practice.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD17**

*"We made the decision to validate a remote programme. We wouldn't have done that if it hadn't been for Covid."- LD17*

Covid19 initiated LD17's shift to online learning mid school week, something many organisations faced during the pandemic. Due to Covid19, LD17 created a blended approach where self-isolating students could join face-to-face classes from home. The facilitators used a panoramic camera that showed the whole classroom and could track different speakers' voices. While this was still difficult for everyone involved, it created a temporary solution. The centre also began offering online degree options through Microsoft Teams which offers the same interactive experience on a different platform. Technology has evolved dramatically since the start of the pandemic, as has LD17's use of it in teaching and assessing. For example, when using Teams as an online classroom, LD17 uses channels and breakout rooms for small group discussions and assignments. Then, the class rejoins as a whole group to share and discuss. For example, small groups may research a theorist and produce a handout to share with the entire cohort. LD17 also makes use of collaborative documents



where all participants can contribute, simulating the face-to-face version of a flipchart. Teams and Canvas (the VLE for the university) hold a variety of resources that aid learning including: reading materials, videos, articles, journals, assignment exemplars, and resources made by the cohort (for instance, the handout mentioned in the previous example). Finally, LD17 can use Teams to assess virtual presentations by using the record feature before providing feedback on Canvas. The digital components described align with LD17's value of interaction in DMLD, creating a space for learners to actively engage with the content and each other.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD17 raised the following points:

- Live, synchronous teaching is key in DMLD to provoke interaction. By interacting with peers and facilitators as one would in face-to-face learning, the teaching may be more effective.
- DMLD makes professional learning for leaders more accessible by eliminating the barrier of travel. This means the sector is reaching leaders who may not have been trained prior to the pandemic.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD17 raised the following concerns:

- Facilitating breakout rooms and channels can be tricky as facilitators cannot easily circulate between groups. By extension, there are fewer opportunities to correct misconceptions, and challenge thinking. While LD17 has created a chat for students to put questions in during channels and breakouts, it is still not easy to actively support their conversations.
- Some people may not have access to technology or reliable internet, creating a barrier to involvement.

### **Moving Forward**

*"If you can get the balance right between being lectured to and being a participant, I think it can work."- LD17*

Moving forward, LD17 wants to ensure that DMLD is interactive for learners. Webinars where leaders sit and listen for hours on end may not produce practical learning that can be carried into settings. Therefore, as organisations continue to develop their provision, they should ensure the content is live and interactive.

### **Take-Aways from LD17**

- Interaction is the heart of learning. Therefore, intentional design in DMLD is about encouraging active participation and conversation, just as we would in a face to face environment.
- Are there any programmes or platforms that make it easier for facilitators to move between breakout rooms and channels, and gather a sense of the dialogues across distinct virtual spaces?

# LD18

LD18 is a private nursery group with over 300 locations across England, Scotland, and Wales. It provides a variety of professional learning to its leaders; this case study will focus on what is offered within the English branch.

## **Leadership Development at LD18**

LD18's programmes take a positional view of leadership, supporting the leadership capacity of those in managerial and operational positions. The *Talent Programme* is for leaders in LD18, ranging from nursery managers to company directors. This synchronous programme focuses on upscaling general leadership skills to ensure leaders can address the business and pedagogical needs of nurseries. For leaders, the programme will run in half day sessions for 12 weeks spread out over 8 months due to breaks; for senior leaders, the half day sessions will be spread out over nine months.

LD18 also delivers the *Early Childhood Knowledge Community* which has around 75 regular attenders. The community has built a network for pedagogical leaders to discuss educational research, enabling early childhood specialists and operational leaders to foster a comprehensive understanding of EY pedagogy. This is an ongoing virtual programme that has been running for around 18 months. The leaders meet every 6 weeks for three hours and every 3 months for a full day. The sessions begin with business topics such as safeguarding and inspections before moving towards leadership and pedagogical theory. Through discussion, leaders develop action plans and identify areas of further development.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning in LD18's Programmes**

The *Talent Programme* and *Early Childhood Knowledge Community* were developed after the pandemic began in response to LD18's observations that leaders across the organisation wanted more opportunities to reflect and connect with each other. They focus on DMPL that values dialogue and reflection. LD18 holds the *Talent Programme* on Teams in 6-hour sessions with breaks at regular intervals to prevent burnout. In accordance with the emphasis on dialogue, facilitators use features such as breakout rooms. Participant feedback has shown that the leaders miss face-to-face teaching; therefore, LD18 will begin shifting to a blended approach.

The *Early Childhood Knowledge Community* sends out pre-reading materials so participants can begin thinking about the content in advance. During the sessions, the facilitator uses breakout rooms for small group discussions before coming back together for whole group discussions. LD18 is beginning to incorporate some face-to-face meetings for team building and reflection. Participants found the one previous face-to-face session helpful due to having conversations with their colleagues and slowing down to reflect.

## **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD18 raised the following points:

- Surveyed participants from the *Early Childhood Knowledge Community* shared that they enjoy networking with colleagues when there is an environment of honesty and mutual support.

- DMLD content is intentionally curated for accessibility, empowering learners to guide their learning with minimal facilitator help.

*“[Covid19] has made us be much more creative and find different ways to approach training, and I think it’s made us be more reflective of our content, making sure the language is accessible because you can’t always explain [what to do online].”- LD18b*

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD18 raised the following concerns:

- DMLD can be more challenging for some individuals. Therefore, organisations must intentionally hold space for everyone, actively working to support learning across a wide range of needs.
- Busy leaders find it difficult to attend live webinars. While this can be supplemented with asynchronous learning, leaders have pointed out that they miss the interaction of live sessions.
- Face-to-face learning has spur-of-the-moment, informal conversations which supplement formal learning.
- Leaders tend to multitask more during virtual learning, becoming distracted by their environments. This means there is less opportunity for reflection.

### **Moving Forward**

*“We really need to be reflective and make sure that whatever training we deliver actually meets those basic requirements of what good teaching looks like.”- LD18*

Moving forward, participants would like DMLD to provide tangible tasks and resources that can be cascaded to other team members, creating a distributed approach to leadership where all team members can take charge of their development to create good outcomes in settings. They highlight the need to be intentional in the design of DMLD, with an awareness of the pros and cons of each delivery mode and an in-depth understanding of the specific audience.

### **Take-Aways from LD18**

- To create effective changes in practice, DMLD should centre dialogue and reflection.
- Organisations should intentionally choose the delivery method based on the programme’s purpose and audience.
- Designing effective DMLD depends on recognising the diverse needs among learners and responding to these with thoughtfulness.

# LD19

LD19 is an independent school and nursery group that was founded in 1995. With five sites across the South of England, this group values providing high quality provision to children; to do this, they provide practical leadership training to all room leaders and managers, enabling them to lead effectively in their roles.

## **Leadership Development at LD19**

LD19 focuses their leadership development on those in positional leadership roles. Their *Room Leaders Course*, which is specifically tailored to the organisation's needs, is for room leaders who have recently been hired externally or promoted internally from the five sites. They join this nine-to-ten-month course to develop the skills they need to effectively lead within their role. The course covers: the role of the room leader, positive leadership, health and safety, quality practice in communication and language, quality practice in maths, staff wellbeing, SEND and behaviour, and characteristics of effective learning. The *Managers Course* focuses on developing the skills of the current nursery managers across the five sites. Their training considered topics such as leading with love, staff mental health, and leading during a crisis.

## **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD19**

Prior to the pandemic, LD19's leadership development offerings were face-to-face. However, Covid19 catalysed the shift to online learning, which allowed the organisation to provide a higher level of training to their room leaders and managers. The *Room Leaders Course* began in 2021 and was therefore always online. For the following year, the facilitators updated some topics to address the shifting sector. Held over nine-to-ten months in the evening, the leaders met for an hour once a month over Zoom to discuss theory. Then, the leaders did gap tasks to embed learning, build up a portfolio, and prepare for the following session. At the end of the course, there was a face-to-face celebration. The *Managers Course* began with a leadership and management course offered by a large national EY membership organisation (LD3) which was held virtually for a total of 8-10 hours in the evenings. The synchronous meetings took place in bite-sized chunks during the workday. There were also gap tasks between each meeting and one face-to-face meeting with LD19 at the end where the leaders embedded the concepts discussed with LD3. When taken together, both programmes value embedding learning through practical, hands-on tasks to make the content discussed online meaningful. This creates tailored, practical provision for their leaders to support outcomes for their specific classrooms and nurseries.

## **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

*"I felt I was more productive. I felt more proactive because my brain wasn't fully engaged in work mode and EY mode. I felt that what I brought to those meetings was a lot more beneficial."- LD19*

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD19 raised the following points:

- Programmes need to fit with leaders' schedules. Concerning schedules, one nursery manager found that doing professional learning at home after work was much more manageable as it allowed her to shift from actively managing the nursery to focusing on her own development.

- DMLD allows managers to receive training when it is impossible to release nursery managers for an all-day training course at a different location. This flexibility means LD19 can consistently deliver higher quality training without it being a major inconvenience for staff.
- DMPL can be compatible with a wide array of learning styles if staff is digitally literate.

### **Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD19 raised the following concerns:

- The recruitment/retention crisis meant leaders were more focused on staff than themselves; this indicates that leaders may not be seeking professional development opportunities.
- Due to the nature of EY, it can be hard for managers and room leaders to carve out time for daytime engagement.
- The sector's digital literacy as well as limited access to hardware can pose a barrier.
- Building off LD19's value of practical, hands-on learning, the organisation believes learners need face-to-face elements to embed leadership learning.
- There is something intangible about being in a room that supports leadership learning, whether it be body language or the ability to create strong connections, that can be lost over a screen.

*"You really get under people's skin and find out what's actually going on, which you don't get through a screen." - LD19*

### **Moving Forward**

Moving forward, LD19 would like to see a blended approach to DMPL where organisations balance the benefits of face-to-face learning with the flexibility and accessibility of digital. For example, they would like to start using Portal training modules with videos and knowledge checks in conjunction with face-to-face meetings. This would clearly and efficiently convey content while also ensuring learning was embedded. LD19 also encourages the sector to consider which platform best fits the needs and content of the program to ensure they are delivering leadership trainings effectively.

### **Take-Aways from LD19**

- DMPL should be practical to the needs of the leaders on the course with hands-on gap tasks and learning opportunities to ensure the content can be applied to daily practice. This means a blended approach to DMPL may be important moving forward.
- DMPL should work within the busy nature of the EY sector by maintaining flexible scheduling.

## LD20

LD20 is a private nursery group with 48 nurseries across England. To support their EY professionals can provide high quality provision, the organisation has started to provide in-house leadership trainings.

### **Leadership Development at LD20**

LD20 takes a positional view of leadership, offering training to those in managerial and operational roles within the nurseries of the organisation. The *Knowledge and Skills Series* has been implemented virtually for about two years. The series has three modules; the *Knowing Your Team* module explores how to build relationships with your team and adjust your leadership style to different people. *Providing Feedback* shares how and when to give feedback to your team using different feedback models. Finally, *Driving Best Performance* considers how to apply the previous modules to create the best outcomes in settings.

### **Digitally Mediated Professional Learning at LD20**

The *Knowledge and Skills Series* was initially supposed to be delivered face-to-face at training centres throughout the country. However, the onset of the pandemic meant that the programme creator adapted the workshops to a virtual format. Delivered over Teams, the interactive workshops are an hour long to prevent exhaustion. Leaders complete some asynchronous activities before the sessions such as questionnaires or a SWOT analysis. During the sessions, the leaders are provided with information that is reflected upon and applied in each leader's particular setting. Previously, LD20 would conduct a skills assessment to pinpoint where leaders needed support; then, the leaders would only attend the sessions that bridged their skills gap. Now, however, the entire series will be mandatory to ensure everyone receives the same foundational knowledge, enabling them to become effective leaders of practice. LD20 notes that leaders adapted well to online learning. Now, as over 18 months have passed, more participants are becoming even more comfortable with DMLD, as indicated by more colleagues turning on their video during sessions and unmuting themselves to share.

### **Good Practice in DMPL for Leadership Development**

When discussing what good practice looks like in DMPL, LD20 raised the following points:

- DMLD can provide continuity and connection in times of crisis, creating consistent access to professional learning opportunities.
- In the EY sector, it is not always possible to release nursery managers for an entire day of training. Therefore, conducting DMLD online, especially for one-hour sessions, is much more accessible and efficient for leaders.
- Leaders should have the option of accessing some trainings from the comfort of their home as opposed to staying late after work.
- DMLD should eliminate travel cost; furthermore, by breaking down the barrier of geography, DMLD can connect more leaders across wider spaces, leading to richer conversations concerning best practice.

*"Today's managers may never have really interacted with each other before... So, that was positive in terms of working with people that haven't worked [together] before and [sharing] best practice."- LD20*

## Challenges in DMPL for Leadership Development

*“When you would have a quick break or as people [were] arriving in the room, it [gave people] the opportunity to talk to colleagues... whereas on Teams, when you have a quick break, everyone turns their camera off, goes and has a cup of tea, and has a comfort break. You don’t have that small talk.”- LD20*

When discussing the challenges of DMPL, LD20 raised the following concerns:

- It is difficult, if not impossible, to capture and replicate the energy that occurs in face-to-face training sessions.
- There is a loss of informal conversations online. These informal interactions are foundational to formal learning, nurturing relationships that support learning and bringing up topics that may not have been on the agenda.
- It can be harder for facilitators to engage participants. It is difficult to tell if participants are multitasking; furthermore, it is difficult for facilitators to get distracted learners back on track without the subtle indicators of nonverbal communication or quiet conversations during breaks.

## Moving Forward

Moving forward, LD20 would like to see a blended approach to delivery where some trainings are delivered online and some coaching sessions are delivered face-to-face. In this way, the best platform will be chosen for the content, ensuring effective delivery that can support leadership development. LD20 also noted that it is important for the sector to harness rapid technological developments, such as apps, to keep DMLD engaging for learners. Building off this, now that the pandemic is settling down and we have shifted out of an emergency mindset, facilitators may benefit from specific training on how to deliver virtual programmes, ensuring programmes are engaging and effective. Finally, it is crucial to ground the development of DMLD in the reality of the EY sector. With the current recruitment/retention crisis, current leaders are more focused on getting and keeping qualified staff than participating in leadership development. Therefore, the sector needs to address this issue in order to focus on advancing high quality DMLD.

## Take-Aways from LD20

- The content of DMLD should be directly applicable to settings, allowing leaders to implement meaningful changes following sessions. Having someone physically go to settings and offer support after the trainings may also support leaders in applying what they have learned.
- Programmes should weigh the accessibility of DMLD with the interactivity of face-to-face when deciding how to deliver programmes; this ensures that the mode meets the session’s purpose.