

Advancing Leadership Development in Early Years Education via Digitally Mediated Professional Learning

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Executive Summary

Strong leadership is evidenced as a principal factor in creating high-quality early years (EY) settings with positive organizational climates, supportive staff-child interactions and good child outcomes (Douglass, 2019). Through this lens, the professional learning that EY leaders receive is instrumental in developing good leadership practice that can support settings. Furthermore, ongoing leadership development is important for leaders at all levels, from those aspiring to lead, through to more junior leaders all the way to those in the most senior positions.

It is important to acknowledge the broader context of the weaknesses in the professional learning and training landscape for EY education which impact leadership development. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, EY settings noted that it was difficult to get leaders into professional learning due to budgetary constraints (Education and Training Foundation, 2018; PACEY, 2018), creating barriers to participation. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has since shifted the largely in-person leadership development offer in the UK EY sector online, catalysing engagement with digitally mediated professional learning (DMPL) (Anderson, 2020; Lockee, 2021; Gomez, 2020) and potentially supporting leadership development across the sector.

However, there has been minimal research into digitally mediated professional learning for EY leaders. In an effort to fill this gap, this project aims to increase the EY sector's knowledge and understanding of how DMPL can be used to extend and enhance leadership development across the UK EY sector, and what makes for effective leadership development delivered via DMPL. To achieve this, the project applied a three-strand research approach: a global systematic review of literature on digitally mediated leadership development (DMLD), case studies with 24 UK EY training providers and design thinking workshops with representatives from UK EY sector bodies.

Across these three strands, our findings highlight that while there is the potential to advance leadership development in the EY sector via DMPL, this depends on the characteristics of the DMPL. Most notably, there is *an essential need for connection and reflection in DMLD, where leaders have the opportunity to learn through the narratives and experiences of one another*. It is also important that leadership development is tailored and connects to the needs of leaders at varying levels of leadership. High-quality DMLD cannot adhere to traditional 'click-and-read' models. As illustrated across the strands, while this mode of delivery can efficiently transmit leadership theories, it does not hold space for leaders to build supportive relationships with their peers or reflect on the nuances of their leadership practice. Throughout the project strands, there was an overarching preference for DMLD that offered coaching and mentoring, discussion forums and synchronous video calls. These facilitated peer-to-peer connections where EY leaders could immerse themselves in dynamic spaces for support, challenge and growth. Through these connections, EY leaders can critically engage with theory and practice.

A second theme that emerged is *the desire to move towards blended delivery models that centre evaluation*. The sector agreed that we must move beyond a restrictive focus on DMLD alone and also harness the power of in person learning to achieve high-quality, reflective, relationship-based leadership development. Blended learning empowers the sector to choose the delivery mode that best suits the content they need to convey while maintaining flexible delivery, something that is essential in order to respond to the busy nature of EY leaders' roles. Moreover, this blended approach

enables training providers to balance flexibility with connection and reflection, ensuring that the specific needs of EY leaders are met. For example, several training providers noted the usefulness of having some sessions online for ease of access and some sessions in person for the purpose of dialogue and relationship building. To trace the impact of these leadership development programmes, it is essential that the sector intentionally constructs and enacts rigorous quantitative pre and post evaluations. While the current focus on qualitative measures such as interviews and field notes provides important data, rigorous quantitative evaluations will empower the sector to confidently pinpoint the elements of leadership development programmes that are effective.

Finally, all strands of the project highlighted *the urgent need to carve out space for professional learning*. The workforce crisis was repeatedly raised as a concern that we must engage with as part of discussions around the future of leadership development for EY. As we advance leadership development across the sector, we must take note of how limited staffing and financial barriers restrict the time and funding available for EY leaders' professional learning. While training providers are responding to the restricted realities of the sector by providing DMPL in the morning and evenings, over the weekends, and in bite-sized chunks, the sector requires a targeted, funded and sustainable strategy. Moreover, the high-quality professional learning described above that centres relationships and reflection takes more time and energy than can be dedicated in these shorter sessions.

Key Recommendations

For policy, we first and foremost encourage government and inspectorate bodies to share learning across the four nations of the UK, allowing the EY sector to have a unified push in the advancement of leadership development. This will strengthen the leadership development initiatives across the four nations as well as the UK EY sector as a whole. We also encourage policy makers to ringfence leadership development for EY leaders by creating clear expectations for the EY sector about their engagement with leadership development. Building off this, policy makers must back up these expectations in the form of time and resources, ensuring that EY leaders are equipped to access this professional learning. This will ensure leaders are supported in undertaking the professional learning they need to create high-quality settings for children.

For training providers, we encourage them to continue centring connection and reflection in their training offer, whether in person or online. We also encourage training providers to consider how blended delivery models can support their training offer in the quest for providing flexible and relationship-based learning.

For researchers, we encourage future studies to detail the connections between leadership development across the four nations of the UK, allowing the sector to clearly visualise the current connections, gaps, similarities and differences in leadership development alongside what can be learned from looking to the leadership development landscape of the other UK nations. We also urge researchers to consider the nature of the EY sector as a whole across the four nations as leadership development is embedded in the unique contexts of each nation. Thinking globally, while recognising that evaluation is complex, we urge researchers to enact rigorous quantitative studies on the effects of EY leadership development so the sector can

definitively trace how EY leadership development impacts upon organisational climate, staff-child interactions and child outcomes. Finally, we encourage future quantitative and qualitative studies to explore whether community is best fostered through digital mediation or blended approaches, allowing the sector to choose evidenced mediums when fostering the relationships that are foundational to learning and development.

Aims and Methods

Rationale

International evidence is clear that high quality early years (EY) leadership is important for high quality interactions between children and staff that supports children's learning and wellbeing (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2019; Douglas, 2019). However, in the UK EY sector there is currently a lack of high-quality leadership development opportunities, leaving many EY leaders without support to develop their leadership skills. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, people have become increasingly willing to engage with professional development online. Digitally mediated professional learning (DMPL) offers a potential solution for advancing and extending leadership development across EY, as it can limit the time and financial cost and improve accessibility to leadership development opportunities. This is particularly important in the context of the wider challenges of recruitment and retention in the EY sector as well as the funding crisis.

Aims and objectives

This project aimed to increase our knowledge and understanding of effective leadership development in EY delivered through DMPL. We sought to understand how DMPL can be used to extend and enhance leadership development across the UK EY sector. Through this work we also aimed to increase awareness and dialogue in the sector around leadership development.

Methods

This research was designed to be useful for those working 'on the ground'. In each of the three strands of the project, the research was co-produced with sector leaders who could proactively influence the uptake of recommendations emerging from the research.

Strand 1: Systematic review of global research

The first strand of this research sought to understand what we can learn from existing evidence on DMPL and leadership development in the early years sector. To this end, a systematic review was conducted, focusing on literature published in the last ten years in relation to:

- Leadership development in EY
- Digitally mediated professional learning in EY

Separate searches were conducted to find relevant literature on each of these topics, using a systematic search protocol with predefined search terms and inclusion criteria. More detail on the databases and search terms can be found in the [systematic review report](#). Once the systematic searches were completed, identifying 46 articles for inclusion in the review, the final articles that met the inclusion criteria were cross-referenced with a landmark paper on 'Leadership for Quality Early Childhood and Care' (Douglass, 2019) for completeness. Through this process, an additional three studies were identified and included in the final selection of articles.

The advisory panel was an important element of this approach as they provided expert guidance on search terms, inclusion criteria and offered an 'on the ground perspective' on the literature, ensuring that findings from this strand were relevant and useful.

The final articles included for each of the two bodies of literature were coded in a spreadsheet according to key features. Findings were reviewed in relation to each of the two topics and then synthesised in order to understand how leadership development in the UK EY sector can be advanced through DMPL.

Strand 2: Case studies of 24 UK training providers

The second strand explored how leadership development providers in the UK EY sector are using DMPL, how this has changed over time and their aspirations for the future. To increase our understanding of these issues, we interviewed representatives from a diverse range of training providers who offer leadership development and DMPL. To gain a fuller understanding of the different experiences and perspectives, we also interviewed those who had participated in the organisations' leadership development.

In total, 43 interviews were conducted, 27 of which were with training providers and 16 of which were with training participants. 8 additional training participants completed a survey in place of an interview to accommodate busy schedules. 3 focus groups were also conducted with training providers. 16 training providers also shared supplemental data on the effectiveness of the programme before and after the DMPL adaptations. All interviews and focus groups were conducted online, recorded and professionally transcribed. The interviews fed into 20 descriptive case studies that pinpoint examples of good practice in and challenges of digitally mediated leadership development (DMLD). In addition, the interviews were analysed via inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020) to draw out key experiences of those delivering leadership development via DMPL. Thematic analysis is an iterative process through which keywords and key phrases are used to build up a set of codes, which can then be grouped into themes and sub-themes. We took an inductive approach, rather than relying on any predetermined theoretical frameworks. Emergent findings were presented to the project advisory group and the resultant discussions contributed to the further analysis and final thematic map.

Strand 3: Design thinking workshops

The aim of the third strand was to develop recommendations to improve DMPL for leadership development in the early years sector. This was achieved by bringing together leaders from influential EY sector bodies across the four nations of the UK to collaboratively reflect on the findings of strand 1 and 2 and generate ideas through two design thinking workshops.

The Design Thinking approach is a five-stage innovation process based on collaborative, solutions-based thinking:

- Empathise – participants build an in-depth understanding of the topic at hand.
- Define - participants work together to identify the problem that arises from their understanding of the topic.

- Ideate - participants generate as many solutions as possible through collaborative brainstorming in response to the problem.
- Prototype - participants shift from divergent thinking to convergent thinking as they pinpoint one solution and discuss its viability.
- Test - participants consider feedback from a target audience.

Individuals from a total of 26 organisations participated in the workshops. In the first workshop, participants worked through the first three stages. To set the context for the first stage (*empathise*), findings from the first 2 strands of research were shared with participants. Participants then discussed how findings related to their experiences across the EY sector in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

- In the *define* stage, we chaired a discussion around the question: What do we need to do to move forward as a sector in terms of leadership development? Responses were remodelled into problem statements, and participants in groups then chose which problem they would focus on for the remainder of the workshops.
- For the *ideate* stage each group provided as many solutions as possible in response to their chosen problem statement. These solutions were crafted in a "the sky's the limit" environment, with the mindset that resources, time and logistics would not pose a barrier.
- In the second workshop participants shifted from divergent to convergent thinking. For the fourth stage (*prototype*) participants worked to develop the most impactful solutions, now within the realistic context of the EY sector.
- For the final stage (*test*) the participants confirmed who the target audience was for each solution and decided the first steps that need to be taken for each solution.

Strand Findings

Strand 1: Systematic review of global research

The following section presents a summary of the findings from the strand 1 systematic review, divided into two sections: leadership development in EY and digitally mediated professional learning in EY.

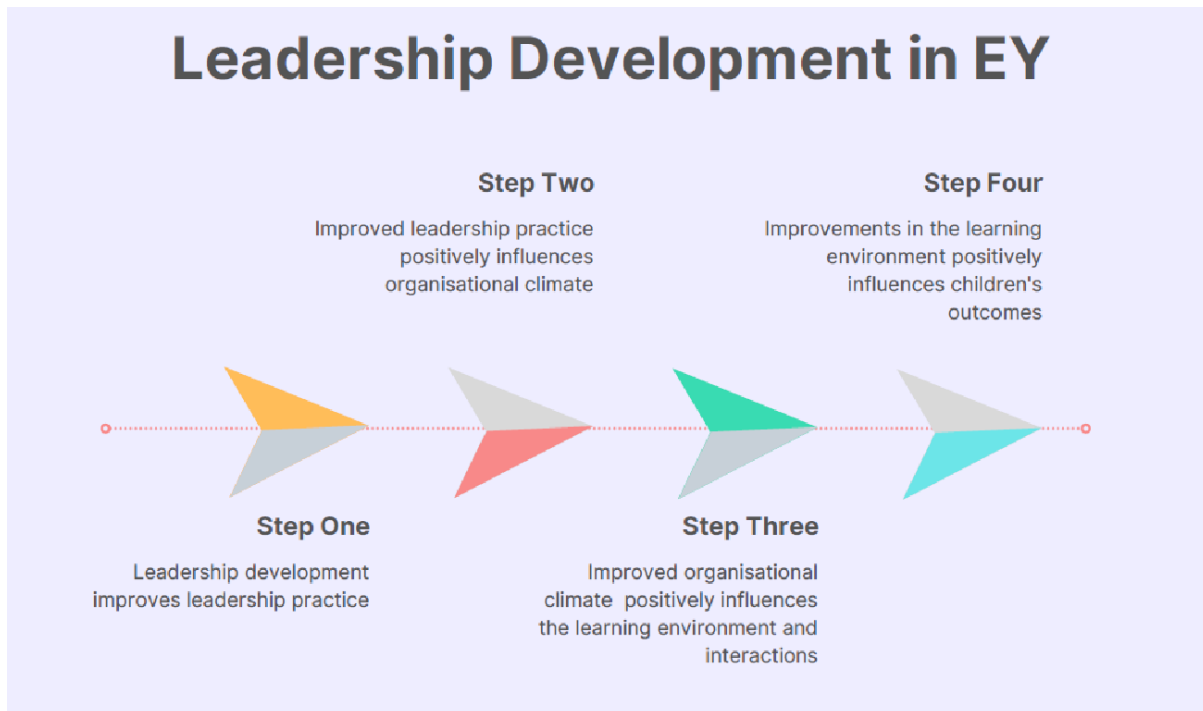
Leadership development in EY

The leadership development initiatives across the 29 articles operationalized a plethora of delivery modes, including workshops, communities of learning, coaching and mentoring and action research. A reoccurring theme amongst the various delivery modes was the importance of centring relationships and connections in leadership development programmes.

The leadership development initiatives primarily adhered to qualitative evaluation methods such as interviews, field notes and documents from leader's workplaces to identify programme effectiveness. Four articles (Talan et al., 2014; Arbour et al., 2016; Ressler et al., 2015; Whalen et al., 2016) included quantitative pre and post

intervention evaluations to demonstrate change in a setting due to a leadership development initiative. The articles appeared to have in common an underlying (tentative) model of how leadership development can have a positive impact on child outcomes.

Figure 1. Modelling the impact of leadership development programmes in EY education



While these four articles are a strong start, the sector must conduct more rigorous quantitative pre and post evaluation measures of leadership development to clearly evidence the impact of leadership development initiatives on organisational climate, staff-child interactions and child outcomes.

Digitally mediated professional learning in EY

Across the 20 studies on digitally mediated professional learning in EY, the content of each initiative covered a range of topics from STEM to working with children with challenging behaviours. Notably, a study by Roberts et al. (2020) considered the impact of DMPL on teachers' self-efficacy. They discovered that there is considerable potential for teacher burnout when engaging with DMPL as opposed to in-person professional learning experiences, rendering it essential to intentionally design DMPL to ensure a supportive learning environment.

The DMPL initiatives harnessed a variety of platforms and tools including web-based portals, online coaching and video conferences. The evaluations of the programmes included quantitative, mixed methods and qualitative measures. Five of the articles considered the tensions between face-to-face learning and digital mediation, the most notable being Roberts et al. (2020), mentioned above. However, across the articles, the programme evaluations tended to focus on the programme content rather than the delivery mode with researchers generally noting a positive correlation between engagement with DMPL and quality of EY.

When taking an overall look at the evaluations, the articles showed that DMPL decreased time needed for professional learning and empowered educators to access

learning in their own time. However, DMPL can be difficult to complete when EY educators are battling limited digital literacy skills and a lack of time for professional learning (Helenius et al., 2017). Furthermore, educators noted the need for an instructor who can guide engagement and provide feedback (Stone-MacDonald & Douglass, 2015), signifying the importance of relationships in DMPL.

Overall, strand 1 evidenced that the sector must enact more rigorous quantitative evaluations of leadership development initiatives to trace their impact on child outcomes. Furthermore, while DMPL could have its benefits in leadership development, it is not a perfect solution on its own. Instead, it is a viable avenue to augment face-to-face leadership development, providing flexibility in professional learning while maintaining relationship-based provision.

Strand 2: Case studies of 24 UK training providers

This section summarises the findings from the strand 2 case studies with 24 UK EY training bodies which traces the characteristics of good DMLD, the sector's excitement about DMLD, the sector's concerns about DMLD, and the future of DMLD.

Our interviews suggested that the foundation of high quality DMLD is ensuring that the content and delivery of courses are specifically designed for the unique needs of the EY sector. Building off this, well designed DMLD should be delivered in bite-sized sessions, ensuring that programmes meet the busy day-to-day realities of EY leaders. Resonating with themes from the literature review, providers highlighted that DMLD must stimulate robust dialogue, nurturing connections and relationships for EY leaders where leaders are learning through narratives and experiences shared by one another. It must also move away from traditional 'click-and-read' orientations of online learning and foster authentic and critical reflection, giving leaders space to think about their practice and make changes accordingly. Finally, echoing the findings from the literature review, good DMLD will support digital literacy, empowering EY leaders to effectively navigate virtual learning platforms.

There has been a steady hum of excitement concerning the potential of DMLD in the sector. This centres on the capacity to forge peer networks across diverse geographical contexts as well as perceptions of cost-effectiveness and flexible engagement in DMPL as compared with in-person professional learning opportunities.

Despite this excitement, there are concerns that DMLD will stifle the learning environment that is needed for authentic professional growth, most notably that the DMPL will dilute the critical, reflective dialogues and peer-to-peer connections that are vital to professional development.

As sector bodies discussed their visions for the future of DMLD, several themes emerged, such as intentionally designing DMLD, harnessing emerging technological advancements and ensuring future orientations of leadership development respond to the constraints of the recruitment and retention crisis. Following on the same path as the literature review, the sector called for a focus on evaluations in DMLD to clearly identify which leadership development initiatives are positively impacting upon leadership practice and child outcomes. Furthermore, the sector agrees that DMLD must move away from binary discourses that position online learning and in-person delivery against each other, instead embracing blended learning which mirrors the findings of strand 1. Finally, our interviews raised the importance of securing equitable

practices in the delivery of DMLD, ensuring that all EY leaders are included and supported as the sector moves forward.

Overall, strand 2 illuminated the potentials of well-designed DMLD while flagging pitfalls to be aware of as we forge a future that thoughtfully mobilises digital mediation to support EY leadership across the four nations.

Strand 3: Design thinking workshops

This section provides an overview of the outcomes of the design thinking workshops, including the problem statements, proposed solutions and how the research team is carrying the proposed solutions forward.

Group 1 posed the problem statement: *How might we get the sector to prioritise leadership development in the context of the EY sector's problems such as ratios, recruitment, retention and sustainability so that we may focus on professional development?*

This problem echoed one of the future orientations from strand 2 and was grounded in the understanding that the fragmented landscape of the EY sector makes it difficult to cohesively address and prioritise leadership development. Through their collaborative brainstorm session, the group identified the need to generate stronger connections between policy-makers and researchers across the four nations that enable partnership working between sector bodies and government departments in order to have a united push to prioritise leadership development in the UK. This, by extension, has the potential to support organisational climate, staff-child interactions and child outcomes. To address this solution, the research team is conducting additional research to map the links between the four nations in terms of leadership development.

Group 2 generated the problem statement: *How might we design digitally mediated leadership development that promotes authentic reflection by protecting time for professional development so leaders may engage critically with their roles?*

As noted in the previous two strands, reflection is considered by the sector to be a fundamental aspect of high-quality leadership development, allowing leaders to consider their current practice and make changes that support their setting, staff and children. Within their discussions around this problem, the team identified the need to foster dialogues about reflective leadership practice across the sector, supporting practice-sharing. The research team has taken this solution forward by writing sector-facing publications about reflective practice and collaborative working.

Finally, group 3 identified the problem statement: *How might we encourage leaders to make time and space for leadership development so that they can focus more on their professional learning so as to best support children, families and staff in the long run?*

This statement addresses the current lack of ringed-fenced leadership development time for EY which, in the context of issues such as the recruitment and retention crisis, makes it hard for EY leaders to prioritise their professional learning. The group agreed that we must call on government bodies to create strong expectations for leaders to engage in leadership development, empowering them to support their settings, staff and children. Following on from this, the research team shared this need with the Department for Education and Ofsted in England and received a positive response,

indicating the potential to set clearer expectations around leadership development in the future.

Overall, the workshops' outcomes focused on supporting greater learning at a policy level among the four nations in order to advance leadership development across the UK. The need for learning across the nations, reflective practice and clear expectations around leadership development are key pillars of this goal.

Project Conclusions

Across the systematic review, case studies and design thinking workshops, three themes consistently emerged: the essential need for connection and reflection in DMLD, the desire to move towards blended delivery models that centre evaluation and the urgent need to carve out space for professional learning. While it was possible to draw out these conclusions looking across the three strands of research, we also recognise that the timing of each research strand had a vital impact on the specific outcomes of that particular strand. In particular, our case studies were conducted at a time of heightened excitement and innovation around DMPL, when many pre-pandemic practices in professional learning had not been resumed. On the other hand, the design thinking workshops happened at a slightly later time when some of this enthusiasm had died down and there was a potent desire to see at least some return to in-person professional learning.

Regarding connection and reflection, high-quality DMLD cannot adhere to traditional 'click-and-read' models that recite and quiz leaders on standard leadership theories. As illustrated across the strands, while this mode of delivery can efficiently transmit leadership theories, it does not hold space for leaders to build supportive relationships with their peers or reflect on the nuances of their leadership practice. The sector is currently weaving opportunities for connection and reflection into their leadership development offers through a variety of modes. Fundamental to this are the development of interfaces that support leaders to share authentic narratives and experiences with one another and learn through these.

Throughout the project strands, there was an overarching preference for DMLD that offered coaching and mentoring, discussion forums and synchronous video calls. These facilitated peer-to-peer connections where EY leaders could immerse themselves in dynamic spaces for support, challenge and growth. Through these connections, EY leaders can critically engage with theory and practice. Reflection works in concert with this. While it is possible to reflect independently, reflecting in partnership with others means EY leaders can cogitate various perspectives that support high-quality practice, guiding development through a cyclic process of testing theories in settings, sharing practice and considering feedback.

As we move forward with DMLD in the sector, connection and reflection must be central to all advancements, ensuring leaders at all levels have access to critical and authentic professional development. This ties into the model developed in strand 1. When connection and reflection are central to leadership development, allowing for critical and authentic professional learning, this has the potential to improve leadership practices which, in turn, can positively influence organisational climate, staff-child interactions and child outcomes.

To achieve high-quality leadership development, the sector agreed that we must move beyond a restrictive focus on DMLD alone and also harness the power of in person learning to achieve in-depth, reflective, relationship-based leadership development. Blended learning empowers the sector to choose the delivery mode that best suits the content they need to convey while maintaining flexible delivery, something that is essential in order to respond to the busy nature of EY leaders' roles. Moreover, this blended approach enables training providers to balance flexibility with connection and reflection, ensuring that the specific needs of EY leaders are met. For example, several training providers noted the usefulness of having some sessions online for ease of access and some sessions in person for the purpose of dialogue and relationship building.

While there has been some evidence of the effectiveness of leadership development offers, the outcomes of these programmes must incorporate rigorous pre and post evaluation measures. Currently, the evidence pool is saturated with qualitative evaluations that utilize data such as interviews, field notes and documents from leader's workplaces. With limited quantitative pre and post evaluation measures tied to the outcomes of EY leadership development, it is difficult to definitively trace a connection between leadership development, organisational climate, staff-child interactions and child outcomes. In the systematic review, four articles (Talan et al., 2014; Arbour et al., 2016; Ressler et al., 2015; Whalen et al., 2016) included quantitative pre and post intervention evaluations to demonstrate change in a setting due to a leadership development initiative. This was less prevalent in the case studies with most training providers relying on informal feedback methods such as leaders' self-reported personal reflections on their development. While this has its merits, to confidently and clearly state the aspects of leadership development that are effective, this must change. While recognising that evaluation is complex, evaluations of leadership development that include the perspectives of leaders, staff and children must be intentionally developed and tested to pinpoint the effectiveness of programmes, empowering EY leaders to trace the impact of their work in their settings.

Despite the potential of leadership development noted across the strands, it became clear that carving out space for leaders' professional learning in a healthy and sustainable way is incredibly challenging within the context of the workforce crisis. The workforce crisis was repeatedly raised as a concern throughout the case studies and design thinking workshops, indicating that as we advance leadership development across the sector, we must take note of how limited staffing and financial barriers restrict the time and funding available for EY leaders' professional learning. This was a prominent discussion point in the design thinking workshops, yielding discussions around leadership development within the context of the workforce crisis and creating sector-wide expectations for leadership development. While training providers are responding to the restricted realities of the sector by providing DMPL in the morning and evenings, over the weekends, and in bite-sized chunks, the sector requires a targeted, funded and sustainable strategy. Moreover, the high-quality professional learning described above that centres relationships and reflection takes more time and energy than can be dedicated in these shorter sessions. There must be a government-led and sector-wide push for ringfenced leadership development across the four nations to ensure EY leaders have the time and resources they need to invest in their professional development and by extension, support the organisational climate, staff-child interactions and children in their settings.

Overall, this research has coherently detailed the current landscape of digitally mediated leadership development in the UK EY sector. Based on this study, we raise two specific areas that urgently require future research.

First and foremost, the UK EY sector must embrace learning across the four nations to support the advancement of leadership development. To our knowledge, there are not any documents identifying the connections that exist between the four nations in terms of EY leadership development, making it impossible to ensure shared learning in this area. Therefore, future research must map the existing connections in leadership development across the four nations to identify where partnership working is occurring, areas where partnership working could be strengthened and opportunities for development in leadership practice across the sector as a whole. Our research team has begun this task, but this will inevitably need to be carried further as we begin to unearth the nuances connecting and dividing the UK EY sector.

Moreover, as leadership development initiatives are rolled out, there must be a specific focus on evaluation. While the current emphasis on qualitative data is useful for understanding the specific experiences of leaders, quantitative data focused on the impacts of leadership development is also necessary. Future studies must take a rigorous quantitative lens to evaluation to clearly identify how leadership development programmes impact upon leadership skills, organisational climate, staff-child interactions and child outcomes, allowing the sector to visualize how leadership development is currently supporting the sector alongside improvements that need to be made in order to support EY settings.

Recommendations

What policy makers need to know

- The four nations have a fragmented approach to partnership working, with each country largely working independently to cultivate strong leaders in their respective EY sectors. Policy makers from across the four nations would benefit from a shift towards learning from each other, working with government and inspectorate bodies in each respective nation, to strengthen the EY sector as a whole, improve the sustainability of leadership and increase access to leadership development.
- Currently, leadership development functions as a suggestion as opposed to a mandatory part of continuous professional learning. Policy makers must clearly state leadership development as an expectation, on par with other professional development tasks such as safeguarding, in order to ensure leaders are undertaking the professional learning they need to create high-quality settings for children.
- Robust financial supports are required to ringfence EY leaders' time to participate in leadership development. This could include sanctioned INSET days as seen in the education sector or providing an annual stipend that covers leadership development programme and staff coverage costs.

What training providers need to know

- Training providers must continue to centre connection and reflection in their leadership development offers, allowing EY leaders to engage in critical and

authentic professional learning that supports their growth as leaders, the flourishing of their settings and the children within them.

- Training providers can do more to harness blended delivery modes, incorporating both in person and online delivery modes into their leadership development offers. This provides professional learning that works with EY leaders' busy schedules while also fostering space for relationships, dialogue and reflection.

What researchers need to know

- Currently, there is limited research available on how the four nations of the UK engage in partnership working across the EY sector. To usher in sustainable and long-lasting changes to how the EY sector approaches leadership development, there must be a collaborative push forward. However, for this push to occur, the sector must first fully visualise the big picture. Therefore, we encourage researchers to explore:
 - The connections that exist in terms of leadership development between the four nations. This will allow us to expand on the partnership working already taking place.
 - The gaps that exist between the four nations in terms of partnership working so we can build bridges between the nations, strengthening our approach to creating and delivering leadership development.
 - The similarities and differences to approaching leadership development between the four nations. There are areas where each nations' sector can learn from the others, ensuring all settings across the UK are receiving the strongest possible professional learning experience.
 - The nature of the EY sector in each nation as a whole. Leadership development must be embedded in a larger workforce strategy. While each context is unique, clearly detailing the mechanisms and structures that underpin the sector will create opportunities for progress to be made.
- Current research on leadership development is heavily saturated by qualitative accounts and evaluations of the process of professional learning, and tends to lack rigorous quantitative pre and post evaluation measures. While effectively evaluating the outcomes of programmes can be complex, we urgently need research that pinpoints the correlation between leadership development programmes and organisational climate, staff-child interactions and child outcomes so we may clearly identify the effective elements of these initiatives alongside what needs to be improved.
- Our research began to explore how to cultivate relationships and community for EY leaders through digitally mediated leadership development. However, the question still remains of whether these supportive communities can be effectively fostered through digital mediation alone or whether a blended model is required. We urge future studies to grapple with this question through both quantitative and qualitative measures as it will allow the sector to identify which platforms are most effective in fostering community alongside what needs to be improved.

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