**Online learning to support excellence**

When most of the world moved online during the Covid-19 lockdowns, early years educators continued to provide essential child-led learning environments for thousands of children. As broader services continue to explore a blended approach, what can online learning offer early years practitioners to support their development?

The richness of early years settings reflects the key principles acknowledged by experienced practitioners. Children need opportunities to play, speak, listen, mark make, count, move, imagine, create… And just as children need opportunities to learn, professionals need time to explore new ideas to inform their practice. Sometimes there are mandatory reasons for learning; a refresher in safeguarding policy is needed, or a chance in a referral system for the speech and language team. However, there are many more purposes for learning: professionals may want to find out ways to support a child with a particular learning need, develop relationships with parents, or utilise a new approach to outdoor learning.

Good managers and staff know that professional development is important and can see the need for specific training to happen. Outstanding managers and staff know that learning is more than training; it is a chance to reflect on practice using theory and apply this knowledge in more than one area of the setting. Excellent learning can be disseminated across the team, allowing all children to benefit from their key workers’ developing practice.

Unfortunately, time and finances are both limited within the sector. Time is an unknown quantity in any early years setting. Best-laid plans are easily scuppered by small children learning to use the toilet, share, voice their feelings, and navigate physical spaces. The increase in fuel prices and food costs means that there is less money for settings to spend on professional development. An online provision could be the answer to making learning accessible to all practitioners.

When practitioners study online, they can make flexible use of time. Early years practitioners are well skilled in finding the time to write up an observation, praise a child, or communicate important information to a colleague. Online learning is often asynchronous, meaning they can be accessed at a time that suits the learner. This approach is perfect for professionals who find it easier to learn in bitesize chunks.

Moreover, online learning offers alternatives to the hidden costs of face-to-face courses. Travel is not needed, cover within the setting may be shorter, and individuals wanting to do longer study such as MA level can continue to work alongside their programme. It can be done anyway in the world with Wi-Fi, meaning that professionals may be able to enjoy some ‘working at home’ benefits that are usually not possible for early years workers.

Another advantage of online learning is the range of courses written by experts. There is no need to travel to the other side of the country or world- the course can come straight into your setting or home. Your team can gain internationally recognised qualifications, including undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, which help you develop practice within the setting and become a more sought-after setting.

Studying online enables you to network with a wider cohort of learners; it is unlikely that your peers will be living locally with you. Without geographical boundaries, you are more likely to hear about different ways of teaching and may even make links with settings to support your children’s learning. Even asynchronous teaching allows this style on many short and longer courses, using forums and other collaborative tools.

As a course leader for an online MA in Education, I know I am biased towards this type of provision. However, I have also taught in nurseries and reception classrooms, and I have never been as challenged as a practitioner. Early years provision is complex. Key workers may not be remembered by individuals in the coming years, but the foundations laid by these professionals lead to the successes of many young people. By taking the time to pursue professional study, more practitioners will enhance their practice. We owe our youngest children the very best start in life; developing knowledgeable and reflective practitioners can only contribute positively to this aim.