

Part 1- Personal reflection

Hello, my name is Ashley Murphy, and my candidate number is 2203999. The aim of this part of the presentation is to reflect on my personal experience completing the John Muir Award.

To provide some context, I chose Skewen Park as my focus area for the award. It is located close to my home allowing for regular visits, and I already have a connection with the park as I walk my dog, Rio, there every day. This frequent interaction has given me a deep appreciation for the park's beautiful landscapes, as you can see in the pictures on the screen. Skewen Park is a public space filled with greenery, flowers, and trees and wildlife making it the perfect place to complete my John Muir Award.

While exploring Skewen Park, I paid closer attention to the beautiful flowers planted throughout. Although I had walked past them many times before, completing this award made me appreciate their bright colours and the positivity they radiate. I also noticed a variety of wildlife, such as crows and bees, that I hadn't given much thought to previously. As a regular visitor to the park, I have also observed various wildlife, including hedgehogs, ladybirds and worms.

One challenge I faced while completing this award was identifying different types of flowers. To overcome this, I sought assistance from the local park keeper and used the internet for research. This was particularly challenging for me as I am not an expert in flowers, but throughout this process, I was able to learn and extend my knowledge. For instance, I have now learned that buttercup flowers use light to attract insects; the reflected light gives buttercups their bright colour, which is why they reflect yellow under your chin in the childhood game to see if you like butter.

I considered several options for my conservation project for the John Muir award. Some of my ideas included making bird feeders for the crows, to deter them from eating minibeasts like worms, creating a bug hotel to provide a safe habitat for insects, and organising a litter pick to keep the park clean and safe for visitors and wildlife.

However, for my John Muir Award, I decided to focus on conserving the flowers at Skewen Park. This involved exploring the different types of flowers present in the park and learning about their importance to attracting different pollinators. To raise awareness, I created a poster

with a catchy rhyme, that I displayed around the park, encouraging visitors to avoid stepping on the flowers so they can grow and support minibeasts who use the flowers to give us food, like honey. This proactive approach was inspired by the existing signage in the park, such as reminders to pick up after dogs, which I have noticed people generally respect.

Also, I also took a focus on the broader wildlife that thrives in Skewen Park. I realised that conserving the flowers was not just about the plants themselves but also about supporting the entire ecosystem that depends on them. The park is home to various pollinators such as bees and butterflies which play a crucial role in the health of the environment. So, in addition to the posters, I planted sunflowers, lavender and bluebells at Skewen Park. By planting more flowers, I aimed to provide these insects with the necessary resources they need to thrive. My research showed that these flowers are particularly attractive to bees and butterflies. By planting these flowers, I aimed to enhance the park's biodiversity and create a more vibrant habitat for wildlife. I believe this is an effective way of conserving the park's natural beauty while also encouraging growth of both plants and pollinators.

Through this project, I learned about the importance of biodiversity and how each species plays a crucial role in the ecosystem. It made me realise that even small actions, like planting a few flowers, can have a significant impact on the environment.

Finally, completing the John Muir award made me reflect on my childhood and how I used to appreciate the beauty of the environment. As a child, I would spend time trying to find minibeasts and taking great joy in watering plants. These simple activities allowed me to connect with nature and made me feel a sense of happiness. The act of conserving flowers at Skewen Park brought back memories of my younger self, eagerly exploring the garden. Through the John Muir Award I was able to rediscover this deep appreciation for the environment.

Additionally, this experience has made me more mindful of my daily actions and their impact on the environment. I now make a conscious effort to reduce waste, recycle and support local conservation efforts, this sense of responsibility has extended beyond the park and into my everyday life, influencing how I interact with the world around me.

To conclude my personal reflection, I believe that participating in the John Muir Award has been an enriching experience. This award has not

only deepened my appreciation for the natural world but also instilled a sense of responsibility towards environmental conservation. Also, the hands-on approach made me realise the significant impact we can have on our local environment. I enjoyed having the opportunity to contribute towards the conservation of Skewen Park and look forward to continuing my efforts to protect and preserve our natural surroundings.

Part 2

I will now move on to part 2 of the presentation.

To begin, what does sustainable development mean?

So, the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015, p.5) by the Welsh Government emphasises that sustainable development is about enhancing economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being. The Act asserts that for Wales, it is crucial to improve all four aspects of well-being equally, recognising their equal importance.

Sustainability in early years education is crucial, as it lays the foundation for a future where children recognise the importance of sustainable development suggests Tinney (2020, p.461). By integrating the principles of the Well-being of future Generations act (2015) into early years education, it ensures that young children grow up understanding the significance of balancing the four areas of wellbeing. Tinney (2020, p.461) agrees as she states that through integrating sustainability into early years education, practitioners can help children understand that their wellbeing is closely tied to the wellbeing of other communities and broader living and non-living environment. This early awareness and education help build a generation committed to sustainable practices and the holistic improvement of communities.

Firstly, Sustainability also ensures that children's rights are met. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, no date) states that children have the right to a healthy environment, and through quality education that can prepare them for a sustainable future.

For children to understand sustainability in the early years, they need to learn through experience. As Piaget (cited by PACEY, 2016, p. 3) noted, children construct their thoughts and understanding of the world based on their first-hand experiences. Spending time in nature is crucial for

supporting children's development, health, and well-being. The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings (2022, p. 16) states that when children experience and connect with nature, they are more likely to act in ways that benefit the earth and build a sense of empathy for the environment. Similarly, Nature for All (2018, p. 4) suggests that direct interaction with nature fosters a deeper connection to the environment and encourages children to care for it.

One way the Welsh Government has introduced sustainability into early years education is through the implementation of the four purposes in the Curriculum for Wales. One of these purposes is to develop ethically informed citizens of Wales and the world (Welsh Government, 2022B). This goal emphasizes teaching children about their responsibilities to their local environment and communities.

The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings (2022) also highlights that through direct interaction with the environment, children develop an awareness of their impact on the world around them. However, this understanding relies on having enabling adults who are positive role models and who care for nature, explaining the consequences of actions. For example, an adult can teach children that hurting minibeast is bad and they have feelings and a family too, modelling empathy.

Furthermore, allowing children to realise that their actions impact their local environment provides them with a sense of 'cynefin'—a feeling of belonging—which fosters a deeper connection to their community and instils a sense of responsibility towards maintaining and protecting it (Welsh Government, 2022). This understanding encourages children to see themselves as integral parts of their environment, influencing their behaviours and fostering a commitment to sustainable practices for the benefit of the community.

However, this can only be achieved if practitioners understand that children learn best through play and first-hand experience with the environment states (Samuelsson and Park, 2017, p.278). This becomes a barrier when practitioners prioritise traditional teaching methods over hands on, experimental learning. For instance, a teacher who is not properly trained in the new curriculum focused on play-based experiences might teach children about how a flower grows through a worksheet. However, for children to truly understand and appreciate how to care for a flower, they need to engage in the hands-on experience of planting and nurturing it. In early years education, linking sustainability to

these interactions can be beneficial. According to David (2010, p. 3), engaging with sustainability can help children meet the "Every Child Matters" outcomes of "Enjoy and Achieve." This is evident when children take pleasure in activities like growing plants and feeding birds.

Furthermore, some practitioners avoid taking children outside in the rain because they do not want to get wet suggests Patchen et al (2024, p.16). Although Leather (2016, p.2) states that there is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing. This mindset can be a significant barrier, as it limits children's opportunities to learn about sustainability in various weather conditions. For example, children can learn about the water cycle and observe how rain impact plants and soil, and understand that water is important for all living things.

On the other hand, however, child-led learning also promotes sustainability in early years. According to PACEY (2023), allowing children to follow their interests makes learning more meaningful and relevant, as they are naturally engaged with the subject matter. For example, if children show an interest in minibeasts, it is the role of the enabling adult to observe and support this interest. The adult can scaffold the play by providing resources and opportunities for exploration, helping children develop their knowledge about the environment and sustainability. This approach not only fosters a connection to nature but also encourages children to think critically about environmental issues and develop a sense of responsibility towards protecting the environment. This also aligns with the principles of the John Muir Award, which allows participants, whether children or adults, to choose what they want to conserve and focus on during the exploration phase.

What's more is Children can also gather an understanding of sustainability through the feeling that they are making a positive contribution to the world – which is one of every child matters outcomes. According to David (2010, p.3) this could be done through encouraging children to walk to school to be healthy and save money instead of using fuel, and celebrating that they are saving the planet from the greenhouse gasses.

However, one challenge is the reduced opportunities for young children to connect with nature, due to the increasing reliance of technology says Malone (2016, p.2). According to Oswald *et al.* (2020, p.1) the combination of high screen time and low time in nature can negatively affect mental health and well-being. This lack of nature connection not

only impacts children's mental health but also serves as a barrier to understanding sustainability.

Additionally, another barrier to sustainability in early years education is the shortage of time and resources highlights Patchen et al. (2024, p.18). In some settings, multiple classes and groups share the same outdoor space, making it challenging to allocate sufficient time for children to experience nature. This competition reduces availability and complicates planning for outdoor activities such as, making bug hotels as there is only 6 hours in the school day.

Patchen et al (2024, p.22) emphasises that these constraints can hinder the integration of sustainability into the curriculum effectively. As without adequate time and resources dedicated to outdoor education, practitioners may struggle to provide meaningful nature experiences that foster environmental awareness and responsibility among children.

According to Patchen et al (2024, p.22) a challenge with hands on learning for children's sustainability could be that practitioners and their close family are not interested. Children's perceptions of sustainability are significantly influenced by their family members and practitioner attitudes towards nature suggests Soga et al. (2018, p.115). According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, the Microsystem- comprising immediate family, peers and other close relationships- play a crucial role in shaping a child's beliefs and behaviours (Crawford, 2020, p.2).

Therefore, children are deeply influenced by the environmental attitudes and practices of those closest to them. This familial influence can pose a barrier to sustainability. For instance, if a child's parents engage in littering, the child may perceive such behaviour as acceptable and may not prioritise caring for the environment. This underscored the importance of fostering positive environmental attitudes and practices with families to promote sustainable behaviours among children. By encouraging environmentally friendly actions at home, such as recycling, reducing waste and appreciating nature, families can play a pivotal role in instilling a sense of environmental responsibility in children from an early age.

In conclusion, early years education plays a pivotal role in shaping children's understanding and commitment to sustainability. Children benefit greatly from hands-on experiences and direct interactions with nature, as these foster a deeper connection to the environment. This approach is supported by child development theories like Piaget's emphasis on learning through experience. And Bronfenbrenner's theory,

which highlights the influential role of close relationships in shaping environmental attitudes. However, barriers such as limited access to outdoor spaces, insufficient resources, and society's reliance on technology pose significant challenges to effectively implementing sustainability education in early years.

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