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ECEY6005

Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years

Cover sheet

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Assignment title and number: Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years

AI Cover sheet

Section 1: Relevant links shared via OneDrive

Section 2: Presentation Script

Reference list

AI Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the use of Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com/>) on multiple dates throughout the assignment to check my work using the prompts:

1. Check the text for readability, grammar, and syntax.

I acknowledge the use of Canva (<https://www.canva.com/>) on 29th June, using prompt in search bar such are:

1. Digital scrapbook template.

I acknowledge the use of Microsoft Copilot (<https://copilot.microsoft.com/>) on multiple dates throughout the assignment, using prompts such as:

1. Find and summarise academic journal articles dated within the past 10 years on:
Effects of litter on children development.
Barriers to outdoor learning in early childhood education.
I need reliable articles with working links; no placeholders or broken links.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide as evidence.

Section 2: Script for presentation.

Hello, I am Amy Cox and for my John Muir Award, I chose to explore Gelli Park, a local community park in the Rhondda Valley and a small stone's throw away from my home. It is somewhere I used to play growing up and I visit it several times a week with my own children, so it is already a familiar part of our routine. However, despite having spent a lot of time there, I realised I had never really slowed down enough to notice the smaller details like the wildlife and history of the park and how different groups of people use it for different purposes. Choosing a place that is part of my everyday life made the experience more meaningful, because it showed me how much nature actually exists, right where I already am.

Gelli Park is a public green space used by all generations. There are always children on scooters and bikes riding along the tarmac path, people jogging loops around the park and families enjoying the space together. In the summer, the grassy areas are full of families having picnics, which gives the park a warm, lively feel. The wide paths along the park make it accessible for everyone and the benches that are dotted around give people places to rest, chat or simply sit and enjoy their surroundings.

The park is surrounded by trees, plants and open grassy areas, which create a calm environment and attract plenty of wildlife. During my visits I saw birds, squirrels and plenty of mini-beats, which helped me appreciate how much biodiversity can exist even in a small urban park. Along the back of children's play area, runs a river, which is fenced off for safety. This quickly became one of my favourite aspects. Watching the river and listening to the sound of it flowing added the more peaceful elements to my visits.

One of the most interesting features of the park is the Gelli Bowls Club, founded in 1912. It is the oldest bowls club in the Rhondda Valley, adding a real sense of history and identity to the space. It is still used weekly today and is one of the best kept areas of the whole park. It also shows how the park has been used and valued for generations. There is also a traditional bandstand, situated in the centre, which gives the park character and reminds you that it has always been a place for gathering. Throughout the year, the bandstand is used for local fundraising activities, including

fetes and small community shows. These events help bring people together and keep the park at the heart of the community.

I chose this site because it represents a blend of nature, history and community. It is not a remote wild area but still offers opportunities to explore and observe wildlife. I wanted to show that connecting with nature doesn't mean you have to climb mountains or walk deep into forestry; it can happen in the everyday places that we walk through.

This links directly to John Muir, who the award is named after. John Muir was a conservationist, writer and campaigner who believed in the importance of nature. He spent much of his life exploring wild places and encouraging others to appreciate them. One of his most famous ideas is that people protect what they feel connected to. He understood that if people spend time outdoors, notice the details and build a relationship with a place, they are far more likely to care for it (Muir, 1911).

The John Muir award is built around four key themes: Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share (John Muir Trust, 2023). Although these aren't just steps, they are a way of thinking about nature. You discover a place by paying attention. You explore it by spending time there and noticing what makes it unique. You conserve it by taking action, even if only small actions, to care for it. And you share your experience so they can be inspired to connect with nature too. Even though John Muir lived over a 100 years ago, his ideas still feel relevant today, we are often too quick to get caught up in our day-to-day routines and often overlook what is around us. He believed that nature has the power to inspire, calm and teach us and that everyone, regardless of age, benefits from spending time outdoors.

Through this experience, I found out far more about Gelli Park than I expected. Slowing down helped me to notice things I had always walked past without thinking, for example the different bird calls, which I hadn't really paid attention to before and how the atmosphere of the park is different depending on the time of day you visit. I also noticed how differently children interact with the environment compared to adults. Children don't just walk through the park; they engage with it. They stop to look at things, they pick things up, they ask why something is there and they see nature as something to explore and be discovered, rather than something to be walked past. Their excitement, even over the tiniest of details, reminded me how

powerful early experiences of nature can be. The experience also reminded me of my own childhood, playing in the park and when being outdoors felt simple and natural. Watching my own children exploring the park, noticing the small things, like insects, collecting their favourite leaf and asking questions, usually I what question, followed by a why or how. It showed me how naturally curious children are when given the chance to connect with nature.

However, one thing that really stood out for me was the amount of litter that appears in certain areas, especially around the benches, despite there being an ample number of bins around. I had noticed it before, but spending focused time there made me realise how much it affects the environment and overall feel of the space. Seeing litter in a place so heavily used by children and families made me think about how human behaviour impacts nature.

It also made me reflect on how litter can interrupt those previously mentioned experiences and how important it is to teach children to look after their world from a young age. It was something that really bothered and will be discussed later on.

Exploring Gelli Park allowed me to slow down, notice small details I had previously overlooked and think about how different generations use and value the space. It made me reflect on how children experience nature in local parks and how important these places are for curiosity, play and learning. The park became a newly appreciated environment for me and it provided a strong foundation for completing the four key themes of the John Muir Award.

Moving on to the academic part of my presentation, I want to build on the reflections I shared earlier and look more critically at how my experience at Gelli Park connects to wider ideas around sustainability and early childhood education. My chosen focus is litter, because it was one of the most visible issues during my visits and it provided a clear, real example of how environmental challenges affect children, communities and the local ecosystems.

Sustainability is often described as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition comes from the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which laid the foundations for global sustainability thinking. Later, the Earth Summit in 1992 emphasised that

education must play a central role in creating sustainable societies (United Nation, 1992). These ideas continue today through frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which highlight responsible consumption, climate action and protecting life on land (United Nation, 2015). The John Muir Trust also reinforces that sustainability is not only global; it is local, practical and must be rooted in everyday actions (John Muir Trust, n.d).

In Wales, sustainability is embedded in legislation through the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015. This act legally requires public bodies to work towards a “Globally responsible Wales”, emphasising long term thinking, prevention, collaboration and involvement (Welsh Government, 2015). Litter directly contradicts these aims because it harms local biodiversity, reduces community wellbeing and teaches children that nature is disposable, rather than something that should be valued (Shortt and Ross, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2023). The UNCRC (1989) also plays a role here, Article 29 states that education should develop respect for the natural environment. When children see litter in their local park, it affects their right to experience and clean, safe and inspiring environment (Feng and Astell-Burt, 2021). This further aligns with research showing that children’s environmental rights are closely tied to the quality of their everyday surroundings and that degraded environments can limit children’s opportunities for exploration, wellbeing and play (Barrable, 2019).

Recent research strengthens this point. A 2025 review found that children’s nature connectedness grows most strongly in environments where they can explore freely, notice smaller details and engage with natural environments in a meaningful way (Salmi *et al.*, 2025). Their review highlights that children develop empathy for nature when they feel emotionally connected to it and this connection is weakened when the environment is uncared for. However, Litter disrupts these experiences. It interrupts children’s sensory exploration, reduces their curiosity and can often create safety concerns for their parents and carers, directly undermining children’s right to safe, clean and inspiring play environments as set out by the UNCRC Article 31(United Nations, 1989) and further clarified in General Comment No.17 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). This directly mirrors what I observed in Gelli Park. Additionally, MacQuarrie, Nugent and Warden (2015)

similarly argue that nature-rich environments support children's emotional connection and environmental learning, reinforcing how litter can weaken these experiences.

Education for Sustainable Development and the ESDGC in Wales, encourage children to be ethical, informed citizens (Welsh Government, 2008; UNESCO, 2005). But it goes much deeper than simply teaching children about recycling or climate change. The wider purpose is to help children understand how their actions connect to the wider world; socially, environmentally and economically and to develop habits, values and ways of thinking that will support a sustainable future.

The Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) and the Curriculum for non-maintained Settings (Welsh Government, 2022) emphasise Cynefin, which means a sense of belonging and connection to a place. Gelli Park is part of children's cynefin. When litter disrupts this environment, it disrupts their sense of belonging and their ability to form positive relationships with nature. A 2023 found that children's joy, belonging and emotional connection to local outdoor spaces are key drivers for sustainable values (Fasting, Hoyem and Ergler, 2025). When children feel that a place is theirs, they are more likely to care for it. This reinforces the idea that local parks are not just recreational places, but instead they are the foundations for sustainability learning, as supported by the UNCRC's commitment to children developing respect for their environment (United Nation, 1989) and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act which recognises local parks and green spaces as key settings for nurturing sustainable habits from early childhood (Welsh Government, 2015). Barrable (2019) further emphasises that children's sense of place and belonging is central to developing pro-environmental attitudes, making local parks compelling spaces for sustainability learning.

In the early years, sustainability learning is hands-on, child-led and rooted in real experiences. This is done through nature walks, outdoor play and exploration, helping children develop curiosity, empathy and responsibility (Welsh Government, 2022). These approaches align strongly with early childhood theorists. For example, Froebel (1887), placed nature at the heart of children's learning. He believed that children grow through direct engagement with the natural world and that nature provides endless opportunities for moral development, creativity and understanding. For Froebel, outdoor experiences were essential for children. He argued that

children learn best when they can touch, observe and interact with real materials and that these experiences helped develop a child's respect for living things (Froebel Trust, n.d.). This mirrors contemporary ECEfS research, which continues to highlight the importance of sensory, embodied experiences in building children's environmental understanding (Cutter-Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014).

Additionally, Malaguzzi (1993), the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, emphasised children's agency, the idea that children are competent, capable thinkers who construct knowledge through exploration and relationships. Malaguzzi described the environment as the "third teacher", meaning that the space children inhabit actively shape their learning (Malaguzzi, 1998). A clean, inviting natural environment encourages curiosity and imaginative play (Prins *et al.*, 2022), while an environment affected by litter sends a very different message. It can provoke thinking and help children understand that human actions have consequences. In this sense, even a negative environmental feature, offer learning opportunities, aligning with UNESCO's view that sustainability learning in early childhood is grounded in real environments with visible human impact (UNESCO, 2014).

Both Froebel (1887) and Malaguzzi (1993) support the idea that children learn best through active engagement rather than abstract teaching. They remind us that children need real problems to solve, real materials to explore and real environments to interact with. And litter provides exactly that. It offers a tangible issue they can see, question, and act upon given they are provided with the correct safety materials. This reflects findings from a systematic review showing nature-rich, real-world environmental features play a key role in developing children's cognitive, social-emotional and environmental literacy (Ardoin and Bowers, 2020). Moreover, this is why early years sustainability education must be rooted in real places, with real encounters. It helps children develop their understanding of care, responsibility and citizenship (Garcia Manas, 2026).

My experience in Gelli Park aligns closely with several key aspects of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2014). Practical learning is one of the strongest. Children learn sustainability through doing. They observe the litter, discuss its impact and take action, such as litter picking. This also helps them build

understanding around cause and effect. They see directly how behaviour changes the environment (Ardoin and Bowers, 2020).

This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about adult modelling and about how children develop knowledge through social interaction. Vygotsky believed that children learn best when they are supported by a "more knowledgeable other", who guides them through new experiences. He described this as the zone of proximal development, suggesting that children can learn and achieve more with support than they could independently (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of sustainability, this means that children are not expected to just understand environmental reasonability. They learn because of the adults around them modelling it and explaining it. When an adult picks up litter, talks about why it matters, they are providing the modelling that Vygotsky (1978) deemed crucial for learning.

Learning through nature is another important aspect. Being outdoors helps children develop emotional connections with the natural world. When they see how litter affects animals, plants, waste systems and even their own paly, they begin to understand environmental responsibility. Research supports this, Chawla (2020) found that emotional connection and stewardship behaviours develop through direct experiences of nature and children's responses to environmental degradation. This supports the ESDGC themes of the natural environment and choices and decisions (Welsh Government, 2008). Elliott, Arlemalm-Hagser and Davis (2020) emphasises that reconnecting children with nature is core for sustainability education and that real outdoor experiences are far more impactful than classroom-based discussions this supports the idea that experiences like the John Muir Award are powerful tools for early years sustainability learning.

Taking action is also central. The John Muir Award encourages conservation and even small actions like removing litter can contribute to a child's sense of agency and children learn that actions today can shape the environment of tomorrow. Furthermore, intergenerational learning also plays a role. Gelli Park is used by people of all ages, children, families, older people. When children see these different demographics contributing to caring for the park, children learn that sustainability is a shared responsibility that spans generations. Watching adults pick up litter and respecting the space, provides children with real-life role models of community care,

reflecting research showing that childrens environmental engagement is shaped by social context and the behaviours of those around them (Schill, Muratore and Hogg, 2022).

However, there are challenges and limitations. Experiences like mine can become too focused on the environmental side of sustainability and overlook wider aspects such as global citizenship, social justice or economic sustainability. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that sustainability is only about nature, green spaces and environmental care, when in reality it is much broader. Garcia Manas (2026) argues that sustainability education must include social and global dimensions, not just environmental ones. Because children need to understand how issues like inequality, consumer habits and global waste systems are interconnected. Litter picking alone does not address the systemic cause of waste. It does not explore why waste is produced, how products are made, or who is affected by global consumption (UNESCO, 2014). So while it is valuable, it is only a small part of much bigger issue that children will need to educated further one, as they get older and develop a greater understanding (Welsh Government, 2008).

Another limitation is access. Not all children have regular opportunities to explore nature or take part in awards like the John Muir Award. Some settings do not have nearby green spaces and even if they do, time pressures, staffing ratios, weather and curriculum demands can restrict outdoor learning (Waite, 2020). Sustainability education requires time, flexibility and a willingness to follow children's interest and not all settings have the capacity to do this consistently. This means that children's experiences of sustainability can vary widely depending on their environment and the resources available to practitioners (Waite, 2020). There is also a risk of adult-led activities overshadowing children's agency. If adults take over, organising the litter pick, deciding what matters or directing every small step, children may become passive participants rather than active thinkers (Underwood, 2025). Additionally, this goes against the principles of Education for sustainable development, which emphasises critical thinking and children's decisions making (Welsh Government, 2008). When sustainability activities become too controlled or too performative, they risk becoming tokenistic, just something done for the sake of box ticking rather than genuinely supporting children's understanding (Somerville and Williams, 2015).

For sustainability learning to be effective, it must remain child-led, exploratory and meaningful for the child. Children need opportunities to notice problems for themselves, ask questions, make decisions and take action in ways that feel authentic. It is only when that is achieved, sustainability becomes part of their thinking, not just an activity that they complete (Underwood, 2025; Elliott, Arlemalm-Hagser and Davis, 2020). Hirst (2019) also highlights that children's agency and critical thinking flourish when they are given space to lead their own inquiries, reinforcing the importance of child-led sustainability learning.

In conclusion, my time at Gelli Park showed me how powerful real-world experiences can be for helping children understand sustainability. Litter became more than an environmental issue; it became a lens through which I could explore children's rights, agency, curiosity and their developing sense of responsibility. When children are supported to notice problems, ask questions and take meaningful action, sustainability becomes part of their thinking rather than just a bypassing activity. Experiences like the John Muir Award demonstrate how early years practice can nurture ethical, informed citizens who feel connected to their local environment and understand their role within it. Ultimately, sustainability in the early years is most effective when it is rooted in authentic encounters, guided by thoughtful adults and shaped by children's own interest and ideas.

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