Introduce myself and the aim of presentation.

Hello, my name is Stephanie Barrett, and the aim of this presentation is to reflect on my experience completing the John Muir Award and to explore how this journey has influenced my thinking around sustainability in Early Years education. I will begin with a personal reflection on my time exploring the outdoors and then move on to an academic evaluation of sustainability's relevance to our practice.

I explored Nant Fawr woodland, a treasured green space close to my home in North Cardiff. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became a vital part of my daily routine, offering me both physical exercise and a much-needed boost to my wellbeing. This experience aligns with the aims of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 3, which emphasises the importance of mental health and wellbeing (United Nations, no date).

I chose this space for the award because I truly love it. Although I live deep within the busy urban area, this green corridor is just wide and wild enough to offer a real sense of escape. The moment I step beneath its leafy canopy, the hum of the city disappears, and I feel immersed in the calming rhythm of nature.

Personal reflection (5-7 mins)

As part of my exploration, I took my two young nieces with me. Although I thought I knew the woodland well, I wanted to experience it through their eyes with fresh curious, imagination and full of wonder. As we wandered, we listened to birdsong, observed moss and wildflowers and noticed the small details that are so often overlooked. I realised how much there is still to learn, I found myself tyring to name plants and birdsongs I once knew but had now escaped my mind. It made me want to reconnect more deeply with the natural world.

The walk stirred memories of my own childhood, days spent at the local stream with my sisters, where we would play from morning until evening, returning home soaked and covered in mud, but full of joy and laughter. It struck me how different childhood can be now. My nieces only get these immersive outdoor moments when I take them and that feels significant. Many of today's children and even their families have become distanced from nature.

As soon as I stepped into the woodland, I felt an instant sense of calm. Surrounded by trees, it was as if the rest of the world faded away, shielding me from the stress and everyday pressures. Being near greenery lifts my spirits and this experience has inspired me to rethink our nursery garden. It was mostly concrete with a hedgerow that is only green for part of the year. I have

added more natural elements into the space, to give children even a little taste of the magic and peace that nature can bring, textures to touch, scents to explore and bugs to observe, in line with Goal 15, life on land, which emphasises the need to restore and protect ecosystems.

This whole experience helped me see how crucial our role is as Early Years practitioners. We are not just teaching literacy and numeracy, we are nurturing awe, empathy and curiosity. We are the bridge between children and the natural world, with the unique opportunity to reintroduce young children to nature in a meaningful and lasting way. A recent nursery trip to the same site, along with the parents for a family engagement session at the stream, reinforced this. Parents shared their surprise at how engaged their children were outdoors. Some even said they hadn't visited a natural space like this in years. It made me reflect on what I call the lost generation, perhaps even my own, whose relationship with nature has faded.

This reflection has deepened my passion for integrating nature into daily learning. Outdoor exploration shouldn't be an occasional treat, it should be a regular, integrated part of early education. In coming away from this module experience it has made me even more passionate about creating opportunities for children and families to develop meaningful, joyful relationships with outdoor spaces. Nature should not feel like an excursion or an exception, it should be woven into everyday fabric of learning and living.

Ultimately, this reflection has affirmed my commitment to promoting wellbeing, Goal 3, delivering experiential education, goal 4 and nurturing respect for nature, Goal 15, all of which are interconnected responsibilities we hold as early years practitioners.

Now, moving on to the academic reflection.

Academic section (15 minutes)

Backdrop and context briefly to sustainability and critically evaluate how it is relevant to early years.

Sustainability, as defined by the Brundtland Report (1987, cited in DEFRA, 2005:6) is meeting the needs of today, without compromising the future generations from meeting theirs. This has shaped a global movement, influenced the 1992 Earth Summit Development (hereafter ESD) and informed the creation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, no date) which addresses interconnected issues such as, poverty, inequality, environmental degradation and climate change.

In Wales, this ethos is firmly embedded in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, (Welsh Government, 2025) which places legal duty on public bodies plan sustainably for the long term. The Act's seven well-being goals, include a more resilient, healthier and globally responsible Wales, showing a holistic vision that balances social, economic, environmental and cultural needs.

The legal framework provides foundations for the Curriculum for Wales for non-maintained nursery settings (Welsh Government, 2024), where sustainability is integrated from the early years. Through the four purposes, the curriculum aims to develop ethically informed citizens with a strong sense of Cynefin (belonging). Philosophers such as Steiner (1923) emphasised the adult role in modelling sustainable values, a view echoed by Boyd (2018) who highlights the practitioner's potential to shape children's understanding of sustainability.

Embedding these principles across all areas of learning fosters meaningful, early engagement with environmental and social responsibility aligning with the Well-being Act's vision for authentic, future focused education (Welsh Government, 2024).

A key policy driver, Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC, 2012) encourages learners to critically ass the impact of their choices on society, the economy and the planet. In the Early Years, this translates into hands on, play-based learning where children explore, ask questions and form connections with the natural world. According to the Froebel Trust (Adams and Short, 2025), such experiences nurtures empathy, curiosity and a growing sense of responsibility. As children begin to understand the interconnectedness of life, they naturally start to consider broader ideas, such as caring for the environment, sustainability and their role in protecting the planet.

The Curriculum for Wales, which has been designed and developed on the Foundation Phase, draws inspiration from socio-constructivist and international pedagogies such as Reggio Emilia, Forest School and Te Whariki (DCELLS, cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018). Despite this strong policy foundation, practical challenges persist. As Tinney (2013, cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018) found, practitioners often perceive sustainability education as an 'add on' rather than an embedded component, citing barriers such as time constraints, curriculum pressures and uncertainty around incorporation. These constraints expose the gap between policy ambition and practice.

Whereas pedagogical models like Reggio Emilia embed sustainability more organically, through daily routines, nature-based exploration, recycling initiatives and community projects. In this

view the environment is a 'third teacher' supporting inquiry and ecological consciousness, its success depends on practitioners' capacity to interpret ecological learning, while honouring children's voices (The Education Hub, 2020; Garcia Senent, Kelley and Abo-Zena, 2021).

In light of this theoretical and policy landscape, I am going to critically evaluate how experiences like I had, being a part of the John Muir Award, supports the themes and aspirations of Education for Sustainable Development, in particularly through, practical learning, learning from nature and taking action. These experiences align closely by fostering critical thinking, environmental responsibilities and active citizenship.

Learning from Nature

The John Muir (2025) Award upholds wild places at the heart of learning, promoting meaningful engagement with natural environments, through observation, exploration and reflection. These nature-based experiences deeper emotional and ecological connections aligning closely with UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) 2030 vision which advocates holistic, values-driven learning rooted in nature.

Barrable (2019) supports this approach, highlighting regular interaction with nature, appreciation of its beauty, compassion for non-human life and mindfulness as key components of environmental awareness. However, both sources largely draw on studies involving older children or adults. Tinney's study (2013, cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018) found that practitioners view Education Sustainable Developmental Global Citizenship (ESDGC) as complex for young children to understand. Furthermore, accessing nature rich environments can be challenging for Foundation Phase learners, whose experiences may be limited to concrete play areas lacking biodiversity (Tinney and Hirst, 2018).

Models such as Reggio Emilia and The Curriculum for Wales, place sustainability at the heart of its pedagogy, in alignment with Wilson's (1992 cited in Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014) theory of biophilia, which suggests children possess an innate love for natural. These frameworks emphasise sensory exploration, fostering curiosity, empathy and comfort in outdoor spaces. While Dankiw *et al.* (2023) affirms that nature play benefits children holistically, they also highlight practical barriers including resources, time, and environmental conditions.

Sustainability is embedded in global dedication goals. Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasises inclusive, high-quality education that supports lifelong learning. Pramling Samuelsson and Park (2017) advocates for empowering children with critical thinking, initiate and reflection, core values of sustainability.

Practical Learning

The Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2024) promotes outdoor learning and experiential engagement, encouraging children to develop their Cynefin, a deep connection to place. Similarly, the John Muir Award's (2025) four challenges discover, explore, conserve and share, offer a structured framework for immersive nature experiences that promote real-world problem solving and align with 17 SDG's and UNESCO's ESD agenda (2023).

Integrating ESD into play-based learning fosters developmentally appropriate experiences that cultivate early understanding of environmental responsibility (Cutter-Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014). However, Blanchard & Buchanan (2011, cited in Cutter-Mackenzie *et al.,* 2014) caution that play alone is insufficient for instilling long-term values without structured reflection. Additionally, Waite *et al.* (2021) point out that socio-economic, cultural and physical factors can limit children's access to nature, with some viewing green spaces as inaccessible or unwelcoming.

Boyd (2018) highlights that approaches inspired by Montessori and Steiner encourage slow, sensory-rich experiences, such as feeling the sun and wind, hearing bird song and silence. This resonates with the John Muir Award (2025) emphasis on immersive engagement and emotional ecological awareness.

Taking Action

Wilson (1997, cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018) argues children should take ownership of their environment, modifying and personalising them to foster a sense of connection. This ethos aligns with the John Muir Award (2025), with practical elements, such as habitat awareness and litter picking, which shifts learning from passive to active engagement, helping children see themselves as contributors to environmental change, locally and globally.

These hands-on experiences reflect the Curriculum for Wales (2024) and the Future Generation (Wales) Act (2015) ambition to develop ethically informed citizens, one of its four purposes. Combined with classroom learning and outdoor experiences, initiatives like the John Muir Award empower children to live sustainably through ethical awareness and personal agency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, children's connection with nature is increasingly shaped and is often restricted by a variety of social-economic, cultural and physical factors (Waite, *et al.,* 2021). The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides framework to address issues. Placing a legal duty on public bodies to improve Wales's social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing, with a strong emphasis on sustainability and long—term thinking.

These limitations are reflected in environments dominated by concrete playgrounds, which Tinney and Hirst (2018) describe as barriers to meaningful outdoor experiences. Such challenges are the reason the John Muir Award (2025) seek to address. In encourages by encouraging people of all ages to Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share their experiences in wild places. This initiative helps to overcome access barriers and promotes environmental awareness and inclusion.

To counteract these constrains, it is important to empower children to take ownership of their interactions with the natural world (Wilson, 1997, cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018). This ownership not only fosters confidence and independence but strengthens children's sense of place and responsibility. When given access, nature becomes not only a background, but a vital space for learning, playing and personal growth.

By alleging outdoor learning with initiatives like the John Muir Award with the Future Generations Act's goals, practitioners and policymakers can work together to remove structural barriers and cultivate inclusive, engaging outdoor spaces. In doing so, we create opportunities for all children to forge lasting connections with nature, equipping them to become advocates of a more sustainable future.

My personal refection in participating in the John Muir Award had reaffirmed my love and connection to nature and strengthened my understanding of Wales's environmental goals and educational policies. This experience has shown me that even small actions, like transforming

the nursery concrete playground, can inspire appreciation for the natural world. I leave this module with a renewed commitment to nurturing future generations through meaningful outdoor experiences, sharing my knowledge to empower others and supporting positive changes for our environment on step at a time. By sharing insights and practical ideas, I can encourage colleagues, families and children to engage more deeply with sustainability, helping to grow a community of environmentally conscious learners and leaders.

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