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My Experience Through the John Muir Award

Introduction

In early years and society sustainability has become a main factor for the current day and age. It has been shown to be a global issue like climate change, pollution and habitat loss that has put strain on society at present but also for future generations. That is why in early years education has been recognised as an effective way to develop young learners' understanding of becoming environmentally responsible and helping to contribute to a more sustainable future (UNESCO, 2020). Within early childhood education, Education for Sustainability (EfS) helps to encourage children to become more knowledgeable on their environment and develop values and behaviours that promotes and develops a relationship between the natural environment, people and society (David, 2010; Hirst, 2019).

This presentation critically reflects on the participation in the John Muir Award through exploring a local environment. Rather than choosing to go and explore different areas, the local area surrounding the school, the school yard, field and wooded areas show natural creatures like bees and birds in their habitats and naturally occurring blackberries. Practitioners also created areas of wildflowers with the children to encourage minibeads to make use of the flowers to pollinate. These activities allowed practitioners to understand sustainability on a deeper level through observation, discussions and reflection, while also showing that having a meaningful connection to the environment can be introduced and encouraged in the local community (Barranle, 2019).

Through this evaluation, the Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, acts as a continuous theme. Although the goal is often used for reducing waste and plastic pollution, it encourages communities to reconsider how their resources are produced, consumed and valued. This discussion critically evaluates if this goal is achievable, it will explore the barriers when implementing and considers if Early Childhood Education for Sustainability can help prepare the future generations to be responsible citizens to help create long term environmental change (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2020).

Reflection on My John Muir Award Experience

The John Muir Award has encouraged me to understand and recognise that nature needs to be seen in everyday environments rather than only in protected nature areas. I chose to explore the natural land around my everyday life which surrounds my school, including the land it surrounds like the field and wooded areas.

Throughout my time I walked around the school and my own home observing the areas taking photo and video evidence to see the biodiversity and the changes especially to see the sustainable interactions between the wildlife and environment.



- The view of the woodland and natural blackberries behind my garden.

Initially, I saw these spaces as just part of the area and surroundings. However, by slowing down and paying attention to detail, observing I became more aware of the richness of the biodiversity that I had not noticed. Listening to communication and songs between birds, watching butterflies move between flowers and grass, observing the bees collecting pollen from potted plants, showing that even the smallest greenery can contribute to the ecosystems. Parable (2019) argues that developing an emotional connection to nature, especially personal and local to

individuals, is fundamental to understanding a long-term responsibility to the environment. My experience helps understand this perspective as it has opened my eyes to an ordinary space to now understand and see it in a new light.

Video - Listening to birds communicating and singing between one another and creating bird feeders to attract and look after the natural life.



Listening to birds rather than observing them has changed my idea of the environment. Hearing the different sounds of different species of birds has been highlighted that biodiversity can go further than what we can immediately see. This expectation has encouraged mindfulness and appreciation of the ecological relationships, supporting Davis's (2010) argument that discusses children who are able to experience nature through their senses rather than relying on factual teaching, having hands-on teaching experiences. However, it also gave chances for critical reflection. If the habitats were lost due to a lack of care and understanding due to current social lack of care or pollution, the ecosystems they support would disappear. Therefore, local aims to conserve contributions directly align with the aims of sustainability development goals 12 by promoting responsibility in managing the natural resources in the environment.

An important aspect of the John Muir philosophy is that those involved should not just use this experience as a discovery and exploration but use it to contribute to the environment and continue to conserve it. For this reason, I created small areas of wildflowers within the school area and within my own garden. Over the weeks we cared for the plants by watering them, monitoring their growth and watched for the number of minibeasts that were attracted to the flowers.



- Watching the growth of wildflowers and seeing what minibeasts they attract.

Unlike observing nature, planting the wildflowers required participation in creating a habitat for wildlife to be attracted to. This demonstrated that to provide sustainability it involved practical work rather than just awareness. Pollinating insects are needed for food production and biodiversity; however, the population of these insects are rapidly declining due to habitat loss, pesticides that are used and climate change (Chawla, 2020).

This experience has given me more of an understanding of conservation. At first, I believed that environmental aid required larger based participation by environmental

organisations. However, growing the flowers on a small scale but across locations and encouraging more to take these small steps can help support local biodiversity. This works with Prince (2010), who argues sustainability education should empower individuals to become active in helping their environment. Nevertheless, critics argue that if too much pressure is put on individual responsibility this risks that communities will overlook other factors such as the role of multinational corporations. Therefore, personal involvement still is an important factor, being able to achieve SDG 12 requires change in production and consumption systems (UNESCO, 2020).

Part 2 –

Education for Sustainability Through the John Muir Award

Sustainability and Global Citizenship

Sustainability is often described as meeting the current needs without negatively affecting the abilities of future generations to meet their own needs. However, modern understandings are much further than environmental protection and recognise that the relationship between environmental, social and economic wellbeing is interconnected (Brundtland Commission, 1987; Davis, 2010). Sustainable Development Goal 12 demonstrates a wider understanding by encouraging societies to have less waste, to show improvement in using resources efficiently, and to establish and promote sustainable lifestyles.

The concept of global citizenship is linked to sustainability. Tinney and Merriman (2018) argue that Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) emphasise the importance for learners to understand that the actions in their area can have global consequences. This understanding was relevant throughout the John Muir Award experience, which was carried out in the local surrounding areas. Observing wildlife helped practitioners and individuals reflect on the bigger issues like pollution or climate change. The creatures like butterflies and bees observed in the areas help to see the larger ecological system that widens the local boundaries.

As a result, global citizenship does not always start through travel, but with the understanding that local environments contribute to global sustainability. Small areas

of land, reducing waste and helping the survival of biodiversity, help us understand that global citizenship contributes to a wider goal that everyone needs to support. This reflects Hirst's (2019) argument that the public has an understanding that they can positively contribute to environmental challenges with everyday actions.

The Three Pillars of Sustainability

Sustainability is understood to be interconnected through three sections, environmental, social and economic sustainability. These sections rely on one another, meaning that if one change happens, it will influence the others (David, 2010). Understanding the relationship is fundamental To achieve Sustainable Development Goal 12 of Responsible Consumption and Production.

The environment section is a clear factor throughout the John Muir Award project. The field, woodland and garden all provided habitats for birds, bees and the natural blackberry bushes. The development of the wildflowers enhanced the area for biodiversity and provided additional food supplies for pollinating insects. These observations show that environmental sustainability requires protecting the ecosystems while understanding the relationships between humans and the natural world (Barrable, 2019)

. However, while local involvement can enhance biodiversity, the bigger picture if environmental challenges like climate change or habitat loss need wider action that is more than individual efforts.

Social sustainability focuses on well-being, equality and responsibility from the communities. The John Muir Award project shows that environmental actions are not just needed by government support or environmental organisations, but by the localised communities. Sharing photos, videos and reflections can help encourage wider attention to promote citizens to support the environment. Hägglund and Samuelsson (2009) argue that sustainability education should help to empower learners to recognise responsibility to their present but also future generations; this suggests that community engagement is essential to support the development of sustainability.

Economic sustainability is equally important to the Sustainable Development Goal 12 because, based on consumer choices, they can directly influence the outcome in the environment. Choosing plants that support local pollinators rather than plants that have little value to the area can show how purchasing decisions can contribute to biodiversity. However, sustainable products will often be far more expensive than alternatives, creating barriers for many families or households. Therefore, achieving the goal requires governments and businesses to make sustainable products that are more accessible and affordable while also reducing the use of harmful products on the environment (UNESCO, 2020).

Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

Among the seventeen United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 12 aims to encourage and promote consumption and production by encouraging societies to produce less waste, improve resource use, and adapt everyday lifestyles (United Nations, 2015). Although this goal is frequently connected to recycling, the goal extends beyond waste by allowing the public to know how products are made, manufactured, consumed and disposed of.

The project showed that responsible consumption is directly connected to biodiversity through observing birds, bees, or other insects, highlighting the imperative of maintaining land, while growing wildflowers provided sources of pollen for other species of insects. These practical activities show how small actions can contribute to the environment. Nevertheless, having local conservation alone will not achieve the goal on a wider scale without larger changes to the system's production and consumer patterns.

Achieving SDG 12 still remains a challenge because societies rely on high levels of consumption to support economic growth. Many products are designed for short-term use before being discarded, which then contributes to pollution. UNESCO (2020) argues that meaningful change requires both behaviour changes and systematic improvement by involving businesses and communities rather than individual responsibility.

Plastic Pollution

Plastic pollution is one of the clearest examples of unsustainable consumption. Single-use plastic is seen as being convenient and easy to use, but it will remain in our system for hundreds of years. This threatens wildlife due to food sources; animals may become entangled or their habitats may be damaged due to degradation (United Nations, 2023). Plastic pollution is a key challenge to the goal. Individuals are encouraged to recycle and reduce waste; the responsibility falls on consumers rather than manufacturers. Achieving meaningful progress means stronger environmental legislation to be put in place, sustainably designed products and having businesses and companies take accountability alongside individuals to change behaviour (Monbiot, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

The Anthropocene and Posthumanism

The Anthropocene is the era in which human activity has become more influential on the Earth's systems, adding to climate change and pollution (Steffen et al., 2018). Sustainable Development Goal 12 aims to reduce these impacts by promoting sustainable production and consumption.

Observations during the award project allowed time to back up the value of biodiversity. Although the birds and insects appeared healthy and full of life locally, many species continue to decline on a larger scale, globally, due to pesticides, climate change or habitat loss (Chawla, 2020). This demonstrates that having healthy local ecosystems can contribute, but it does not solve the larger challenges. Posthumanism further emphasises the interconnected relationships between humans and nature, pushing for more respect for biodiversity and responsibility over the environment (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2018).

Consumerism

Consumer culture remains one of the main barriers to Goal 12. Economic systems often focus on continuing the production and consumption, and the increase in waste (Monbiot, 2020). Plastic litter observed during the project shows how everyday consumption can affect the area. Although recycling is considered to be important, governments, businesses and manufacturers need to reduce the amount of unnecessary packaging to support economies (UNESCO, 2020). Sustainability also needs to address the global inequities, as the wealthier nations usually benefit from systems that create environmental and other costs elsewhere (Tinney & Merriman,

2018). Local actions like planting flowers instead of buying fake plants help to contribute to sustainability but cannot affect the wider change needed.

Early Childhood Education for Sustainability

Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) helps children to develop understanding and awareness through first-hand experiences with nature (Davis, 2010). The John Muir Award helped to explore local areas and green spaces that help to enable children to observe and build a positive relationship with nature and natural wildlife around them. Barrable (2019) argues that emotional connections with nature help to encourage a genuine lifelong relationship in caring for the environment, while Hirst (2019) emphasises curiosity-based learning or experimental learning. These approaches help to support a deeper understanding than factual teaching alone.

Climate change threatens biodiversity and human wellbeing through habitat loss and extreme weather conditions (United Nations, 2023). Bees and butterflies observed while visiting the project's flowers show how gardens and land can support pollinators, which are essential for global food production (Chawla, 2020). While local conservation is valuable, the extent of the progress is based on whether locals value and understand the area's needs in support of future generations.

Educational Theory

Education can reinforce the value that the environment needs through outdoor learning. Dewey highlighted learning through experience, Froebel saw nature as central to children's developmental needs, and Vygotsky emphasised the use of collaboration and discussion of their experiences. Activities that were planned, like planting flowers, observing wildlife and reflecting, demonstrate these principles in everyday practice (Hirst, 2019; Prince, 2010; Tinny & Merriman, 2018).

In Wales, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015) and the Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship all encourage that sustainability is embedded across the curriculum. Organisations such as Oxfam, Fairtrade schools and the RSPB provide resource packs that help to encourage and support learning about the environment (Miller, 2012). Early years settings can promote Sustainable Development Goal 12 through the use of outdoor learning, gardening opportunities, composting and reducing single-use plastics and having the children be involved in

caring for living things (Davis, 2010). However, limited training, funding and curriculum pressures still remain a barrier to effective sustainability education (Dyment et al., 2014).

Having the chance to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 12 remains a challenge because of the many environmental issues that are caused by wider economic and political systems rather than individual behaviour (United Nations, 2023). Nevertheless, the John Muir Award project demonstrated that practical activities within nature can help foster environmental awareness and promote responsible behaviours. Overall, progress requires action to be taken by governments, businesses and educators. Early Childhood Education for Sustainability plays a vital role in the development of knowledge, values and behaviours needed to support the environmental changes that can be long-term (Davis, 2010; Hirst, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the John Muir Award demonstrated that meaningful environmental action could start within the local environment. Exploring biodiversity and establishing wildflowers encouraged active participation and responsibility when linking responsible consumption and climate change for environmental justice. Although achieving Sustainable Development Goal 12 requires a larger-scale change to the government's idea of economic function, education remains central to helping develop and promote sustainable lifestyles. By encouraging children from a young age to explore nature, question consumption and join in conversation, practitioners and educators can help develop informed and responsible global citizens who can contribute to a more sustained future.

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