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Hello everyone.

My name is Wing Yi Chu, my student number is 2308275, and today I want to share my experience exploring nature through the John Muir Award for my ECEY 6005 assignment. This presentation aims to reflect on that journey, share what I learned personally and professionally, and connect it to the bigger picture of sustainability and early years education.

For this assignment, I chose to explore Walsall Arboretum, a large public park and woodland area located in the heart of Walsall. This site stood out to me for several reasons, both personal and educational.

First, Walsall is a new community for me. Moving into a new area can feel unfamiliar, and I wanted to learn more about the green spaces near where I now live. Exploring the Arboretum gave me a chance to connect with my surroundings, build a sense of belonging, and reflect on how local nature can be meaningful for both adults and children.

Secondly, the Arboretum is easily accessible. It is near homes, schools, and public paths, which means families and early years settings could visit without needing transport, permission slips or entry fees. This accessibility is a key part of why I chose it. It has real potential to support outdoor learning in everyday life. The quiet woodland areas felt peaceful and sensory-rich. The smell of leaves, the sound of birds, and the textures of bark could offer powerful experiences for early learners. I also noticed seasonal changes in colours and wildlife, which are natural teaching moments tied to science and observation.

Walking through Walsall Arboretum, I was struck by the peaceful atmosphere: the birds singing, the wind gently rustling the trees, and the earthy scent of the woodland floor. It reminded me of being outside as a child, exploring nature freely and without structure. This connection made me reflect on how rarely many children today experience these simple but powerful moments. Being in the Arboretum highlighted how nature can significantly support children's emotional and social development. The calm yet stimulating environment offered opportunities for children to engage their senses, regulate emotions, and build language by describing what they saw and heard like "crunchy leaves," "rough bark," or "chirping birds." It also nurtured creativity and free play; I could easily imagine children pretending the trees were castles or spotting insects as if they were on a treasure hunt. These unstructured, sensory-rich experiences are vital for cognitive, emotional, and linguistic growth. Research by Sobel (2020) supports this, highlighting how regular interaction with natural environments fosters resilience, imagination, and early environmental awareness in young learners. My thinking has shifted through this experience.

Let's look at the bigger picture now.

When considering the broader context of sustainability, it is important to recognise that the concept is grounded in the principle of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. This definition was first introduced in the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which laid the foundation for global environmental and social action. Following this, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio further developed the global sustainability agenda, leading to the introduction of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 17 interconnected goals designed to promote prosperity while protecting the planet (United Nations, 2016). In the UK, sustainability is increasingly integrated into education policy and practice. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework in England supports aspects of sustainability through its emphasis on enabling environments, active exploration, and fostering respect for living things and the natural world (Department for Education, 2024). In Wales, this focus is even more explicit in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which places a legal duty on public bodies to work sustainably and make long-term decisions that protect future generations (Welsh Government, 2015). Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2022) underpins many of these approaches by affirming every child's right to learn, play, and thrive in a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment which connects sustainability to both children's rights and their learning experiences.

In early years education in the UK, the principles of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) are closely aligned with the goals of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework in England. While ESDGC is not named explicitly in the EYFS, its core values such as developing respect for others, understanding the world, and fostering responsibility are embedded throughout the curriculum. For example, the EYFS prime area of Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) encourages children to form positive relationships and show care and concern for others and the environment. Similarly, the Understanding the World area supports children in exploring their environment, learning about nature, and considering their role in the wider world (Department for Education, 2024). These areas foster early values of empathy, sustainability, and ethical thinking, which are central to ESDGC. Moreover, hands-on, outdoor learning such as nature walks, gardening, or exploring local parks supports children in building a sense of place and belonging, encourages curiosity, and promotes active citizenship. Research has shown that such experiences help children develop pro-environmental attitudes and a deeper emotional connection to the natural world (Elliott & Davis, 2020). In this way, the EYFS in England supports young children to explore their world, build empathy, and begin to think about the future in meaningful, developmentally appropriate ways.

The John Muir Award gave me a clear and meaningful way to connect with nature. It's built around four main ideas: Discover, Explore, Conserve, and Share. These steps encouraged me to spend time in nature, learn about it, take care of it, and talk about what I had done. This award links really well with the values of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

because it helps build awareness, responsibility, and care for the world around us. From my experience, I found that the award supports children's learning in three strong ways: through practical learning (hands-on experiences), learning from nature (gaining knowledge by observing the natural world), and taking action (doing something positive for the environment). These kinds of experiences match ideas in early years education, where learning by doing and exploring the real world are so important. For example, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework encourages children to "understand the world" by exploring nature and learning how to care for living things (Department for Education, 2024). Outdoor activities like the John Muir Award give young children the chance to build those skills in a real and memorable way.

Children learn best by doing things for themselves. When I was in the woods, I could feel the rough bark of trees, smell the fresh leaves, and hear the birds singing. It was a full multi-sensory experience, and it made me think how valuable this kind of learning is for young children. Outdoor activities like this help with many areas of development. Climbing and running improve physical skills, while talking about what they see. Like bugs, leaves, or clouds that support language and communication. Being in a quiet, natural space also helps children feel calm and safe, which is good for their emotional wellbeing. The idea that children learn best through nature and play has been supported for many years, and it still matters today. For example, Bruce (2021) explains that nature-based learning builds on the ideas of Froebel, who believed children grow through first-hand, meaningful experiences. Simple things like collecting leaves or listening to birds can spark curiosity and confidence and important skills for lifelong learning.

Nature is a powerful teacher. It helps children learn about life cycles, like how plants grow from seeds, and about the seasons changing from warm to cold. It also teaches responsibility, such as caring for plants or not stepping on insects. Some early years approaches really value this. For example, the Reggio Emilia philosophy sees the environment as the "third teacher", a space that guides and inspires learning (Vecchi, 2010). Similarly, Maria Montessori believed children are naturally connected to the earth and learn best through real experiences with it. When children spend time outside, they often become more curious, asking questions like "Why are some leaves red?" or "Where do worms go when it rains?" They also learn to care for living things, such as watering flowers or watching birds without scaring them. Nature also helps develop problem-solving skills, for example, figuring out how to build a den with sticks or how to cross a puddle without getting wet. These outdoor experiences build thinking skills, confidence, and care for the world. These skills that will help children both now and in the future.

Through the John Muir Award, I took small but meaningful actions like picking up litter, noticing how plants were changing, and sharing my thoughts and pictures with others. These might seem like little things, but they made me feel more connected to nature and more responsible for looking after it. Young children can do similar things too. For example, they can plant flowers, help care for a school garden, or draw pictures and tell stories about the natural world. These simple activities help children feel proud of helping the planet. It also

teaches them that they are part of something bigger than is what we call global citizenship. Even young children can learn that their actions matter, and they can help take care of the world around them. This links to the idea of global citizenship, where we all have a role in protecting the planet, even young children. According to Elliott *et al.*, (2020), giving children real tasks in nature helps them grow confidence and learn to care for living things. Also, Bruce (2021) explains that when children have chances to explore and take action, they feel respected and important, and this helps them understand they can make a difference. So even small actions can teach big lessons about responsibility, care, and being part of a global community.

In my real experience when I involved children in decision and making during the garden activity, we collected rainwater and reused containers. These small acts became powerful learning tools, as children began to question why we were doing them and how they could do the same at home. It shows how real-world experiences develop critical thinking, values, and environmental literacy (Elliott, 2014).

Furthermore, these experiences supported what Siraj-Blatchford (2014) described as a "pedagogy for sustainability" where relationships, reflection, and critical thinking are central. I used open-ended questions like, "What do you think would happen if we used too much water?" and "Why do worms help the soil?" These conversations helped children think deeper and take different perspectives, supporting their holistic development.

During the gardening activity, I also strongly to multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), not just SDG 4 (Quality Education). Here are 2 examples like:

SDG 15 - Caring for the garden helped children understand ecosystems, biodiversity, and the importance of native species.

And **SDG 6** - We used rainwater in the garden and talked about why clean water is precious. This made children more conscious of turning off taps and saving water.

Although learning in nature offers clear developmental benefits, there are still significant challenges to making it part of everyday early childhood education. Many early years settings particularly in urban or low-income areas which struggle with limited or unsafe access to green spaces. In addition, educators may lack the confidence or training needed to lead outdoor learning experiences. There is also a systemic emphasis on academic subjects like literacy and numeracy, which can sideline nature-based learning. Knight (2016) notes that educators often value outdoor play but face time constraints, high child-to-adult ratios, and safety concerns that make it difficult to integrate into daily routines. Some critics also argue that programs like the John Muir Award focus too heavily on the environmental side of sustainability, overlooking the equally important social and economic aspects such as inclusion, equity, and community collaboration. True Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), as Davis and Elliott (2020) argue, must encompass both a connection to nature and social values like fairness and cooperation. The Welsh Government (2015), through the Well-being of Future Generations Act, similarly emphasises that sustainability in education

must support a just, healthy, and inclusive society but not only the environment. While early years settings have the potential to embed nature experiences, like nature walks, outdoor storytelling, or simple science using natural materials. These opportunities require structural support, professional development, and a shift in educational priorities. As McClure *et al.* (2022) highlight, nature-based learning enhances children's cognitive, emotional, and language development, but to realise this fully, educators need more time, resources, and recognition of outdoor learning's value within early education systems.

This whole journey has helped me feel more connected to nature, and reminded me just how important it is not just for adults, but especially for young children. Nature is more than just a place to play. It's a teacher, a friend, and a space where children can imagine, explore, and discover. Simple outdoor activities like looking at leaves, digging in the mud, or watching birds can help children build confidence, curiosity, and care for the world. The John Muir Award showed me that even small experiences in nature can support big learning goals, especially those linked to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). For example, when children pick up litter or plant flowers, they're learning to take action, show responsibility, and think about the future and core values of ESD (Davis, 2020). Research also shows that early nature experiences help children develop emotional strength, social skills, and a stronger sense of belonging to their community and environment (McClure *et al.*, 2022). But for this to really work, outdoor learning needs to be part of everyday planning in early years settings not just as a treat, but as a valuable way to learn. If we want children to grow up as kind, thoughtful, and active citizens, we need to give them real chances to explore, care, and take action. Their future and the planet's that depend on it.

Thank you for allowing me to reflect on and share this learning journey with you.

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