

Script for presentation

Part 1 – Reflection of my John Muir Award experience (5 minutes)

Good afternoon, my name is Kerri McLachlan, student number 2316526. Today I will be reflecting on my experience of undertaking the John Muir Award, following which I will critically evaluate how awards like this can support the current Early Years approaches to sustainability and citizenship education.

When introduced to the John Muir Award, I was keen to get started. Scrapbooking, time spent outdoors and a chance to get creative...all my favourite things! I immediately decided on a place to carry out the award, my local park and nature reserve, which I have visited regularly for the past thirty years, and is somewhere my family and I love. The location and some pictures of the park can be seen in my scrapbook [here](#). I was unsure at first what I would gain from this experience, given that I was familiar with the park already, but I soon discovered there was plenty more to learn.

The award requires a lengthy time to be spent in the chosen area, meaning I had more time to observe individual parts of it in more depth, rather than taking them all in at surface value, as I usually do. I stopped and focused on specific areas and found that I appreciated more fully what each part of the environment could offer, in terms of the wildlife that resides there, the atmosphere it provides, and the views it offers. This meant I was able to recall the plants and trees I could name, spot those that I could not, and ponder lots of other questions that had never crossed my mind before. My curiosity then drove me to carry out research to fill in all these missing facts, and as you can see [here](#), I have researched several species of plants and trees and found out more about them. This exercise led me to reflect on the speed at which early years outdoor activities are delivered. Due to time constraints and the pressure to focus on core

subjects, our visits to Forest School and other outdoor areas, are sometimes limited to an hour or less, and the children have often barely begun to engage in a bug hunt, or some digging, when it is suddenly time to tidy up and return to class. Opportunities for discovery and discussion are often lost because of the lack of time allowed. Similarly, although I have already spent a long time preparing my scrapbook and researching my chosen area, I feel that I need even more time to investigate and to delve deeper into its history. This has motivated me to carry on learning after the award is complete, looking for other ways to support and protect my chosen place of interest. Likewise, if children are given longer time periods to explore areas that interest them, this will likely throw up many questions that they can then research, hence building their knowledge over time.

In addition, visiting my chosen area with a specific purpose in mind, for example to study the trees, meant my focus was sharpened and I looked for finer details than I would normally. Thinking about an activity undertaken with Reception children last Autumn, I recall that time was tight, as usual, and children were asked to quickly collect leaves ready for printing. The outcome was that nineteen children all arrived back in class with a bucketful of identical leaves from one tree. Admittedly the selection of trees in the playground was limited, but I still felt a more specific instruction could have sharpened their focus, helping them concentrate on the different leaves available. A better planned introduction to the activity, such as a leaf identification exercise, could also have supported them further, making them aware of the different leaves available to them. In addition to educating the children on the appearance of different leaves, giving more targeted instruction would have led to a better outcome, and this is something I will bear in mind when planning future activities.

During my own investigation, spending a prolonged time in one area allowed me to witness a special moment that I may have missed if I had rushed by. I saw a blackbird stop and hover mid-air, for a split second, with a small worm in its beak, before darting into the middle of a blackberry bush. I saw the bird dip its head and deposit the worm

into a tiny beak below. The baby blackbird was so still I had not seen it before. The adult blackbird flew off, and I immediately became concerned for the baby's welfare, worrying that it had fallen out of the nest and would be in danger from predators. I watched for half an hour afterwards, noting that the baby stayed just under cover on the edge of the bush, awaiting the return of its parents. Meanwhile, I looked online to see what I could do to help and discovered that blackbirds naturally undergo a short time living at ground level, after fledging, before fully taking flight. They mostly feed from the ground in adulthood also – something I would never have known had I not witnessed this lovely moment and been inspired to find out more. Providing children with access to the outdoors and the chance of seeing similar events to this would result in more natural learning opportunities and pose more questions for them to ponder, encouraging their enthusiasm for learning. In practice, however, this is not always possible, as practitioners are still under pressure from senior leadership to improve reading, writing, and mathematical skills. Outdoor pursuits are sadly one of the first things to disappear from the daily schedule, when core subjects need attention. I do feel, however, that more training should be given to practitioners regarding how to utilise the outdoor environment for teaching core subjects, and more time given within the daily schedule, for outdoor pursuits to occur.

Moving forward, I will look for more opportunities to combine core lessons with outdoor learning. For example, if a Forest School session falls prior to a number lesson, would there be a way I could incorporate the number activity into the outdoor area, preventing the need to hurriedly pack away and return to the classroom. Could the children use natural objects to practice their counting? Could they find me three leaves to feed a hungry caterpillar? Which of their sticks is the longest or the shortest and can they put them in order? This type of learning would surely be far more attractive than making children go inside to count pictures of flowers and twigs on a worksheet and would allow them to be taught equally well, whilst they play and enjoy the outdoors. From an economic perspective, spending time outdoors and making use of natural resources on a regular basis could ultimately lead to less money having to be spent on artificial

classroom resources. It could limit the amount of expensive, often plastic items purchased over time, reducing the need to replace these when they break and having to find a way to dispose of them. Also, if time is spent outside, classroom lights can be turned off to save energy.

Another benefit to undertaking the John Muir Award is the positive effect on my wellbeing. Excitedly anticipating my visits to Babbs Mill each day made me realise how much I miss regular outdoor activity. Whether it be through lack of time or lack of energy after a long day at work, I often find myself going for two or three weeks with very little outdoor time. My aim is to uphold the habits I have formed during the award duration, and to visit a natural site every couple of days as a minimum. After all, I have no excuse when I am so close to such a beautiful park!

Part 2 – Critical evaluation of how experiences such as the John Muir Award could support the principles of early childhood education for sustainability and citizenship.

Following on from the John Muir Award, I will now consider current approaches to early years education for sustainability and citizenship, and how experiences such as the John Muir Award can support the principles behind the current curriculum.

Sustainability is defined by the United Nations Brundtland Commission (1987, cited in Kono, 2023), as meeting the present need without any compromise to future generations being able to meet their needs also.

Whilst participating in the John Muir Award, I explored a natural area without changing or damaging it in any way that would affect its use by other people, either now or in the

future. At the same time, however, I observed ways it could be improved for the benefit of other people, for example by removing litter from the environment. This is an example of good citizenship, considering the effect of my actions on other people. The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (EYFS, Department for Education (DfE), 2024) states that children will learn to appreciate their own needs and those of others, through the supportive relationships they build with adults in the setting. Little guidance is given on how to achieve such relationships, and success would depend on the temperament and expertise of the practitioner. By discussing with children how they feel and how they perceive their actions will make others feel, practitioners can help them make considered and informed choices as to how they respond in various situations. When adults note a child's mood, it can help to acknowledge that they have recognised how the child is feeling, and to also name the emotion, in case the child is uncertain of what it is. Throughout the school day, especially at times of transition, it can be useful to ask children how they are feeling and perhaps indicate this by placing their name or photo on the corresponding emotion picture. This will help them to become familiar with their feelings and to use this knowledge to anticipate situations that may make them feel uncomfortable in the future, based on their previous experiences. When children understand their own feelings, they are more likely to recognise the same feelings in other people, making them more empathetic to people around them (Soliman, 2021). This is a valuable quality to have, when trying to show good citizenship. Cliffe and Solvason (2020) believe that if emotions are downplayed or disregarded on a regular basis, this results in children feeling either silenced or privileged in the early years environment. Demonstrating empathy can help to alleviate this, and practitioners are ideal role models in doing so. Acknowledging the child's emotions lets them know they have been seen and are valued and shows they have not been overlooked or ignored.

During completion of the John Muir challenge, I recognised the positive effects it had on my wellbeing. This links with Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015, SDG3), which aims to promote good health and wellbeing for all individuals. The EYFS

(DfE, 2024) refers to many aspects of good health throughout the various areas of learning. Personal, social and emotional learning promotes children being healthy by expressing their feelings and looking after their bodies, whilst physical development focuses on building motor skills and core strength, both of which result in children having good socio-emotional development and wellbeing. Expressive art and design enables children to express their emotions and feelings through various methods, such as art, dance, and movement, helping them interpret what they have observed. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) requires children's views to be respected and as such, when children express themselves through different art forms, adults should show interest in what they are saying and doing as this provides an insight into the child's interests and what they consider important. In addition to the obvious health benefits of being outdoors, for example walking for exercise, my experience of the John Muir Award helped me to slow down and appreciate the smaller details in the environment, meaning that not only was I learning something new, but for a short time, I was distracted from the pressures of daily life. I was inspired to express what I had seen, felt, and heard through different art processes, as mentioned by Steiner, (1894, cited in Sakr, 2019) and you will see from my scrapbook that I used drawing, texture rubbing and photographs to interpret what I had observed, and to record it for other people to explore. Expressing what they observe through various art forms helps children to appreciate and recognise culture (Kingdon and Gasper, 2020), and in practice there are many resources that settings can provide to facilitate this expression. For example, role-play items representing different cultures; this could be dressing up clothes, items from around the home or artefacts that may relate to different cultures and religions. The role of the adult is to provide resources, discuss with children what they have observed, and talk about how they have represented this, giving the child a chance to explain their thinking. This process can deepen the practitioner's understanding of the child and their life experiences to date and assist in deciding what future resources can be selected to further the child's learning. Furthermore, natural resources discovered by children can be used to make transient artwork or for printing shapes and patterns. According to Early Excellence (2025), transient art can give children a sense of control over their surroundings and

can support them in making decisions, problem solving, and expressing their ideas. These skills display the ability to create and think critically, as mentioned within the characteristics of effective learning (DfE, 2024). It also gives the child a chance to verbalise their experience, building their communication skills and vocabulary. Moula, Walsh and Lee (2023) state that children from deprived areas are significantly less likely to have access to nature than children from more affluent areas. In our position as early years educators, we can help narrow this inequity, by providing all children with natural resources to explore, and giving them regular access to outside areas, either within the setting, or by visiting other places, such as farms and parks, as per UN (2015, SDG10) and in accordance with the EYFS (DfE, 2024), which seeks to provide equal opportunity for all. Looking at the EYFS (DfE, 2024), the most obvious areas of learning concerned with sustainability and citizenship are Personal Social and Emotional Development and Knowledge and Understanding of the World. An award such as the John Muir Award encourages participants to explore their surroundings to make sense of the world around them, both of which are key points in the Knowledge and Understanding section. In practice, this can be encouraged by taking children on visits to farms, museums and other places of interest, broadening their knowledge of the surrounding area, or simply by allowing them longer periods of time to explore natural areas within the grounds of their setting. Whilst not a specific requirement of the John Muir experience, children's personal, social and emotional development, together with their communication skills, can be further developed by engaging in conversations with farmers, police officers, firefighters and other professionals they may meet on such visits. Through visits to various places of interest, the children will be exposed to new vocabulary, which they can then learn to use in different contexts, and which will help them become more confident readers, linking to the Communication and Language aspect of the curriculum (DfE, 2024). The knowledge gained from such visits acts as a starting point for discussions around sustainability and gives the children some context within which to explore these issues, being able to discuss ecocentric or posthumanist approaches at a basic level. More recent initiatives such as National Insect Week (Royal Entomological Society, 2025), and National Tree Week (Tree Council, 2025) can also provide sources of inspiration for teaching children about sustainability. Do the children know the

lifecycles of common creatures, on whom we depend? Are they aware that our use of paper affects how many trees are felled? As children learn so rapidly between the ages of zero to five, early years practitioners must be confident in sowing the seeds of knowledge needed for the formation of lifelong sustainable habits (King, 2025).

Considering the provision of educational outings through a sustainability lens, however, the cost of travelling to outside attractions and the emissions from the fuel this will use, may render it more economical and sustainable to utilise school settings and adapt them to include as many natural features as possible. Several of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), including SDG13, SDG14 and SDG15, call for more sustainable use of the earth's resources. These goals were originally intended to be achieved by 2030. Although this now seems very unlikely, it is important that we educate the children in our care about sustainability, as they may go on to address these issues and perhaps provide solutions. Altering the outdoor environment will, of course, depend on school budgets or any fundraising attempts being sufficient to purchase the resources needed. To remedy this, requests can be made to parents, carers, and local businesses to provide any unneeded equipment they can spare. For example, used tyres make good planters for flowers, or leftover timber can be used to build seating or raised vegetable beds. In doing so, the reduce, re-use and re-cycle mentality is being followed, elements of which some children will be familiar with from their home environment (Faridy and Rohendi, 2021), preventing the need to always purchase new equipment, and supporting the wider goal of responsible consumption and production (UN, 2015, SDG12). In addition, the services of any green-fingered staff or parents could be enlisted, giving them a purposeful role in the children's education, and enabling the children to learn from their guidance. Activities such as those mentioned follow the approach of Steiner (Steiner, 1894 cited in Sakr, 2019), who advocates for support of the natural world and appreciation of community involvement and co-operative learning, as does Bronfenbrenner (1979, cited in Harkonen, no date). By undertaking such activities children are learning to develop a conscience and a sense of responsibility towards their natural environment. In doing so, they will

hopefully maintain these values throughout their life and become the next generation who will undertake conservation of areas such as those observed in the John Muir Award.

The proposal to travel to a place of interest could make a good starting point for discussions around economic viability and the effects of travel on natural environments. This exercise would also encourage children's critical thinking and problem-solving skills, both of which are valuable for them to become good citizens, with the ability to make sustainable contributions to society (Nuzzaci, Orecchio and Romano, 2024).

Through exploration of new or familiar spaces, as promoted by John Muir, children are also able to build skills in physical development, both gross and fine. They could be involved in walking, climbing, jumping or carrying, all of which would improve their gross motor skills, or could also be engaged in more compact activities, such as grass picking, bug hunting, or collecting natural objects like acorns or stones. This type of activity supports their fine motor skills, preparing them to be more competent writers in the future, having the ability to hold pens correctly and control their writing action (Montessori, 1907, cited in Adibpour and Hassanvand, 2020). In addition to this, when children have opportunities to explore and discover, they are learning about the natural world around them and what it is capable of. Theorists such as Dewey (1938, cited in Seaman, 2019) discuss the benefits of an experiential approach to learning, where history and culture play a part in outdoor learning. If children are involved in repeated experiences over time, led by familiar adults or family members, their experiences will remain with them, and they will learn with increasing levels of understanding over time, based on their experiences. Their past experiences may cause them to think differently and come up with new solutions to problems. Vare (2021) makes a valid point that children are expected to leave secondary school and become fully engaged citizens, without having been given opportunities to engage in any student-led, community-based activities, enabling them to test out their ideas. Bearing that in mind, as early years

educators, we must take steps to inform children on sustainability issues, making them aware of the challenges they may face as adults and giving them the strategies to deal with these problems, such as critical thinking practice, problem solving skills and good citizenship qualities. This will hopefully then feed through to secondary education, where children may be compelled to stand up for their rights and the rights of others. Department for Education (DfE, 2023) state that they and other education professionals are responsible for preparing children for the challenges they may face around climate change and sustainability, by giving the correct pastoral care, knowledge and skills. This document also mentions the importance of children spending time in, and learning from nature also, together with the need for them to become actively involved in conservation. These are both elements that align with the John Muir Award, which emphasises exploration and conservation of a natural area. Josephidou and Kemp (2022) investigated the similar theory of (Froebel, 1782-1852 cited in Bruce et al, 2024), in relation to babies and toddlers in early years. They claim that whilst the potential benefits of the outdoors to babies and toddlers are recognised, there is little evidence to show that they are being supported to interact with the environment around them. This could be due to safety fears or because outdoor time is more associated with physical development than with exploration of nature and the environment.

It can therefore be seen how the John Muir Award and other similar schemes can support children's education for sustainability and citizenship. Whilst a pleasurable undertaking, the John Muir Award could be critiqued for not discussing other aspects of sustainability, such as the economic impact. Whilst it talks about visiting and conserving the natural environment, it does not discuss how financially viable these improvements are. However, it does give suggestions for reasonably inexpensive conservation projects, such as homemade bird feeders or bug hotels, meaning that most children would be able to access an activity such as this.

In essence, a version of this award could be carried out at a basic level, with early years children, giving them an insight into the world of sustainability and citizenship. Having had the opportunity to complete the John Muir Award has certainly made me look at my setting's practice in an entirely new light and I can already see lots of scope for improvement. Hopefully in sharing my findings, I can encourage others to take part and eventually achieve a whole school approach to see us into the future.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my presentation today. I hope you enjoyed it and that it has provided some food for thought.

Reference List

Adibpour, N. and Hassanvand, B. (2020) 'Determining and Comparing the Effect of Traditional and Montessori Methods on Perceptual Motor Activities of Elementary School Students' *Journal of motor and behavioral sciences* Available at: https://www.jmbs.ir/&url=http://www.jmbs.ir/article_118239_d014a7df31e30619c60dbf2a2d85ef8f.pdf?lang=en (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Association of Steiner Waldorf Schools in the UK and Ireland (2025), 'Guide to the Early Years Foundation Stage in Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Settings' Available at: https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2011/10/Guide_to_the_EYFS_in_Steiner_Waldorf_settings1.pdf (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Harvard University Press.

Bruce, T., Yukiyo, N., Powell, S., Wasmuth, H. and Whinnett, J. (2024) *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Friedrich Froebel* London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Cliffe, J., & Solvason, C. (2020). 'The role of emotions in building new knowledge and developing young children's understanding' *Power and Education*, 12(2), 189-203
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743820930724>

Department for Education (2023) *Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services system* Available at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy/sustainability-and-climate-change-a-strategy-for-the-education-and-childrens-services-systems> (Accessed: 12 July 2025).

Department for Education (2024) *Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework*
Available at:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/670fa42a30536cb92748328f/EYFS_statutory_framework_for_group_and_school_-_based_providers.pdf (Accessed: 12 July 2025).

Dewey, J. (1938) *Experience and education* New York: Macmillan.

Early Excellence (2025) *Transient Art and Loose Parts Play* Available at:
<https://earlyexcellence.com/practice-and-pedagogy/transient-art-and-loose-parts-play/>
(Accessed: 12 July 2025).

Faridy, F. and Rohendi, A. (2021) 'The Role of Parents in Engaging Early Childhood to Implement 3R (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle)' doi. 10.2991/assehr.k.210421.070
<https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/iconetos-20/125955700> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Harkonen, U. (2007) 'The Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory of human development' *Scientific Articles of V International Conference PERSON COLOUR NATURE MUSIC October 17-21, 2007 Available at:*
https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/78412107/Bronfenbrenner_in_20English_07_sen-t-libre.pdf?1641737060=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DThe_Bronfenbrenner_ecological_systems_th.pdf&Expires=1752445858&Signature=IkWloFGrPe4nOCI1PKkp~hlzM0X-UjOTIm5tHE-hyxEzKGtI0W09fDwY19L9CMXNFLiXcE5pUAXi24HOzrYvuVfZpl4aU-MS7OxkkB1gtY43L80KvpM0saw6JxWHMhHNqZ7-JWCt86-wyJ9rgaK2b0Adu80AJIDeHxjIYQxjT7qqHdJXna~RqN7orolSMprcgdLxWAmip5I9dwM9d8Lu3-ZiXbGjngKMe4CYxA94FzmOqSNzYEK6LRU1hTeNgul4kH2sSnqZFnNRBxyX3SSM0IArrH7E9McWqJMyS21ICp~GYC3tbzYVf0AJ2BzTcL3WIZr-h6yirVH4DGyKkjaJ6Q_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Josephidou J and Kemp N (2022) : 'Finding Froebel: National and Cross-National Pedagogical Paths in Froebelian Early Childhood Education (Part 2) ' *Global Education Review* Vol. 9 No. 2 Available at: <https://ger.mercy.edu/index.php/ger/issue/view/50> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

King, J. (2025) NCFE *How we're supporting practitioners to embed sustainability into early years* Available at: <https://www.ncfe.org.uk/all-articles/supporting-practitioners-embed-sustainability-early-years/> (Accessed: 12 July 2025).

Kingdon, Z. and Gasper, M. (2020) *Role-Play and Emotions a Vygotskian analysis* Routledge

Kono, N. (2023). 'Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development)' In: *Maggino, F. (eds) Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*. Springer, Cham. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17299-1_441 (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Moula, Z. Walsh, N. and Lee, E. (2023) "It was like I was not a person, it was like I was the nature": The impact of arts-in-nature experiences on the wellbeing of children living in areas of high deprivation' *Journal of Environmental Psychology* Volume 90 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272494423001202> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Montessori, M. (1912) *The Montessori Method* Rome.

Nuzzaci, F. Orecchio, R. Romano (2024) 'The Role of Critical and Civic Thinking in Citizenship Education' *INTED2024 Proceedings*, pp. 7198-7207 Available at: <https://library.iated.org/view/NUZZACI2024RO> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Royal Entomological Society (2025) *Insect Week* Available at: <https://www.insectweek.org/> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Sakr, M. (2019) 'Creative 'Stuff' in the Steiner Kindergarten: How Steiner Educators Understand the Art Materials They Work With'. In: *de Rijke, V. (eds) Art and Soul: Rudolf Steiner, Interdisciplinary Art and Education. Landscapes: the Arts, Aesthetics, and Education, vol 25*. Springer, Cham. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17604-4_3 (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Seaman, J. (2019) 'Restoring Culture and History in Outdoor Education Research: Dewey's Theory of Experience as a Methodology', *Journal of outdoor recreation, education, and leadership*, 11(4), p. 335. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18666/JOREL-2019-VII-I4-9633> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Soliman, D. *et al.* (2021) 'Enhancing empathy in preschoolers: a comparison of social and emotional learning approaches', *The educational and developmental psychologist*, 38(1), pp. 64–76. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20590776.2020.1839883> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

Steiner, R. (2000). *The philosophy of freedom*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press. Original work (1894).

Tree Council (2025) *National Tree Week* Available at: <https://treecouncil.org.uk/seasonal-campaigns/national-tree-week/> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child Treaty Series 1577.3 Available at: <https://library.iated.org/view/NUZZACI2024ROL> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).

United Nations Brundtland Commission (1987) *Sustainability* Available at:
<https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/sustainability> (Accessed: 12 July 2025).

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2025) *Take Action for the Sustainable Development Goals* Available at:
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/> (Accessed: 12 July 2025).

Vare, P. (2021) 'Exploring the Impacts of Student-Led Sustainability Projects with Secondary School Students and Teachers'. *Sustainability* **2021**, 13, 2790 Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13052790> (Accessed: 13 July 2025).