

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 trying 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, according to Brundtland Report (1987, cited in DEFRA, 2005:6) ensures we meet the needs of today, without preventing future generations from meeting theirs. This has shaped a global movement, influencing Earth Summit Development (hereafter ESD) in 1992, the creation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, no date) which aim to address interconnected challenges including 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 to think long term,

work collaboratively and pursue sustainable solutions for both humans and the planet. 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.

This legal framework provides a strong foundation for embedding sustainability in education, particularly within the Curriculum for Wales for non-maintained nursery settings (Welsh Government, 2024), through the four purposes, which aim to develop ethical, informed citizens with a strong sense of *Cynefin* (belonging). In alignment with these principles, Steiner (1923) viewed the adult as a role model who leads a sustainable lifestyle, actively promoting social, economic and environmental values. This highlights the influence of practitioners, shaping children's understanding of sustainable living (Boyd, 2018). By embedding sustainability across all areas of learning, the curriculum fostering early, meaningful engagement with environmental and social responsibilities. Thus, reinforcing the Well-being Act's goals through learning that is authentic and future focused (Welsh Government, 2024).

Aligned with this, Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC, 2012) has long been a key driver in Welsh education policy, encouraging learners to understand the impact of their choices on the environment, economy and society.

This is relevant in the Early Years, where hands-on, play-based experiences allow children to explore, question and connect with the world around them. According to the Froebel Trust (Adams and Short, 2025), such real-life, child-led experiences naturally develops empathy, curiosity and a growing sense of responsibility. As children begin to understand the interconnectedness of all living things, 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, was grounded in theoretical frameworks, shaped by child-led learning, socio-constructivist principles and international pedagogies such as Reggio Emilia, Forest School and Te Whariki (DCELLS, cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018). Despite policy frameworks such as the Curriculum for Wales promoting outdoor learning and sustainable thinking, the barriers continue to hinder the meaningful integration of ESDGC. As Tinney (2013, cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018) found, practitioners often perceive it as an 'add on' rather than an embedded component, citing a lack of time, curriculum pressures and uncertainty about how to incorporate it. These constraints highlight the disconnect between policy and ambitions and classroom realities.

Whereas pedagogical models like Reggio Emilia integrate sustainability more holistically, through daily routines, nature-based exploration, recycling initiatives and community projects. This approach conceptualises the environment as a 'third teacher' supporting inquiry and ecological consciousness, its success depends on practitioners' capacity to interpret ecological inquiry, while honouring children's voices (The Education Hub, 2020; Garcia Senent, Kelley and Abo-Zena, 2021).

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 foster a deeper emotional and ecological connection to the world around people. This aligns with UNESCO's ESD's 2030 vision which emphasises holistic, values-based learning rooted in nature. Similarly, Barrable (2019) advocates for regular interaction with nature, appreciation of its beauty, compassion for non-human life and mindfulness as key components of environmental awareness. However, it is important to note that both sources largely draw on studies involving older children or adults. Tinney's study (2013) cited in Tinney and Hirst, (2018) noted that practitioners stated that ESDGC was too complex and difficult for young children to understand. Additionally, Tinney and Hirst (2018) highlight the difficulty for Foundation Phase children and practitioners to access a nature-rich environment, as meaningful interactions with nature requires spaces that support living ecosystems, such as animals and plants, rather than just concrete play areas or restricted outdoor space.

Educational models that incorporate biophilia, such as the Reggio Emilia approach and The Curriculum for Wales, place sustainability at the heart of its educational vision, making it a mandatory component for every child. This aligns with (Wilson's 1992 cited in Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014) concept of biophilia, which describes children having a natural love for and connection with the natural world, fostering a sense of comfort, curiosity and empathy towards

living environments. The Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2024) echoes these principles by emphasising the importance of understanding the diversity of living organisms and their interactions with their environment. The framework encourages learners to explore and to recognise that plants and animals are living things that grow. Although, Dankiw *et al.* (2023) found nature play was beneficial for children holistically, barriers such as limited resources, time constraints, and environmental conditions affected children's access.

This emphasis on sustainability is reflected in global education goals. Applying Sustainable Development Goal 4 to early childhood education highlights the importance of inclusive, high-quality learning that fosters lifelong learning (United Nations, no date). Pramling Samuelsson and Park (2017) highlights the importance of empowering children to think critically, take initiative and reflect, core values of sustainability.

Practical Learning

The Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2024) places strong emphasis on outdoor learning and experiential engagement, fostering children's appreciation for the living world and their sense of *Cynefin*, a deep connection to place. This approach encourages sustainable thinking and responsible citizenship from early years. Complementing this vision, the John Muir Award (2025) offers a structured framework for experiential learning through its four challenges: discover, explore, conserve and share. These activities promote real-world problem-solving and align closely with UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (hereafter ESD) agenda. According to the UNESCO (2023), ESD supports lifelong learning and active citizenship while advancing progress toward the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Integrating ESD into play-based learning enables practitioners to create developmentally appropriate experiences that introduce sustainability concepts, fostering children's early understanding of environmental responsibilities (Cutter-Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014). While meaningful exploration promotes foundational awareness, outdoor play alone may be insufficient for embedding lasting values without structured guidance and reflection (Blanchard & Buchanan 2011, cited in Cutter-Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, access to quality outdoor environments is not universal. Waite *et al.* (2021) note how socio-economic, cultural and physical factors can limit children's engagement with nature, creating barriers with some children seeing green spaces as inaccessible or unwelcoming.

Boyd (2018) highlights that Montessori and Steiner believed in children's natural connection to nature, promoting slow, sensory rich experiences, feeling the sun and wind, hearing bird song and silence. This resonates strongly with the John Muir Award (2025) which encourages deep immersive engagement with wild places through its structured challenges of discover, explore, conserve and share. Like the philosophies of Steiner and Montessori, the Award emphasise meaningful interaction with nature, allowing children to build emotional ecological awareness through direct experiences.

Taking Action

Wilson (1997, cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018) argues children should be given opportunities to take ownership of their environment, allowed to change, create and personalise it, creating foundations of connections towards the natural world. This perspective aligns with the practical ethos of the John Muir Award (2025), which engages in tangible environmental actions such as litter picking, or habitat awareness. These activities move learning beyond passive awareness, so individuals see themselves as contributors to environmental change on both local and global levels.

These hands-on environmental experiences reflect the Curriculum for Wales (2024) emphasis on nurturing ethically informed citizens, one of its four purposes. Through experiences like the John Muir Award (2025) children are not only encouraged to engage with the natural world but take responsibility for it.

Aligning with the Future Generation Act, schools play a vital role in fostering active citizenship by engaging young people in fair trade, eco initiatives and sustainable development. When combined with classroom learning and outdoor experiences like the John Muir Award, these efforts empower children to become informed, responsible contributors. Through hands on actions, ethical awareness and personal agency sustainability becomes a lived, everyday experience.

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. It 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 constraints, 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 aligning 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 reflection 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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