

Sustainability in the early years (part2a script)

ECEY6005

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Word count: 619

Hello everyone, my name is Amira Abdelmagied

Today, I will be reflecting on my John Muir Award experience, which took place in Machynlleth, Wales.

As part of this experience, I visited Machynlleth with my family and stayed in a cottage surrounded by forests, mountains and beautiful countryside. During our visit, we spent time exploring woodland trails, enjoying the peaceful environment and observing the natural landscape.

In the first part of my presentation, I will reflect on how this experience changed my understanding of sustainability and helped me engage with it in a practical way. In the second part, I will critically evaluate how experiences like this can support Education for Sustainability in early childhood by drawing on educational theory, research and policy.

Before this visit, my understanding of sustainability was quite limited. I mainly thought about recycling, reducing waste and saving energy. Although these are important, I now realise that sustainability is much broader than that.

Spending time in Machynlleth helped me see sustainability in a different way. Being surrounded by forests and wildlife made me think about how important it is to protect

natural habitats and care for the environment. I realised that sustainability is also about respecting nature and making choices that help protect it for future generations.

One of the things I enjoyed most was walking through the forest. As we explored different walking trails, I noticed the variety of trees, plants and birds around us. I became much more aware of biodiversity and how different parts of nature depend on one another. This made me appreciate how easily these environments could be affected if they are not protected.

Another part of the experience that I really valued was staying in a cottage surrounded by nature. It was very different from my everyday routine. Instead of traffic and busy streets, I woke up each morning listening to birds and looking out over the countryside. The peaceful environment helped me slow down, relax and appreciate nature in a way that I had not experienced before.

The visit also made me reflect on the connection between nature and wellbeing. Spending time outdoors helped me feel calmer, less stressed and more connected to the environment. It reminded me that nature benefits people's physical and emotional wellbeing as well as supporting wildlife and biodiversity.

As I reflected on this experience, I began to think about young children. If spending time outdoors had such a positive impact on me as an adult, I wondered how valuable these experiences could be for children during their early years. I realised that children can learn a great deal simply by exploring nature, asking questions and observing the world around them.

Overall, this experience completely changed the way I think about sustainability. Instead of seeing it as a list of environmental actions, I now see it as a way of living that encourages respect for nature, responsibility and care for future generations.

Most importantly, I learned that some of the most meaningful learning happens through experience. Walking through the forest, observing wildlife and spending time in nature helped me understand sustainability in a way that classroom learning alone could not.

This experience has also influenced the way I think about my future career in early childhood education. It made me realise that outdoor experiences can play an important role in helping children develop curiosity, confidence and respect for the environment from an early age.

Having reflected on my own experience, I will now move on to the second part of my presentation, where I will critically evaluate how experiences like this support Education for Sustainability in early childhood using educational theory, research and policy.

Sustainability in the early years (part2b script)

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Having reflected on the experience in Machynlleth, it is now important to critically evaluate how experiences like this can support Education for Sustainability (EfS) in early childhood.

According to UNESCO (2020), Education for Sustainability is about developing the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that enable people to contribute to a more sustainable future. It is not limited to environmental protection but also includes social responsibility, respect for others and an understanding of how individual actions affect communities and future generations (*Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap*, 2025)

UNESCO also argues that sustainability should be embedded in children's everyday learning rather than taught as a separate subject. This suggests that meaningful experiences are more effective than simply teaching facts, as children develop a deeper understanding when they actively explore and interact with the world around them (*Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap*, 2025).

This view can be linked to the work of Friedrich Froebel, who believed that nature is one of the child's first and most important teachers. Froebel argued that children learn best through play, exploration and direct experiences instead of relying only on formal instruction. From this perspective, natural environments provide opportunities for children to investigate, ask questions and develop curiosity about the world (Chawla, 2020; Tovey, 2016)

Froebel's theory strongly supports Education for Sustainability because regular contact with nature helps children build positive relationships with the environment

from an early age. Activities such as nature walks, gardening and observing wildlife encourage children to appreciate biodiversity while developing communication, creativity and problem-solving skills (Bilton, 2010)

One strength of Froebel's theory is that it views learning as an active process. Rather than receiving information from adults, children construct their understanding through exploration. This approach encourages deeper learning and supports children's emotional connection with nature, which is considered an important foundation for sustainable behaviour later in life (Bilton, 2010; Tovey, 2016)

However, there are also limitations. Not every early years setting has access to forests or large outdoor spaces, and poor weather may reduce opportunities for outdoor learning. These practical challenges can make it difficult for practitioners to provide regular nature-based experiences (Daniels, 2016; Tovey, 2016)

Despite these limitations, Froebel's ideas remain highly relevant. Meaningful outdoor learning does not always require large natural environments. Local parks, school gardens and natural materials such as leaves, sticks and stones can all provide valuable opportunities for exploration and learning (Tovey, 2016; Daniels, 2016)

While Froebel focused on children's relationship with nature, Lev Vygotsky offered a different perspective by emphasising the importance of social interaction.

Vygotsky argued that children develop knowledge through conversations and shared experiences with adults and their peers. His concept of scaffolding explains how practitioners can extend children's understanding by asking questions, encouraging discussion and providing appropriate support during learning (Daniels, 2016)

This theory is particularly relevant to Education for Sustainability because environmental understanding develops more effectively when children are encouraged to discuss their observations and reflect on their experiences.

For example, during a nature walk, practitioners can ask questions such as "Why do you think this tree has lost its leaves?" or "How can we protect the animals that live here?" These discussions help children think critically rather than simply memorise information (Daniels, 2016)

A major strength of Vygotsky's theory is its emphasis on communication and collaboration. Children learn from one another by sharing ideas, solving problems together and listening to different perspectives. This supports the development of environmental awareness while also strengthening language and social skills (Daniels, 2016)

However, Vygotsky's approach depends heavily on the knowledge and confidence of the practitioner. Effective scaffolding requires careful observation, skilled questioning and an understanding of each child's individual needs. Without this support, valuable learning opportunities may not be fully developed (Daniels, 2016).

Overall, both Froebel and Vygotsky offer valuable perspectives on Education for Sustainability. While Froebel highlights the importance of direct experiences in nature, Vygotsky demonstrates that discussion, collaboration and adult support help children make sense of those experiences. Together, these theories suggest that meaningful outdoor learning should combine exploration with opportunities for communication and reflection (Daniels, 2016; Tovey, 2016).

Educational theories provide a strong foundation for Education for Sustainability. However, it is equally important to consider whether these ideas are supported by contemporary research.

Research by Chawla (2020) suggests that regular contact with nature helps children develop a stronger emotional connection with the environment. This connection is important because children who value nature are more likely to care for it and develop environmentally responsible behaviours as they grow older. Outdoor experiences also encourage children to appreciate biodiversity and understand the importance of protecting natural habitats.

Similarly, Louv (2008) argues that many children today spend less time outdoors because of technology and modern lifestyles. He suggests that limited contact with nature may affect children's physical health, emotional wellbeing and curiosity. Increasing opportunities for outdoor play can therefore support children's overall development while helping them build a positive relationship with the natural world.

In addition, Davis (2015) argues that sustainability should not be taught as a separate topic. Instead, it should be embedded within everyday experiences.

Activities such as gardening, caring for plants, exploring local parks or observing seasonal changes allow children to develop environmental understanding through practical experiences. This approach makes learning more meaningful because children can connect new knowledge with real-life situations.

Together, these studies support the ideas of Froebel and Vygotsky. They suggest that children develop a deeper understanding of sustainability when they explore nature, discuss their experiences with others and participate in meaningful everyday activities (Chawla, 2020; Davis, 2015; Louv, 2008).

Although the literature highlights many benefits, it is also important to recognise that there are challenges when implementing Education for Sustainability in early childhood settings (Bilton, 2010).

One challenge is that not all settings have easy access to natural environments. Children living in urban areas may have limited opportunities to visit forests or large green spaces. Financial pressures and limited resources may also reduce opportunities for outdoor learning (Bilton, 2010).

Another challenge is practitioner confidence. Some practitioners may feel uncertain about planning outdoor activities or managing risks outside the classroom. In addition, weather conditions, particularly in Wales, can sometimes make outdoor learning more difficult (Bilton, 2010).

However, these challenges should not prevent children from experiencing nature. Research suggests that meaningful learning does not always depend on large outdoor spaces. Local parks, school gardens and small outdoor areas can all provide valuable opportunities for exploration. Even simple activities such as planting flowers, collecting leaves or observing insects can help children develop environmental awareness and curiosity (Bilton, 2010; Tovey, 2020).

The importance of Education for Sustainability is also recognised within the Curriculum for Wales (2024). The curriculum aims to develop ethical, informed citizens who understand their responsibilities towards society and the environment. It also aims to develop healthy, confident individuals who are prepared to make positive choices throughout their lives (Welsh Government, 2022).

These aims closely reflect the principles of Education for Sustainability. By providing regular opportunities to learn outdoors, practitioners can support children's environmental understanding while also promoting wellbeing, confidence, communication and problem-solving skills. This demonstrates that sustainability is not an additional subject but an important part of children's overall learning and development (Welsh Government, 2024).

Overall, the evidence from theory, research and policy consistently highlights the value of outdoor learning in early childhood education. While practical challenges exist, the literature suggests that they can be addressed through careful planning, creativity and effective use of local environments. This means that all children should have opportunities to experience and learn from nature, regardless of the size or location of their early years setting (Bilton, 2010; Davis,

In conclusion, experiences such as the John Muir Award provide valuable opportunities to support Education for Sustainability in early childhood. The literature demonstrates that meaningful outdoor experiences help children develop environmental awareness, curiosity and a sense of responsibility towards the natural world.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Education for Sustainability should be embedded within everyday practice rather than treated as a separate topic. By providing regular opportunities to explore natural environments, practitioners can support children's learning while encouraging respect for nature and responsible attitudes that may continue throughout their lives.

Finally, this evaluation demonstrates that outdoor experiences are not only beneficial for children's development but also play an important role in preparing future generations to live more sustainably.

Thank you for listening.

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