

Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years

Personal reflection

Good afternoon and welcome to my personal reflection. Firstly, I would like to introduce myself I am Grace Morton-Parker, when I first started my John Muir Award Journey, I was unaware how deeply personal and moving it would become.

What started off as a seaside walk with my girls became something much more of an eye opener and life –changing experience. Each morning, as we make our journey to school together, Borth beach became more than just a view.

It became a shared experience with waves crashing in the cliffs, sand in between are toes the joyful greeting of good morning sea for me and my girls. Taken me right back to my childhood when I felt free when connected closely to nature.

However, this journey also made us see more. When we really started to explore the beach, we found plastic rubbish pollution was very hard to ignore, suddenly this beautiful seaside did not look so natural, there was things that did not belong, washed up plastic bottles and plastic bags the list goes on.

This was horrible to see especially seen through the eyes of my children, my older daughter was full of questions how did the rubbish get here? it's not nice for the animals and the animals will get poorly, what can we do? That is when my view began to change.

I found out and learnt that over 80% of plastic in the ocean comes from land,

Wildlife often mistake it for food or get trapped which can lead to injury of death.

Our everyday choices impact the environment for example using single use plastics and flushing wet wipes has a knock-on effect on the planet.

I also found out about carbon footprints, Microplastic and even why sewage ends up in the sea due to climate change and overloaded systems. This is not just a wakeup call something needs to change. This process has made me think differently about how I live and ask the questions

Can we use less plastic at home?

How can we teach the children of today to not just enjoy nature but to protect it?

Which got me thinking of the idea of setting up a litter picking station at the beach, it is such a simple powerful tool that could reduce litter and get people involved.

This exercise took me back to my own childhood, when I am spending time outdoors that was not planned it was natural, I spent most of my time on the beach in the school holidays exploring rockpools, building sandcastles, collecting shells and jumping over waves, when there were fewer distractions, less plastic pollution and more freedom.

Seeing my own children experience that same joy as I did on the beach it is vital that we protect these environments. Children need to connect with the natural world it is crucial for their holistic development and wellbeing.

This is because if they do not love it, how will they ever want to save it, even a small change like picking up litter and making better choices teaches our children that they can have a real impact on the environment.

I will end this reflection with a John Muir quote, he once said “when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe (Popova no date). So, we need to take responsibility to protect the natural features of the world and make it better place for our children's children.

Academic section.

The concept of sustainability is much debated, and the term sustainable development stated in the Brundtland Report 'Our Common Future (1987) provided the mostly used and generally agreed definition (University of Essex,2024).

This refers to sustainability as using and managing resources responsibly to meet current needs in the way that make sure their accessible for future generations, while responding to the needs of the present day. That laid and influenced the foundation for Global movement, in creating the Earth Summit (1992) which is also known as The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) that set out to address sustainable development goals (SDGs) which aim to address linked barriers encompassing inequality, poverty, climate change and environment degradation (United Nations, No date).

Therefore, the Welsh Government has implemented sustainability not only into law but into education, The Wellbeing of the Future Generation (Wales) Act 2015, which gives public organisations a legal duty to think long term, work in collaboration and work towards sustainable solutions for both human beings and planet. There are seven well-being goals in the act, aiming for a more resilient, healthier and globally responsible Wales, showing a holistic vision that balances social, economic, environmental and cultural needs (Welsh Government ,2025).

This is closely in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) but does not use the term sustainability, but it follows the term closely, highlighting in article 29 that education should support the full development of a child's personality, talents and abilities. It encourages children to learn and show respect for their parents' cultural identities and environment.

Also, article 24 underpins that the government must ensure that children have clean water, nutritious food and a clean environment and education on wellbeing and health (Unicef, no date).

Therefore, this legal framework places a strong emphasis for embedding sustainability in education, and it is included in the Curriculum for Non-Maintained settings in Wales (Welsh Government, 2024), through the four purposes. These strive to develop learners as ethical, informed citizens with a strong sense of Cynefin which means (belonging) encouraging learning that is in real life, authentic experiences. By implementing

sustainability in a cross curricular way, thus supporting early, meaningful engagement with environmental and social responsibilities, reinforcing the Well-being of Future Generations Act through learning that is real and forward thinking (Hayles 2018). Likewise, The Curriculum for Wales (2022) has areas of learning and experience promoting health and wellbeing, physical and emotional care for self and others. In addition, Science and technology, exploring environmental change and human impact and humanities, developing an understanding place, community and identity (Welsh Government ,2020).

Closely linked with this, Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (2012) is a well-established driver in Welsh education policy, encouraging learners to understand the impact of their actions on their surroundings, economy and society (Welsh Government,2012).

This is related to the Early Years curriculum, where hands-on, play-based experiences encourage children's curiosity to explore, question and connect with their environment through having lived experiences. Research shows that having child-led learning and hand-on experiences has a vital impact. Elliott and Davis (2014) stated that sustainability in early years education must be active, real, relevant and imbedded in the children's everyday environment.

However, Edwards and Cutter- Mackenzie highlighted of the issue of sustainability education in the early years being how to teach sustainability in a way that is meeting each child's needs and pedagogies in a play-based environment (Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie 2013). Tinney and Merriman (2018) argue that sustainability in the early years is not restricted just to awareness of the environment; it includes nurturing core values such as social justice, wellbeing, and active citizenship (University of Wales,2018). This suggests that sustainability is far broader than the natural environment.

Moreover, the John Muir Award aligns with education for sustainable development (ESD) by having a framework that give opportunities for people to continue with nature, promoting environmental stewardship, encouraging and inspiring people to take actions towards building a sustainable future (John Muir Award 2015). In other words, the ESD is not just about teaching facts, it is about providing all learners with firsthand

knowledge, values and attitudes to care for the natural world for a brighter, ethically and sustainable world (UNESCO, No date). Additional practical hands-on learning is a cornerstone of both ESD and early years education pedagogy. providing opportunities such as litter –picking on the beach, exploring rock pools, building bird feeders of bug hotels and observing wildlife, having this real-world experience that helps children and adults to develop ecological understanding and a gives a sense of responsibility and a long-term environmental citizenship. These approaches that are focused and located within outdoor discovery and environmental preservation opportunities are core to children's learning (University of Wales,2025). By learning by doing and engaging with the environment physically and emotionally children are engaging in what Froebel would call 'real-life experiences' Froebel (1897) believed that children learning through play and contact with nature is key. He stated that nature is vital to understanding the world (Froebel Trust, no date). Agreeing with these statements Davis stated that with meaningful, hands-on experiences as a foundation young children can be empowered to take part in decision making and meaningful actions (Davis,2010).

Learning from the natural, sensory rich experiences of being beside the sea and watching jellyfish and chasing waves creates awe and wonder and develops curiosity and impacts wellbeing. As Reggio Emilia's philosophy of nature is that when experienced directly it becomes both the teacher and the classroom this is inspired by Malaguzzie. In this approach, the third teacher is the environment, a place that invites children to be curious, enjoy discovery and learn respect. Nature is a living system we are a part of not just something to study (Reggio Emilia approach, 2022). We are experiencing climate change and the consequences of pollution and should be questioning why and what we can do about it. This is a crucial point in the early ESD, it is not just about giving answers but about nurturing and have the right mindset that empathises, questions and observes (UNESCO,2024).

The most powerful experience is taking action to looking after the environment by collecting litter, using less plastic, these acts although small are a start in caring more and promoting ESD giving opportunities to learners to feel like they are making a

difference (UNESCO,2024). This links with Montessori's approach to education highlighting that children have the capabilities to be their own learners of the world. She believed that children should be given real responsibilities from a young age, giving them opportunities to become independent learners, and develop ethical awareness and social responsibility (Montessori, no date).

In conclusion, while the concept of sustainability remains complex and widely debated, its relevance to early childhood education is undeniable. Grounded in the Brundtland report's foundational definition of sustainability development (University of Essex, 2024).

The global and national policies from the Earth summit and UN SDG and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales ,2015) clearly establish that sustainability is both a global priority and an educational responsibility.

In Wales this vision is embedded through the Curriculum for non-Maintained settings and the Curriculum For Wales , which encourage learners to become ethical informed citizens with strong sense of Cynefin (belonging) to both local communities and global communities, these curriculums reinforce the value of real life experiential learning that aligns with the principles of sustainable development (ESD). Experience such as those undertaken through participating in the John Muir award provided a powerful hands-on opportunity to connect children with nature, building their knowledge and understanding of the natural environment and their responsibilities. These are not just one-off opportunities but need to be regular real-life experiences as the theorists and educationalists Froebel and Montessori recognised that children need to learn through nature and respectful engagement with the world around them,

However, research highlights that ongoing challenges with outdoor play-based learning whilst providing a rich environment for sustainability education theorists such as Edwards & and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013) consider that early year's sustainability education must be moved beyond the environmental awareness. It must also include active citizenship, social justice and a deeper pedagogical framework that supports children developing identities and values.

What is evident through research lived experience is that sustainability education in the early years must be relevant and relational as children learn best through doing whether that is litter picking, building bug hotels or exploring rock pools these actions plant the seed of long – term environmental care and citizenship.

In essence, Education for sustainable development is not about preparing children for the distant future it is about engaging them with the world around them now, helping them understand it, love it, and protect it by embedding sustainability deeply within early years practice through connection, action and empowerment. To keep our planet clean and sustainable for the future generation.

Thanks for listening.

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