

Reflection

Good morning and thank you for joining me today for my presentation. My name is Julie Luckett University number 2315325. I will begin with my reflection.

Spending time in my garden has become more than a simple pastime. It has evolved into a source of reflection, inspiration, and quiet learning. Each corner of my garden now holds a moment, a memory, or a lesson that gently reminds me of the beauty and wisdom found in nature when we slow down long enough to notice it.

One of the most meaningful parts of this journey has been observing the tiny creatures that make their home in this shared space. I have watched snails with their slow, determined movements navigate damp pathways, teaching me about resilience and adaptability. Their patient persistence, even in the face of obstacles, mirrors the steady pace at which real growth often happens, not in leaps and bounds, but in small, consistent steps. Similarly, the flash of red from a visiting ladybird brightens the leaves like a hidden gem, reminding me of the surprises nature offers when we take the time to truly look.

Caring for my Pink Flamingo tree has been a particularly grounding experience. From its delicate beginnings to the gradual unfurling of new leaves, this tree has come to symbolise hope, patience, and quiet strength. Watching it grow slowly through the seasons has taught me to value progress that is not always visible day, to day but reveals itself beautifully over time. It stands as a reminder that nurturing, whether of plants, people, or concepts, requires ongoing care and attention.

Additionally, my neighbour's garden offers its own quiet wonders, a tree and a flowering plant that gently cascade and peek over our adjoining wall. Until recently, I had never really noticed them. Perhaps they had always been there, quietly growing and changing with the seasons, waiting for me to slow down and really see them. Now, they capture my attention daily, the leaves shifting in the breeze, the flowers blooming in soft bursts of colour that brighten even the duller days.

I often find myself wondering what these plants are called, how old they are, and who chose them. Were they planted many years ago with care and intention, or did they arrive by chance and decide to stay? Their presence feels meaningful, as though they hold stories I will never fully know. They carry with them a sense of quiet history, rooted in the life of the garden and, perhaps, in the memories of the person who planted them.

Yet despite my curiosity, I have been unable to discover their names. My neighbour, who is now frail and seldom seen outdoors, might know the answer, but asking might cause confusion or concern. So, I remain content with the mystery. Instead of names, I have given them meaning through observation, noticing how the blossoms respond to the sun, or how the branches shift with the wind. In many ways, these plants have become a gentle, living bridge between us, a silent connection to me that nature does not just belong to those who actively tend it; it also belongs to those who take the time to notice it. These shared glimpses over the wall are enough, a reminder that even in separate spaces, nature can quietly bind us together.

Working in an urban setting, I have come to realise that nature is never truly absent, it is simply waiting to be noticed. Amid the busy streets, tall buildings, and constant movement, small pockets of life quietly thrive. I see weeds growing confidently through cracked concrete, birds settling on rooftops, and wildflowers springing up at the edges of playground fences. In my setting, children delight in spotting these little signs of life, a ladybird crawling along a fence, or a snail slowly making its way across the playground. Even the bees appear angry, especially in the recent warm weather. These everyday encounters have shifted my view of the urban environment and deepened my understanding of how children engage with nature.

My garden initiative offers a rich, hands-on learning space that supports key principles of sustainability. Whilst engaging in planting, water conservation, and observing wildlife, I encourage my curiosity and foster a sense of responsibility.

My setting is more than a concrete space; it is a foundation for lifelong environmental protection, helping children understand their impact on the world and inspiring them to be active, thoughtful contributors to a sustainable future.

I have learned that connection to the natural world does not rely on wide open spaces; it can begin in the smallest observations, even in the heart of a city. This awareness has reinforced my commitment to creating opportunities for children to explore and care for their environment, fostering curiosity.

Academic Writing

Now I will consider my academic research for Sustainability in the Early Years.

Sustainability in early childhood education is increasingly recognised as a fundamental component of quality provision, with early years settings playing an integral role in laying the foundations for environmentally responsible thinking (Jordan, 2023 and Yildiz *et al.*, 2021). Research highlights that introducing sustainability from a young age supports the development of ecological literacy, empathy, and global citizenship (Fisher and Lombardi, 2025; Watt and Frydenberg, 2024). The early years are an integral window for shaping attitudes and behaviours that can lead to long-term sustainable action (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2025; Kos *et al.*, no date),

From a Froebelian perspective, nature is not only a context for learning but an integral element of the child's holistic development. Froebel viewed the child as intrinsically connected to the natural world, and his pedagogy emphasised hands-on, outdoor experiences such as gardening and observation of natural phenomena (Froebel Trust, 2022; Kemp and Josephidou, 2023 and Watts, no date). This philosophy aligns with the view that sustainability education should be experiential and rooted in a sense of wonder and respect for life (Beaver and Borgerding, 2023). The Froebelian emphasis on unity and interconnectedness resonates with modern ecological thinking, supporting the idea that even the youngest children are capable of forming meaningful relationships with the environment (Flemig and McNair 2022).

Similarly, the Reggio Emilia approach positions the environment as the "third teacher" and promotes sustainability through inquiry-based learning, collaboration, and the use of recycled and natural materials (Fondazione Reggio Children, 2025). Children are seen as capable and competent citizens whose voices should be included in conversations about care, responsibility, and change. This aligns with Hedefalk *et al.*,

(2024) view that early childhood education should involve children in active, reflective processes that build understanding of environmental systems and human impact.

Both approaches support the broader educational aim of fostering ethical, informed citizens, as outlined in the Curriculum for Wales and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. They show that sustainability is not an add-on but an integral part of early childhood pedagogy, rooted in respectful relationships, critical thinking, and a deep connection to the world around us (Jordan, 2023 and UNESCO, 2017).

Additionally, Montessori education promotes sustainability by encouraging children to care for their environment, use natural resources thoughtfully, and develop a deep respect for nature. Through real-life, hands-on activities, children learn to be responsible, independent, and mindful of their impact on the world. This nurtures a lifelong connection to the earth and supports sustainable living from an early age (Nature, 2024).

In Wales, sustainability in early years education is closely aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which underpins all policy and practice involving children. Article 29 states that education should develop respect for the natural environment, placing a clear responsibility on professional practitioners to promote environmental awareness and action from an early age. Likewise, Article 24 recognises children's right to the highest standard of health and a clean environment, further reinforcing the importance of sustainability in protecting their future well-being (Haslett *et al.*, 2018).

Through Article 12, children also have the right to express their views and be involved in decisions that affect them. In practice, this might include involving children in recycling schemes, gardening, or discussions about energy saving, whilst encouraging agency and responsibility. Additionally, outdoor play, protected under Article 31, supports a connection with nature and contributes to physical and emotional development (Tinney and Hirst, 2017).

By embedding sustainability into early years practice, professional practitioners are not only supporting environmental goals but actively fulfilling children's rights as set out in

the UNCRC, something reinforced in Wales through the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Children's Rights Approach promoted by the Welsh Government (Children in Wales, no date; Holland, 2017 and Murphy and Davies, 2022).

Furthermore, the UNCRC and the Welsh Curriculum both support children learning to care for themselves, others, and the world around them. Through play and real-life authentic experiences, children learn to look after nature, make good choices, and be kind and fair (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2025; Holland, 2018 and Welsh Government, 2025). They are listened to and encouraged to take part in their learning, helping them grow into confident, caring individuals who can make a difference in their world (Merrick, 2023).

Moreover, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro marked a pivotal moment in global efforts to promote sustainable development. One of its key outcomes, *Agenda 21*, emphasised the importance of education in achieving sustainability, highlighting that learning should begin in early childhood. This global framework supports the concept that young children should be listened to, involved in their learning, and empowered to care for the world around them. By fostering curiosity, empathy, and responsibility through real-life experiences, the early years of education can nurture confident, caring individuals who are equipped to make a positive difference in their communities and the environment (UNESCO, 2014 and UNESCO, 2024).

Additionally, John Meyer views sustainability as more than environmental awareness; it is about helping children understand their connection to the wider world and their role within it (Frank, John and Meyer, no date). In the early years, his approach encourages real-life, meaningful experiences that build care, responsibility, and critical thinking. (Dewey, 1938). This aligns with the Four Purposes of the Curriculum for Wales by supporting children to become ethical, informed citizens who care for their communities and the planet, healthy individuals who thrive in natural environments, ambitious learners who ask questions about the world around them, and creative contributors who take thoughtful action to make a difference (Welsh Government, 2020). Through this, sustainability becomes a natural part of how children live and learn (Estyn, 2024).

Moreover, in the early years, sustainability is supported by the Welsh Government's 7 Well-being Goals, which guide how we nurture children to care for themselves, others, and the world around them. These goals promote learning that encourages curiosity, kindness, and responsibility (Welsh Government, no date and Welsh Government, 2015). By connecting with nature, celebrating culture, and learning through play, children begin to understand their role in creating a fair, healthy, and sustainable future (UNESCO, 2025). They learn to value the environment, make thoughtful choices, and develop the confidence to contribute to their communities and the wider world. These early foundations help build a generation ready to care for the planet (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, no date and Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2016).

Critique

However, implementing sustainability in early years settings in Wales presents several challenges. Funding remains a key barrier, as projects like gardening, composting, or water-saving systems often require upfront investment that many settings cannot afford (Barry and Boyd, 2022). Time and staff training also impact progress; professional practitioners need support and professional development to confidently embed sustainability into everyday practice yet often face limited time and resources (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019). Additionally, equity is a concern; settings in more disadvantaged areas may lack access to outdoor spaces, materials, or community support, resulting in unequal opportunities for children to engage with sustainability (Cooper, 2015 and Evelyn *et al.*, 2024). Overcoming these challenges requires coordinated support at local and national levels to ensure all children can benefit from sustainable education (Centre for Environment Education, no date and Kioupi and Voulvoulis, 2022).

Furthermore, a key barrier to embedding sustainability meaningfully in early years practice is the presence of rigid or overly structured timetables (Somerville and Williams, 2015 and Wood and Hedges, 2016). When the daily timetable is dominated by fixed routines and short activity blocks, opportunities for sustained, experiential learning,

particularly outdoors, can be significantly limited (Schroth, 2023). Sustainability education in early childhood relies heavily on child-led exploration, real-world experiences, and time spent in nature (Louv, 2019). These approaches are fundamental to developing environmental awareness, responsibility, and critical thinking, all of which are reflected in the Four Purposes of the Curriculum for Wales, particularly in developing ethical, informed citizens and healthy, confident individuals (Somerville and Williams, 2015 and Tinney and Hirst, 2017).

Timetabling that prioritises formal learning outcomes over holistic development may restrict the flexibility required to engage in meaningful sustainability practices, such as gardening, composting, recycling, or observing seasonal change. As a result, sustainability can become tokenistic, presented through isolated topics or brief activities, rather than embedded in daily routines and values (Hays and Reinders, 2020 and University College London, 2023).

This challenge also contrasts with the vision of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which calls for long-term thinking, preventative approaches, and integrated action to support a resilient, healthy, and globally responsible Wales (Welsh Government, 2015). For early years settings to align with this national vision, there is a need for more flexible, responsive timetables that allow children the time to connect deeply with nature, explore sustainable practices meaningfully, and develop a lasting sense of responsibility for their environment (Welsh Government, 2015).

Conclusion

To conclude, sustainability in the early years is essential for fostering lifelong attitudes of care, responsibility, and environmental awareness (Davis, 2015). When embedded meaningfully, it supports children's holistic development and aligns closely with the Four Purposes of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020) and the vision set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, which promotes long-term thinking and a globally responsible Wales (Welsh Government, 2015).

However, while the intent is clear in national policy, its implementation can be inconsistent (Stewart, MacDonald and Waters-Davies, 2024 and Stewart, MacDonald

and Waters-Davies, 2025). Barriers such as rigid timetables, limited resources, and a lack of practitioner confidence may hinder sustainability from becoming a lived, everyday experience for young children (Sommerville and Willians, 2015). For genuine impact sustainability must be integrated into daily routines, supported by flexible planning, outdoor learning, and ongoing professional development (Siraj-Blatchford, Smith and Samuelsson, 2016). By doing so, early years settings can empower children to become active, informed citizens capable of shaping a more sustainable future (Tinney, 2025).

Thank you for your attendance this morning. It is much appreciated.

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