

## **Presentation script**

Good afternoon, my name is Hayley Severs, welcome to my presentation for Regaining Paradise, sustainability in the early years.

As part of this module, I decided to focus my John Muir award on my own family garden, the space is approximately half an acre on the upper south side of the Mabws valley. This is a space that is very important to me, as we have been developing it from farm grazing land over the last 10 years, a place my own children have found a love of nature, and I have inspired many other children through my previous role as a childminder. During the last month I have looked at this space in greater detail than I ever have before, often sitting and watching for hours on end, noticing new and wonderful things but also realising that there was a lot lacking. As spring turned to summer and the house martins returned, I noticed that despite their best efforts, their nests were falling, due to the long dry spring they did not have enough access to wet mud. I noticed a lack of diversity in our neatly kept lawn with only 3 or four species of flora claiming it as home, and realised on putting the bins out, that our waste was mostly fruit and vegetable packaging. I set to it to make some changes, creating wildlife corridors between wild areas by leaving the grass to grow, leaving damp exposed mud for the house martins, creating vegetable beds surrounded by wild borders to replace some of our shop bought veg and creating bee hotels for the solitary bees. What I never expected was for these small changes to have such an impact, we saw hedgehogs for the first time in many years, the bees moved straight in, house martins have fledged and we've had wildflowers appear from nowhere. The John Muir award has not only drawn my attention to the small things that can be done to make a positive impact, but also of the importance of bathing in nature and taking time to notice things that we may otherwise be oblivious to.

I would like to close this section a short video of my experience.

## **Poem and video**

A walk in my garden shows how far we've come; A barren farm pasture was where we began.

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Our own piece of heaven, half an acre or so, a place to call ours where our family can grow

For 10 years we searched for what was destroyed, through intensive grazing and the practices employed

We built our home brick by brick from the ground and in so we realised there was no one else around

The nature was lacking, hardly creature to see, the soil was barren barely an ant or a bee.

We pledged to make a difference, for the generations to come, and started a plan of what now must be done.

We started with solar, ground source and more, to lessen our impact and heat lost out the door.

We planted trees and restored the ancient stone wall, but things were still missing this was all too small.

We pondered and questioned to what's going on, where had the magical wilderness gone.

Our children were growing, their environment rich, a life full of nurture and then flicked a switch

Just like our children nature needs time, to grow and develop, to be at its prime

The frogs had no home, and the nests were still falling the grass was too short and no birds were calling.

We came up with a plan to fix all this mess, it's only our garden but no effort is worthless.

We built bee houses in old dried out logs, and left highways for beetles and prickly hedgehogs.

We dug out a pond and let wildflowers grow. Planted our own food and let our community know.

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The flowers grew strong, like never before, and house martins danced in the sky once more.

The pond filled with critters from skaters to newts.

The magic returned with petals and roots

Our quest is not over and more must be done, but we'll keep on working come rain or come sun.

The lesson we're learning by being in the wild is nature needs protection and nurture just like a child

When child and environment are viewed as a whole, magical things happen that brighten your sole

A lifelong relationship that grows by the day, of mutual respect and prospects of play

Trees to be climbed and woods be explored, a world that's respected, protected, adored.

So, by starting at home in a space seen each day, we're reminding the next generation of the part that they play.

For when we make changes with passion and drive, nature gives back and supports us to thrive.

### **Critical evaluation**

I would now like to move on to a critical evaluation of sustainability in the early years

The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) act 2015 sets out 7 connected goals for Wales including A globally responsible Wales, but what does this mean and how does it relate to early years?

Sustainability is often viewed with idea of protecting the environment (Samuelsson and Park, 2017), however the United Nations (no date) define sustainability as, considering the environment along with the economy to ensure current societal needs can be met without jeopardising the needs of future generations. Furthermore, Davies (2010) suggests that sustainability is the relationship between how resources are managed in a biodiverse world, which must consider intergenerational equity, thus

complementing the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) act 2015, the act promotes the consideration of the impact Wales has as part of an interconnected world, where improving Welsh economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing must be considered along side the global impact this causes both in the present and the future (Taylor, 2024). With the health of the planet and the health of the global population being so closely linked, and many global economies on the brink of collapse, the next generation will be the one who feel this global crisis most deeply (Davies, 2010), In response to this , UNESCO (no date) have created Education for Sustainable development (ESD) , a programme which aims to empower young people with the knowledge and mindset to live sustainably in a way which benefits the environment, society and the economy, recognising climate change as a priority area of ESD. Furthermore, The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings places an emphasis of the value of being immersed in nature for developing a child's awareness of their impact on the environment and the world around them (Education Wales, 2024) However, a generational shift in how children play has resulted in children having a greater reliance on adults to access the outdoor world (Watts, 2022), with children spending considerably less time outdoors than previous generations (Waite *et al.* 2021) furthermore, parental anxiety and lack of safe outdoor environments is a contributing factor in inequitable access to outdoor play, seeing access to green spaces halved in one generation (Sandseter *et al.* 2019 and Waite *et al.* 2021) additionally, with settings listing many barriers to outdoor learning including, lack of confidence in the educators ability to meet needs of the curriculum, manage risk and behaviour and lack of access to suitable environments and clothing (Learning through landscapes, no date) access to these immersive environments is not always easy. Thus, resulting in inequity in the ability for those wishing to access programmes such as the John Muir award where the main objective is to connect with wild places and in doing so aiming to protect them (John Muir Trust, no date). However, reframing what is perceived as a green space or natural environment, may help in breaking down barriers to accessing outdoor spaces (Waite *et al.* 2021), with the John Muir award stating that the green space explored as part of the award can be in any environment, and of any size, as long as nature has the opportunity to thrive there (John Muir trust, no date).

There is growing evidence to show the holistic benefits of spending time immersed in nature, although somewhat anecdotal, nature immersion appears to increase academic attainment and wellbeing (McCree, Cutting, and Sherwin, 2018. Pimlott-Wilson and Coates, 2019. Tiplady, 2018. Tiplady, and Menter, 2020). Furthermore, being outdoors provides children with rich learning opportunities, supporting the promotion of skills identified in the four purposes of the curriculum for Wales, supporting the holistic development of future generations (Education Wales, 2022). However, Davies and Hamilton, (2016) state that there are still practitioners that cannot see the benefit in being outdoors, believing that deeper learning can be achieved indoors, furthermore Education Wales (2023) state that with the implementation of the curriculum for Wales allowing settings to write their own curriculum, many settings do not understand the value or implementation of an outdoor pedagogy and need greater direction to steer them away from ad hoc outdoor play. Wainwright, (1973) said "There's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing.", The Outdoor Guide Foundation (2025) aims to provide every state funded school in the UK with ten sets of wellingtons and waterproofs, to enable children to access the outdoors in all weather, a sentiment which echoes Froebel's pedagogy, which suggested the importance of children spending time outdoors every day, in all weather, where an interconnection between child, educator and the environment is mutually beneficial (Watts, 2022). It was this belief in a rich immersive education in nature, through exploration and experimentation that allowed the children in Froebel's care to gain a deep hands on cross curricular understanding of the world around them and the knock on effects of their actions to their peers, communities and environments (Reed, 2012) Froebel's pedagogy is echoed by Samuelsson and Park (2017) who stress that children must be given the opportunity to give meaning to their learning, being immersed in the subject rather than repeating worksheets, furthermore, where children are able to immerse themselves in nature, they invite educators to join them in the experiences opening up the opportunity for deeper exploration and the opportunity for the educators to draw the child's attention to matters of sustainability (Watts, 2022). However, Samuelsson and Park (2017) stress that although learning about sustainability begins at birth, it should be done so with high quality education, supported by highly qualified educators who have a great understanding of sustainability and value the voice of the child. Nevertheless, Van der Klink *et al.* (2017)

explain that practitioners often feel there is little support in accessing continued professional development, and the onus to ensure they are fully educated and up to date on evolving educational policies often falls on the individual practitioner, furthermore research by Dymont *et al.* (2013) suggests that providing practitioners with initial training on education for sustainability (ESD) can have an impact on how sustainable values are promoted in settings, however for ESD to be truly effective, providers need to be confident in their abilities and ESD values need to be deeply embedded in to the early years curriculum, However, universities such as the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, ensure that Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship are deeply embedded in their early years courses, promoting the next generation of practitioners that work with sustainability in mind (Tinney and Merriman, 2018)

Where the curriculum values the children's voice, allowing the child to think critically and question what they are presented with, children gain greater understanding, empathy and connection with their peers, community and environment (Samuelsson and Park, 2017) With Wales having laws which promote both the United Nations convention for the right of the child (UNCRC) and Sustainable development goals, (these are Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011), it would be easy to assume that these laws should work together (Williams, 2021). However, although policy is in place to promote sustainability goals alongside those which promote the child's rights, there has historically been a discrepancy in how these 2 agendas can work together (Croke *et al.* 2021). The UNCRC states in article 12 that children have the right to their views, feelings and wishes to be considered at all times (UNICEF, 2019), however, Croke *et al.* (2019) suggest more needs to be done to promote children's agency in matters that affect them, with policy being driven from the top down and little input or consideration of the views of the children who are directly impacted by this policy.

With the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales, Wales is moving towards a more connected approach to a rights based sustainable education (Williams, 2021). The curriculum puts the UNCRC at the heart of new curriculum (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2022). Through the four purposes, the curriculum encourages children to be ethical informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of the world and Wales, directly linking with Article 29 of the UNCRC which states that education must foster a

respect for the natural environments, the rights of other and global cultures. Furthermore, sustainability is a mandatory requirement under the curriculum for Wales, and with schools being at the heart of every Welsh community it is important to take a collaborative approach, including the voice of the child to ensure children are provided with an education that not only meets their needs but also allows them to thrive as citizens of the world (Miles, 2022). Furthermore, the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings sets out play as a main area of its pedagogy, stating that play is fundamental to a child's learning (Education Wales, 2024), directly linking to the UNCRC article 31, which states that every child has the right to play (UNICEF, 2019). Additionally, The Wildlife trust (2024) found that through children spending time in nature, through challenges such as 30 Days Wild, children felt an increased connection to nature, and were more likely to show conservation behaviours, furthermore the Education Wales (2024) state that spending time outdoors provides children with a deeper empathy for their environment, and the resulting effects of their actions on the world.

In conclusion, there is much evidence to support the importance of ensuring children are immersed in a rich and varied outdoor education that has a focus on sustainability. Many pedagogies have used nature as the foundation to their approach with a focus on the benefits of being outdoors not only on a child's learning but also on their holistic wellbeing, however with generational shifts, accessing the outdoors feels more difficult than ever with many practitioners feeling conflicted between expectations and ideals. Policy and targets at macro level are drivers as to how education is being implemented at micro level, with Global, national and local policy makers, all having an input in how sustainable education is delivered with little opportunity for children to have their say, However implementation ultimately lies with those working directly with children, their confidence and understanding in sustainability and their ability to promote education for sustainable development in a rights focused environment that allows children the freedom to experience the benefits of true unadulterated outdoor immersion. Through programmes such as the John Muir award or 30 days Wild, practitioners and children can work together to reap the benefits of learning outdoors and inspire the next generation of ethical informed citizens of the world.

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