

ECEY6005
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Sustainability in the Early Years.

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Appendix; I haven't used AI to help support me, with this assignment.

My name is Joelle Evans, and today I'm going to share my reflections on completing the John Muir Award, focusing on the detailed digital scrapbook I created about Sandy Water Park in Llanelli. Engaging with this local space allowed me to explore, discover, and care for nature in a way that strongly reflects place based learning principles. Gruenewald (2003) emphasises that children learn best when they build meaningful connections with the environments they inhabit, and Sandy Water Park offered a rich, familiar landscape for this kind of learning. As I reflect on my experience, I'll also draw on experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984) highlights that deep learning happens through hands on exploration, reflection, and active engagement. The John Muir Award embodies this cycle, encouraging learners to move beyond observing nature to interacting with it, questioning it, and caring for it. I will then move on to critically evaluate how experiences like these can support education for sustainability in the early years. Sustainability education, as described by Davis (2010), focuses on nurturing children's capacity to care, act, and think critically about the world around them. Experiences such as those in the John Muir Award help children develop positive environmental attitudes from a young age, emotional connection to nature, and an understanding of connection, ideas reflected in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which reminds us that children's development is shaped by the environments they interact with daily (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). By grounding the John Muir experience in these theoretical perspectives, outdoor, nature based learning can be understood as a powerful foundation for sustainability thinking in early childhood, aligning with wider early years sustainability guidance such as Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2010), who emphasise everyday experiences, connection, fairness, and children's active participation.

Building on this, I want to briefly share where I explored and what I discovered during my John Muir journey. I chose Sandy Water Park in Llanelli because it is a calm, quiet space rich in wildlife, and it is also a place that holds deep personal meaning for me. Growing up in Llanelli, I spent many days here with my parents, and later with friends. Now, I bring my own children it's where they learned to ride their bikes, where we walk our dog Betsi, and where we found moments of calm during difficult times. This strong emotional connection reflects place based learning, as Gruenewald (2003) highlights how personal attachment to a place strengthens learning and reflection.

As I explored, I noticed things I had never truly paid attention to before. Around the pond, there are information boards that share facts about the wildlife, plants, and history of the area. These encouraged me to slow down and look more closely. In one area, the grass had been left long, and I observed bees moving between flowers and butterflies resting on the wild patch. I later learned that the long grass is intentionally maintained to support pollinators, a simple but powerful example of local sustainability practice. I also noticed a flower bud that looked just like a tiny tomato before it opened, and deeper in the bushes I found blackberry plants at different stages of ripening. These hands on observations align with experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), as my understanding grew through direct observation, curiosity, and reflection.

I spent time watching the pond wildlife too. I noticed lily pads floating across the surface, creating shelter for insects and adding to the calmness of the water. Some swans swam together while others stayed alone, and after researching this, I discovered that swans usually mate for life, so solitary swans may be waiting for a partner or may have lost one. I also watched people feeding the ducks, some offered appropriate food, while others fed bread, which can harm water quality and wildlife health. Along the path, I noticed signs reminding visitors not to feed bread and explaining how to protect the wildlife. These small observations helped me think critically about human impact and how everyday actions shape local ecosystems. As I walked the path, I noticed how many people used the space for wellbeing gentle walks, quiet moments, time in nature. This reminded me of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasises how environments influence human development and emotional regulation (Bronfenbrenner, U.1979). Sandy Water Park clearly supports both wildlife and community wellbeing. There is also a small woodland area, and as you walk around the pond, you can look out towards the beach. The mix of habitats pond, woodland, grassland, coastal views made me realise how diverse this local space is and how much potential it holds for children's learning. Exploring Sandy Water Park helped me understand sustainability in a more personal and meaningful way. Sustainability is not just a concept, it is something lived and experienced. Davis (2010) argues that sustainability education in the early years should nurture children's capacity to care, act, and think critically, and my exploration showed me how powerful this can be.

After exploring the area with my daughters, we came home inspired to take action. We built and painted bird boxes for our garden to support local wildlife, and during a family visit to their grandparents, the girls also helped plant new flowers from the local garden centre and watered them, discussing why plants need care and how flowers support pollinators. These small acts of stewardship reflect the values of the John Muir Award, discover, explore, conserve, share and demonstrate how outdoor experiences can spark real change in children's attitudes and behaviours. This experience made me think deeply about how children connect with nature. When children experience the natural world directly, they begin to understand their role within it. They notice, they care, and they want to help. This aligns with education for sustainability guidance from Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2010), who emphasise that early childhood is the ideal time to build environmental responsibility.

This experience has strengthened my belief in learner led outdoor exploration. Watching my own children become inspired by nature reminded me how powerful learning that grows from children's interests can be. This has shaped my thinking about my practice, where I want to provide regular opportunities for children to explore local natural spaces, follow their curiosity, and engage in hands on discovery. These experiences help children take small stewardship actions, planting, caring for wildlife, noticing environmental changes which aligns with Davis (2010) and his emphasis on early childhood as a crucial time for developing environmental responsibility. I also want to use outdoor environments to support wellbeing, regulation, and emotional connection, reflecting Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the importance of children's immediate surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, U.1979). This experience has absolutely changed my thinking about the importance of outdoor learning. I have always valued nature, but the John Muir Award helped me see how structured exploration, combined with personal reflection, can deepen children's understanding of sustainability and inspire real action.

Building on my reflections so far, it is important to briefly introduce what is meant by sustainability and why it is so relevant to early childhood education. Sustainability is commonly defined using the description provided in Our Common Future, where the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) emphasises meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

This definition places children at the centre of sustainability discussions, because they are those future generations. The global commitment to sustainability was strengthened through the Rio Earth Summit (1992) and later through the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), which emphasise environmental protection, social justice, and economic wellbeing. These international frameworks highlight that sustainability is not only about caring for nature, but also about developing responsible individuals who understand interdependence and global responsibility.

In Wales, sustainability is embedded within national policy through the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Welsh Government, 2015), which legally requires the public to work in ways that protect the planet and support long term wellbeing. This aligns closely with the Curriculum for Wales, particularly the purpose of developing ethical, informed individuals who show commitment to sustainability and community (Welsh Government, 2022). Children's rights also underpin this work. Article 29 of the UNCRC states that education should prepare children to live responsibly and respectfully, including towards the natural environment (UNCRC, 1989). This connects strongly to the Welsh concept of *Cynefin*, which refers to belonging, rootedness, and understanding one's place in the world. When children explore local spaces such as Sandy Water Park, they develop a sense of *Cynefin*, a deep connection to place that supports both identity and stewardship (Adams, D. 2022).

Understanding sustainability in the early years requires recognising that young children learn through relationships, experiences, and emotional connection. Sustainability education, as described by Davis (2010), emphasises nurturing dispositions such as curiosity, empathy, responsibility, and care. Early years frameworks in Wales, including Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship and the Curriculum for Non Maintained Settings, emphasise belonging, care for the natural world, active participation, and understanding interdependence (Welsh Government, 2022). However, these principles do not always translate into practice. Financial pressures, limited access to high quality outdoor spaces, staffing ratios, and resource constraints can make it difficult for settings to provide regular outdoor learning or sustainability experiences. For example, not all families or settings can afford plants, seeds, or materials for activities, and some communities

lack safe green spaces. This creates gaps in children's access to sustainability learning.

My John Muir experience supports sustainability education in several key ways. Firstly, connecting with nature is fundamental. During my exploration of Sandy Water Park, I observed insects, plants, pollinators, birds, and lily pads. This direct connection with nature is central to sustainability education. Froebel believed that children learn best through close contact with nature, describing it as "the great educator" (Froebel, 1887). Malaguzzi similarly emphasised the environment as the "third teacher," suggesting that natural spaces provoke curiosity, creativity, and emotional connection (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012). Piaget also supports this view, arguing that children construct knowledge through active exploration and interaction with their surroundings, experiences in nature offer children valuable opportunities to explore ideas and deepen their understanding through hands on engagement (Piaget, 1923). Together, these perspectives highlight that natural environments are not simply settings for learning, but active, responsive spaces that shape children's thinking, emotions, and development. Research shows that when children build positive relationships with nature, they are more likely to develop pro environmental attitudes (Chawla, 2009). My observations of bees, butterflies, swans, ducks, and human impact such as feeding bread helped me understand how small everyday actions shape ecosystems. This aligns with education for sustainability principles, which encourage children to notice, care, and act (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2010). My personal connection to Sandy Water Park strengthened this further because the place holds memories from my childhood and now my children's childhoods, I felt a deeper sense of responsibility. This mirrors the Welsh concept of Cynefin, where belonging to a place encourages stewardship (Welsh Government, 2022).

Secondly, hands on practical learning plays a vital role in sustainability education, and this was evident throughout my exploration of Sandy Water Park. As we walked around the pond, my daughters asked questions about the different species of ducks and swans, why some swans stayed together while others swam alone, and why certain areas of grass had been left long. These moments of curiosity became opportunities for practical investigation, looking closely at plants, comparing habitats,

and researching wildlife behaviours when we returned home. This type of active engagement reflects Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), where children learn through doing, reflecting, and acting. Froebel emphasised practical activity such as observing, collecting, and caring for natural materials as essential for understanding the world (Froebel, 1887), while Montessori highlighted how purposeful, hands on tasks build independence and responsibility (Montessori, 1967). Through these experiences, my children were not only connecting with nature emotionally, but also developing problem solving skills, understanding cause and effect, and engaging in early scientific thinking all key principles of Education for Sustainable Development (Davis, 2010). This demonstrates how outdoor learning can move children from awareness to action, which is a core aim of sustainability education.

Thirdly, learning from nature and taking action are central to both the John Muir Award and the Curriculum for Wales. The John Muir Award encourages learners to discover, explore, conserve, and share (John Muir Trust, 2024) values that align directly with Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship and the Curriculum for Wales. Through my exploration, I learned how small actions such as planting, building, noticing, and questioning contribute to sustainability. This supports the Curriculum for Wales aim of developing ethical, informed individuals who understand their impact, show care for their environment, act to improve their world, and feel a sense of belonging (Welsh Government, 2022). My experience showed how outdoor learning can inspire children to take meaningful action, even in small ways.

However, while experiences like the John Muir Award offer rich sustainability learning opportunities, there are also challenges and limitations. Access to safe, high quality outdoor spaces varies across communities, and time pressures or curriculum demands may limit opportunities for outdoor learning. Staff confidence in delivering sustainability education can vary, and experiences may focus too heavily on environmental aspects while overlooking social or economic sustainability (Huckle & Sterling, 2014). Weather, staffing ratios, and risk assessments can also restrict opportunities. Reflecting critically, my own John Muir experience was rich environmentally but less focused on social or economic sustainability. This reflects a wider challenge in early years education, where environmental sustainability is often

prioritised because it is more visible, easier to access, and more comfortable for practitioners to deliver. However, Education for Sustainable Development emphasises that sustainability must be understood holistically, this requires a balance of all three pillars environmental, social, and economic to support children in developing a rounded understanding of how people, communities, and the natural world are interconnected (UNESCO, 2014). In lectures, we discussed how sustainability can become tokenistic if not embedded meaningfully, and how settings need support, training, and resources to deliver high quality sustainability education consistently.

In conclusion, sustainability is a global, national, and educational priority grounded in children's rights, wellbeing, and belonging. Experiences like the John Muir Award exploring nature, noticing wildlife, taking action, and reflecting strongly support sustainability education in the early years. They align with key theories, Welsh policy frameworks, and the Curriculum for Wales, helping children become ethical, informed individuals with a deep sense of Cynefin (Adams, D. 2022). My exploration of Sandy Water Park showed me how powerful learner led outdoor experiences can be. They inspire curiosity, connection, and action, and they remind us that sustainability begins with noticing the world around us and caring enough to protect it.

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