***ECEY6005 : Regaining Paradise : sustainability in the early years***

**My Chosen Area: Our Family Allotment**

My chosen area for this project is our family's allotment. We've had the plot for a short time, but during that time, it has become so much more than a place to grow vegetables. Together, as a family, we've been working to restore parts of it into a natural space where wildlife can thrive. It includes raised beds filled with vegetables and flowers, compost bins to recycle food and garden waste, and water butts that collect rainwater to help support the plants and pond if they need a helping hand. At the top of the allotment, we've even created a small wildlife pond — a peaceful little haven that is already attracting a range of species.

This has been a real family project. My little boy, Harrison, has been involved every step of the way. One of his proudest contributions has been painting two bug hotels with environment friendly paint. These small shelters encourage insects and pollinators, and they've been a brilliant way to introduce Harrison to the importance of biodiversity and caring for nature.

The allotment is located in Townhill, Swansea, and is part of a larger shared space where several families each have their own plot. It is a very special place for my family. My dad grew up in this area and has countless fond memories here, especially spending time outdoors with friends and neighbours. Many of those same locals still work their plots nearby, and there's a real sense of community and shared purpose. That connection to the area — and to the people in it — made choosing this allotment feel natural. It holds a lot of emotional value and restoring it has helped us reconnect with our roots.

When we first took it on, the allotment was quite overgrown. Since then, we've slowly transformed it into a vibrant, green space full of life and activity. It's not just about growing food — although we've had great success with tomatoes, runner beans, carrots, sunflowers, broccoli, cauliflower, courgettes, sweetcorn, potatoes, and marigolds. These plants have attracted so much wildlife, from bees and butterflies to toads, ladybirds, and all sorts of garden birds. We've loved watching the space change with the seasons and seeing nature respond to the care we've given it.

As part of maintaining the site, we've taken simple but meaningful actions that help the environment. We've composted our food waste, used rainwater instead of tap water (which

actually helped the plants grow better), and planted wildflowers to attract pollinators. Harrison especially enjoyed decorating the insect hotels and checking who had moved in each week. The small pond has also become a central feature for wildlife.

This experience has deepened my own understanding of sustainability in practical and personal ways. It's shown me how everyday choices — like composting, using recycled materials, and thinking about how much water we use — can have a real impact. I've started to think more carefully about where our food comes from, how much we waste, and how we have to be gentler to the planet. It's made sustainability feel achievable, not overwhelming. Working on this allotment alongside my family has inspired me to keep learning, keep improving, and to do what I can to protect and nurture the natural world around us.

Part 2

Engaging in regular, direct experiences in nature significantly aligns with the principles present in early years education, with a focus on sustainability. Approaches like Montessori, Reggio Emelia and Forest School prioritise experiential, hands-on learning, fostering children's connections with their environment, promoting independence and care for the world around them (Drew, 2024). In the Montessori approach, children are motivated to learn through hands-on experiences, utilising authentic tools and participating in meaningful activities. This learning can happen naturally, by planting seeds, using rainwater when caring for plants and investigating bug hotels, children start to grasp the concepts of cause and effect of nature. The Montessori method emphasises respect for both the child and their surroundings, which is closely connected to sustainability education (Gynther & Ahlquist, 2022).

The Reggio Emelia approach promotes sustainability education by viewing the environment as a vital 'third teacher'. This philosophy creates learning spaces that foster inquiry, creativity and appreciation for nature (Yufiarti, Fidesinur, & Garzia, 2022). Utilising natural material, encouraging open-ended exploration and documenting children's thoughts all help to establish a stronger connection with their surroundings. Reggio educators see children as capable and inquisitive, integrating sustainability through collaborative projects, seasonal observations and motivating children to care for their shared environment. This framework nurtures reflective and socially responsible learners from a young age (Robson, 2016). Within

Reggio Emelia environments, sustainability is integrated through active engagement with the community. Projects often include partnerships with local organisations, parents and artists that inspire children to view themselves as engaged members of their environment. This link to the community reinforces the social aspect of sustainability, fostering empathy, cooperation and responsibility in children (Mineo, 2023).

The Forest School ethos aligns with these experiences. It advocates for child-led, play based learning in natural environments, fostering exploration, problem solving and resilience (Chan, 2024). The key principles of Forest School further enhance this approach to learning. It promotes emotional resilience in children through consistent outdoor experiences (Blackham, Cocks, & Bunce, 2021). Engaging in activities like pond maintenance, interacting with local wildlife habitats, or observing changes with the seasons reflect the emphasis on discovery and connection to the environment. These activities cultivate a sense of wonder and responsibility, which are essential elements of sustainability education in early childhood (Cudworth & Lumber, 2021).

Research shows that connecting children with nature early on fosters positive attitudes and behaviours towards the environment (DeVille, et al. 2021). These insights underscore the importance of motivating young children to explore, ask questions and engage with their natural surroundings as part of their initial education experience. By taking part in nature focused activities, children are then equipped to become more proactive and responsible learners, while developing the skills and mindset that is needed to promote a more sustainable future (Palmberg & Kuru, 2010).

While these nature-based experiences that are heavily focused on sustainability have many advantages, there are certain limitations to be aware of. Not all early year's settings have access to green spaces, particularly in deprived areas (Fernandes, et al. 2023). Factors such as time constraints, curriculum requirements and lack of training can hinder practitioners from integrating sustainably focused education (Parry & Metzger, 2023) . Additionally, there may be safety concerns, inadequate outdoor space or limited financial resources to support these activities like composting, gardening, or water saving. These obstacles can lead to disparities in the quality of education. To address these issues, the Welsh Government and local authorities provide a variety of initiatives and funding opportunities. For instance, the Welsh Governments Eco-School's Programme, and is run by Keep Wales Tidy (Welsh Government,

2024). These initiatives promote environmental awareness through child-led projects. These programmes supply guidance, resources, and a recognised reward system that encourages both children and practitioners to engage in practical sustainability efforts. Alongside this, initiatives such as Outdoor Learning Wales offer training, tool kits and professional assistance to support early years settings in developing outdoor learning approaches while advocating sustainable practices (Welsh Council for Outdoor Learning, 2021).

Certain local councils also provide grants for community gardening, nature-based education and biodiversity initiatives. These programmes are often backed by broader legislative frameworks, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which has a strong emphasis on sustainability and environmental care at the heart of all public service planning (Welsh Government, 2025). With ongoing government backing, professional development plans and local collaborations, early years settings can overcome obstacles and make sustainability a significant and attainable aspect of every child's educational experience.

Participating in the John Muir Award reflects several fundamental principles of early years education, especially those that shine a light on experiential and nature focused learning. The emphasis on active exploration, interacting with natural environments, and developing a sense of place aligns well with the philosophies of Froebel, Dewey and Steiner. Frobel's emphasis on learning through nature (Flemig & McNair,2022), Dewey's focus on experiential learning (Holdo, 2022), and Steiner's holistic view of the child (Stoltz, Weger, & Veiga, 2024) all reinforce the idea that meaningful learning happens through active, sensory-rich interactions with the environment. This award promotes opportunities for reflection, creativity and environmental awareness, all of which are connected to the principles of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (Welsh Government, 2012). Engaging in reflective activities, such as watching wildlife or considering our role, encourages critical thinking and aligns with the four aims of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2023). The Curriculum for Wales promotes the integration of the four purposes throughout all educational experiences, sustainability fits well under the aim of developing 'ethical, informed citizens'. For instance, children could participate in seasonal planting activities that connect to the 'Cycles and Changes' learning area, or utilise natural materials in creative projects that encourage recycling. These simple, daily practices demonstrate the objectives of the

curriculum. Alongside this, these activities uphold Article 29 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, no date), which highlight's a child's entitlement to an education that fosters respect for the environment, human rights and cultural identity.

The hands-on conservation work undertaken, such as painting bug hotels, planting wildflowers and maintaining the pond, align well with the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (Welsh Government, 2025). These activities provide children with practical experiences related to sustainability, allowing them to grasp it not just as a concept but as an action that they can engage in. Although the John Muir Award actively promotes environmental education, it could benefit from incorporating more themes relating to citizenship, including equality, social justice and community engagement. By broadening its focus, this award could achieve a better balance among the three pillars of sustainable development.

In conclusion, involving children in nature-based activities, such as those offered in the allotment project, creates valuable opportunities for learning, exploration, and fostering environmental awareness. When these activities are combined with educational philosophies like Montessori, Forest School, and Reggio Emilia, they encourage sustainability not just as an idea, but as an integral part of daily life. By engaging in hands-on conservation efforts, observation, and meaningful connections with the natural world, children can cultivate the values, attitudes, and skills necessary for caring for the planet and who they share it with. With careful execution, early childhood education can play a vital role in developing responsible, passionate, and environmentally aware future citizens.

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