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Part One Introduction & Reflection on Experience at Pen y Fan Pond

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INTRODUCTION

Hello and Welcome. Today I will be presenting a short presentation that focuses on the reflection of my John Muir award. Looking at why I chose this location, what was explored and how as a family we understand and view sustainability in our daily lives. This will then lead to an academic evaluation of sustainability through policy, curriculum, and theory.

Let's begin, the Location I shared in my John Muir award was Pen Y Fan Pond.

We all remember very well the events that took place on the 23rd March 2020. The whole world was taking action to advise everyone to stay home and protect yourself. We know this as that dreaded word 'Lock down'.

A deadly virus was being transmitted through the population of the world called the coronavirus, shortened to COVID-19.

The UK government encouraged people at this time to take part in a daily mile to look after their emotional and physical health.

Pen y Fan Pond became a place during the first lockdown of COVID–19 that, as a family we never knew we needed. It became a place of curiosity and discovery.

- As a mother, the worry was unbearable, protecting my children, worrying about work and unable to care for loved ones.
- Going to Pen Y Fan Pond, I was able to forget the worry of what is going on in the world for 10 minutes.
- Even though it didn't have swings or attractions tailored to children. My children absolutely loved it, they looked forward to going.

It was the very first walk we took as a family when restrictions began, and from that day forward, it became a daily ritual. Taking the children there provided structure to our lives in an uncertain time—it gave purpose to our days, grounded us in nature, and offered much-needed mental and emotional relief.

- And luckily the children absolutely loved it.
- Each visit brought new opportunities for exploration.
- We discovered frogs nestled in the undergrowth
- Fed ducks as they glided across the water.
- We even watched the changing seasons unfold around us.
- The children rode their scooters and bikes along the paths, and on quieter days, we brought snacks to sit together, take in the views, and absorb the calming sounds of the natural world.

Since then, our connection to the pond has deepened. We've welcomed a dog, Ralphy, into our family, and taking him for walks there has become part of our routine.

- Working only part-time, I get to share some quiet walks with him around the pond on my days off.
- Ralphy has made many four-legged friends along the way. Some of which have egged him on to jump in the shallow parts of the pond.
- We have even watched people fish, canoe, and swim in the water. I hold my breath with thoughts of how cold it would be.
- Horses sometimes wander through, and of course, the sheer excitement of the children seeing such a big animal at a touching distance, watching their faces.

While Pen Y Fan Pond holds cherished memories for our family, it has also become a place of healing and reconnection for our well-being. COVID-19 impacted each of us differently. Though we were fortunate not to lose any loved ones, we felt the loss of purpose and routine that once shaped our daily lives.

Returning to nature gave us back some of that rhythm. Our children clung to those daily walks, later drawing pictures of their adventures. These outings became more than just

moments of fresh air; they became windows for learning and growth. Their minds were ignited with curiosity, connecting experiences with the natural world around them.

Reflection on Sustainability Understanding and Engagement

What began as a simple need for routine evolved into a deeper awareness of our relationship with the natural environment. Daily contact with the pond ecosystem helped me appreciate how local green spaces play a crucial role in both personal well-being and community resilience. Observing wildlife up close, respecting the natural habitats we explored, and seeing others use space responsibly all contributed to my growing understanding of sustainability.

These walks encouraged a hands-on, lived experience of sustainable values: -

- slowing down, appreciating biodiversity
- recognising our shared responsibility to protect natural spaces
- They opened conversations with the children about the importance of looking after wildlife.
- We noticed a lot of litter, so we discussed the importance of not littering and how human actions, no matter how large or small, impact the environment.

Getting involved like that really changed how I see sustainability—not just as some big, global topic, but as something close to home and part of everyday life.

Reflection in the workplace.

- Recycling loose parts and resources.
- Understanding the purpose of creating outdoor play for children to explore.
- Creating Mud-type menus in the Mud kitchen. Mud pies, plant pastas
- Planting vegetables in our school ground greenhouse. Using great big potato bags.
- Also, planting flowers and digging up soil, creating a good foundation for all the new plants.

Reflection on my personal life.

My days out with children have changed. I would always pay to go to farms and attractions way out of the area. Aware of my carbon footprint, I now we enjoy local more 'affordable' (Free) attractions like:

Bryn Bach Farm – Another lovely lake with a 2 km path around it. Something our miniature daushaund struggles with on a hot day.

Parc Cwm Darren – another small pond with an adventure park around the outskirts of it. Lots of woods to get into and explore. Lots of squirrels and badger holes everywhere. Oh, and lots of fishermen.

The pond taught us the value of consistency, connection, and care. These are foundations of a more sustainable mindset that continues to influence how we live, play, and engage with our world.

This leads me on to part 2 of my presentation looking deeper into what sustainability is, linked with policy and theory.

PART TWO

What is sustainability?

Sustainability is commonly understood as using resources in ways that meet current needs while ensuring future generations can do the same. This definition became widely accepted after it was introduced by the United Nations Brundtland Commission in 1987, which sought to connect environmental protection with development goals (United Nations, no date). Building on this foundation, sustainable development broadens the concept by highlighting the importance of a connected strategy that gives equal consideration to environmental preservation, social fairness, and economic stability (United Nations, 1987). Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) encourages young children to play an active role in creating a sustainable future. It blends environmental, social, and economic themes into early learning, emphasising hands-on experiences, meaningful relationships, and core values such as responsibility and empathy. Sustainability Success (2024) outlines the three pillars of sustainable development as environmental, social, and economic, that are interconnected foundations. Working together, they help align policies, balance competing priorities, and maximise benefits across all areas. Tinney and Hirst (2018) suggest that sustainability in early childhood education is not limited to environmental awareness, it also involves fostering core value such as, social justice, wellbeing, and active citizenship. In Wales, this aligns with the national emphasis on Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) (UNECE,2009), promoting experiential learning that connects children meaningfully to their environment and communities. Barrable (2019) promotes a shift in early childhood environmental education, emphasising the importance of nurturing deep emotional connections with nature, rather than placing emphasis solely on acquiring knowledge. Her "pedagogy for

connection" emphasises the sustained nature of contact, appreciation of views, compassion for non-human life, and mindfulness. Therefore, nurturing wellbeing and promoting lifelong environmental stewardship. This approach complements Tinney and Hirst's (2018) view that sustainability in early years settings also includes the values mentioned regarding social justice, wellbeing, and active citizenship through meaningful, experiential learning.

The John Muir Award promotes sustainability by encouraging people to discover, explore, conserve, and share their connections with nature. It draws on meaningful relationships, enjoyment, and a sense of care, fostering a lasting commitment to protect the natural world (John Muir Trust, no date a). While the Award offers flexibility, its framework primarily emphasises structured activities and measurable outcomes. Activities such as conservation projects or sharing experiences (John Muir Trust, no date b) may unintentionally prioritise outcomes over the slow, "deep sensory connection to the natural environment that Barrable (2019) advocates. As a result, adaptations may be needed for younger children to ensure they develop emotional connections and engage in spontaneous discovery, rather than being led by outcome-driven tasks.

The Welsh Government's investment in creative, reflective, and socially responsible education demonstrates a clear commitment to the values enshrined in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. By aligning with Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC), this approach fosters not only academic growth but also the development of empathy, critical thinking, and active citizenship (Welsh Government, 2025). Initiatives such as the £4.4 million boost to the arts and culture sector promote meaningful engagement through creative expression, directly supporting the Act's goals of building a more balanced, prosperous, and culturally vibrant Wales (Welsh Government, 2023). This vision is reinforced by the Curriculum for Wales (2022), which aims to develop ethical, informed citizens and embeds Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) principles throughout its framework. Through creative, reflective, and locally relevant learning, the curriculum nurtures empathy, critical thinking, and inclusive participation, which are key elements for achieving long-term social and cultural sustainability (Welsh Government, 2022).

Dewey (1938) proposed that education should be rooted in experience, enabling learners to engage meaningfully with their communities and develop the skills needed for collaborative decision-making. This is the ethos that underpins both the Curriculum for Wales and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Building on Dewey's emphasis on experiential learning, Boyd's (2018) work reinforces the idea that early childhood education plays a pivotal role in fostering sustainable thinking and action. She highlights how the legacies of Montessori and Steiner demonstrate that values such as social justice, environmental responsibility, and holistic development can

be embedded from a young age. Again, these approaches closely align with the principles of the Curriculum for Wales (2022) and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Particularly through their shared focus on fostering ethically aware, reflective individuals are encouraged to think critically and engage meaningfully with sustainability from an early age (UNESCO, 2017).

Passy *et al* (2021) highlights the value of the John Muir Award in supporting Learning for Sustainability through experiential, place-based learning that enhances environmental awareness, personal development, and community engagement. The John Muir Award aligns with the Curriculum for Wales (2022) by promoting inclusive participation and fostering confidence, well-being, and a deeper connection to nature. These principles resonate with the ideas of Friedrich Froebel, who emphasised the importance of outdoor exploration in early childhood as a means of nurturing curiosity, independence, and holistic development (Tovey, 2017). Steiner's approach gives emphasis on holistic development, through rhythmic movement, storytelling, and the arts to nurture children's imagination, emotional growth, and self-expression. Therefore, through rhythm and creativity, it encourages children to engage deeply with their inner world and environment (Dahlin, 2017). With this in mind, we can draw upon the emotional regulation that the outdoors brings to children. Johnsen and Rydstedt (2020) suggest that engaging with nature provides distinctive opportunities that enhance emotional strength, help alleviate stress and restore mental clarity. Furthermore, Play Wales (2023) agrees and highlights that play is an effective approach for children to manage emotions, build resilience, and feel safe to express themselves. Building on these perspectives, the Curriculum for Wales (2022) says that outdoor experiences play a significant role in supporting emotional regulation, fostering well-being, and creating emotionally safe spaces where children can thrive.

Power *et al* (2020) shares that outdoor exploration and learning, requires access to natural spaces, possible transportation, and trained staff which can become costly. Ardoin and Morris (2014) argue that place-based learning might not connect with all learners, as assuming a universal connection to nature through outdoor experiences can neglect the influence of individual, cultural, or social contexts.

A core principle of Froebel's educational philosophy is that play represents a vital aspect of childhood development, offering children a meaningful way to express themselves and make sense of their experiences (Early Education, 2021). This is further supported by the Froebel Trust (no date), highlighting the use of Froebel's 'Gifts', simple materials such as balls, blocks, and sticks to encourage tactile exploration, imaginative thinking, and early conceptual understanding. Moreover, Adams and Short (2025) emphasise that children thrive when encouraged to explore and express their creativity, supported by adults who offer thoughtful guidance rather than direct

instruction. This reflects Froebel's belief in balancing structure with freedom in early learning experiences.

Leading on from these principles, Froebel's emphasis on child-led exploration, emotional engagement with the environment, and learning through purposeful play aligns closely with modern sustainability education. The holistic view is that children need to be active, empathetic participants in their world. This supports key aims of Learning for Sustainability, including stewardship, responsible citizenship, and ecological awareness and principles echoed in frameworks such as the Curriculum for Wales (Watts, 2022 and Addison, 2021). The Curriculum for Wales (2022) closely aligns with the perspective shared by Adams and Short (2025) sharing the same view for children to experience nurturing creativity, fostering learner independence, and building positive, responsive relationships between adults and children within its educational philosophy (Welsh Government, 2022). Meaningful interaction with the natural environment is a key component of early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS), as it nurtures children's sense of empathy, wonder, and environmental responsibility. This approach resonates with Froebel's view of the natural world as a rich and meaningful context for learning and development (NCFE, 2022).

This leads on to one of the four core purposes within the Curriculum for Wales: supporting children to become “*ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world*”. This purpose encourages learners to explore and evaluate real-world issues, while developing an understanding of their rights and responsibilities within a democratic society (Welsh Government, 2020). The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is closely aligned with this aim, as both seek to create a more sustainable, equitable, and forward-thinking society. In doing so, they work towards empowering children to become active participants in democratic life and community engagement, encouraging collaboration with the wider society (Welsh Government, 2025). Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) highlights that education should support the full development of a child's personality, talents, and abilities. It also encourages children to show respect for their parents, cultural identities, and the environment around them (United Nations, 1989).

In conclusion, the experiences outlined in Part 1—such as discovering, exploring, and engaging with local nature through the John Muir Award, alongside play-based outdoor learning clearly support the philosophy and principles of early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) (Waters and Rekers, 2019) These approaches allow children to form emotional connections with nature, encouraging curiosity, independent thinking, and a deeper sense of ecological awareness and wellbeing (Barrable, 2019 and Tinney & Hirst 2018 and Boyd, 2018).

Theorists such as Froebel, Dewey, Montessori and Steiner clearly highlight the value of experiential, child-led learning within natural environments, through natural environments whilst learning and community contexts. Their collective ideas support hands-on exploration, and reflective engagement is essential for nurturing curiosity, independence, and sustainable thinking in early childhood education (Tovey, 2017 and Dewey, 1938 and Dahlin, 2017).

The Curriculum for Wales (2022) and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 reinforces a shared vision for sustainability education. A vision that nurtures empathy, creativity, and active citizenship from the earliest years (Welsh Government, 2020 and Welsh Government 2022). This is strengthened by Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC), which promotes reflective, values-based learning that is responsive to the needs of society and the planet (Welsh Government, 2023). Aligning with the inclusion of Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) enhances this connection by affirming that education should support holistic development while encouraging respect for others and the environment (United Nations, 1989). Making a connection with Barrable (2019), who advocates sensory-rich immersion and emotional connection, presents a valuable balance to structured activities and calls for more inclusive, child-sensitive implementation strategies. This emphasis aligns with Play Wales (2022), which highlights how participation in play fosters children's resilience, emotional regulation, and capacity for self-soothing.

Ultimately, early childhood experiences that priorities outdoor exploration, creative expression, and relational learning serve as powerful vehicles for embedding sustainable values. They provide children with a sense of purpose, belonging, and responsibility that lay the foundation for a lot more than just compassion and a sustainability-minded society (Passy *et al* 2021 and Watts, 2022 and Addison, 2021).

The experience of lockdown and researching this assignment has made me understand the importance of children experiencing the natural world from the early years to help them learn about the environment, human responsibility, conservation and sustainability.

This concludes my presentation, thank you for listening.

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