

Regaining paradise? Sustainability in the Early years – Part 2

Reflection – 5minutes

Hello I am Rhian Moore

Firstly, I would like to share my thoughts whilst undertaking the John Muir award.

I chose to carry out this award in my garden as it is a place I enjoy spending a lot of my time, especially when we have the warm weather to do so. It is a place that helps me relax and unwind whilst listening to the birdsong. Very often, when I am sitting in my garden I watch my 12-year-old son play football practicing his shots at goals.

But it has always been my sanctuary – when I think back to troubled times it is somewhere I always retreat to and where I can collect my thoughts.

During lockdown in 2020 I will always be grateful for the garden we had as a family, where we were able to enjoy the large, grassed area amongst the flowers, gardening, playing and being together outdoors. It was where we spent most of the long days, when we could not go anywhere else.

What the John Muir award reminded me of was that since this time, gardening, caring and conserving my garden and the wildlife in it, has not been something I have focused on as much since the days of lockdown.

Where I still enjoy my garden and maintain it, I have not spent enough time to support and look after what lives in it. The John Muir award made me stop and think of the small changes that have affected the wildlife's home that have been made in my garden over the past year, where a tree had been taken down, a fence had been changed and a wall remodeled. Since these changes, I realised how 'tidy' my garden looked and it was very bare in some areas that were once filled with various large plants and flowers. All of which had been taken away where the wildlife once lived. I have to say it made me feel quite sad to think that I had not replaced the bird feeder and replanted the flowers that had been cut down in the process of remodeling my garden. I instantly wanted to find ways to protect the wildlife's home in future and quickly get new flowers replanted.

Once I made the decision on how I would conserve my garden and what I planned to do, I soon made a start. First of all, I wanted to make a bird feeder and plant more flowers for the bees and other insects.

When I started to make the bird feeder with the help of my husband, my youngest child took a keen interest in what I was doing and wanted to help and get involved. It certainly was a nice experience for us all to start enjoying nature in our own garden once again. We also added a bug hotel and planted some wildflowers to encourage the bees back to the garden and for them to have somewhere to gather.

I know I have taken away a lot from the award where I will always stop and think about how I can enhance and conserve an area. The John Muir award has been such an enjoyable experience for me by making such small changes that make a big difference, and definitely supported my own well-being to get back with nature and I will continue to do so.

I have already seen an increase in birds visiting my garden and enjoying the new bird feeder. This was exciting for us as a family to watch, and made us laugh one morning as we watched all the food be eaten by the many birds fighting and swarming the feeder. My next plan will be to add a water bath for the birds.

I will look forward to seeing the newly planted flowers bloom next year that will invite the bees and other insects back now I have conserved their habitat.

15 Minutes

Sustainability is the balance between economy, equity and the environment. The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainable development with this quote - “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In simple terms, sustainability means using resources wisely. Such sustainable practices should support human, economic health and vitality along with ecological practices. Put simply it is about what world we leave behind for our children (UCLA, 2024). The big issue with global warming is humans are not living in a way that protects the capacity of earth, where it can continue to provide an adequate supply of water and clean air and plenty of

resources for every person. Whereby new problems are arising including economic vulnerability and governments needing to provide urgent economic stability (Davis, 2010, p. 1).

Notably, as set out in Brundlant's report 1987 – our common future. The world commission on environment and development asked for 'A global agenda for change'. This was deemed a high priority at this stage by the general assembly of the United Nations, that it proposed environmental strategies to achieve sustainable development by the year 2000, along with developing interrelationships between resources, people, the environment and the development. Also considering international communities to effectively deal with environmental concerns and issues that can protect our environment for years to come. Likewise, The well-being of future generations (Wales) act 2015 sets out a need to pull together in order for public bodies to achieve the well-being goals that provides ways of observing how people live and how they can improve the environmental, social and cultural wellbeing (Commissioner for Wales, 2024).

To illustrate this point further the focus of the John Muir award is encouraging everyone to involve themselves in nature no matter where it is and to connect with the wild places they find. John Muir was a great believer that people need to grow up learning about nature and how they can love and respect it. As emphasised in The John Muir trust, (no date) the John Muir award sets out four challenges for children to discover, explore and conserve an area, then share their experience. Outdoor opportunities that increase children's awareness of the natural environment such as the John Muir award, gives children the chance to connect with wild space through their senses to learn about different habitats. Take for example Reggio Emilia approach of the '100 languages of learning' where children discover and learn through their senses and can express their thoughts and feelings with others. Early years practitioners can learn together with children and can encourage them to share through their own creative expression (Reggio Emilia approach, 2022).

Taking all this into account, let us begin by considering the importance of sustainability within the early years and why it is so important for children to be exposed to the topic. David, (2010, p. 2-3) explains how as adults we should be wise to introduce children on how they can care for their planet, and it is early years practitioners who can play a central role in addressing sustainability with young

children. An important aspect to note is the recognition that children and education are key to sustainable development, and how their own behaviours are recognised towards the environment and the society that is capable to sustain the life they live in now and in the times to come (Davis, 2015, p. 104 cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018).

Wales, however, has responded well with the Education for Sustainable Development and Global citizenship (ESDGC) which is about preparing young children by embedding its values and attitudes that can be adapted into everyday lifestyles (Bourn et al, 2016, p. 104 cited in Tinney and Hirst, 2018). Therefore, schools need to provide such opportunities for learners that can enhance their education, but for this to be successful, a whole school approach needs to be addressed and embedded into the curriculum (Welsh government, 2008).

Samuelsson and Park, (2017, p 275) state that all young learner's early education should be of high quality that includes sustainable development goals. These goals encourage what kind of sustained learning children receive, and the type of curricula and pedagogy supports their learning and understanding. However, Heft and Chawla, (2006) question what experiences children have with their local environment that allows them to engage and learn to appreciate the places where they live. Chawla, (2008) asks how communities support children's environmental learning and action. Indeed, Chawla continues by arguing that children should be encouraged to value and protect our planet and the diversity of life on it.

Children should have many opportunities and have interactions to see the ever-changing habitats of plants and animals. Take for example the words of Randy White (2004) who says '*We need to allow children to develop their biophilia, their love for the earth, before we ask them to save it*' (cited in Ward, 2010, p 3). Studies by (Palmer, 1993; Tanner, 1980) show that when children have positive outdoor experiences during early childhood, they develop a natural concern for the environment. Nevertheless, other research by (Bixler, Carlisle, Hammitt, & Floyd, 1994; Hart, 1979; Kaplan, 1976, Simmons, 1994; and Wilson, 1994) indicates that when children do not experience positive outdoor experiences it can establish fears of nature, which as a result interfere with effective learning about the world (Wilson, 1997).

According to Welsh government, (2022) children who have plenty of outdoor experiences help support and develop their confidence in a relaxed space that stimulates awe and wonder. Furthermore, children can build empathy for the

environment when they connect with the world around them. Including, learning about sustainability that is embedded within the four purposes of the curriculum for Wales. Ward, (2010, p.4) agrees stating that children can be encouraged to make connections with the natural world through educators scaffolding them through implementation of creative activities. Of course, Vygotsky's concept supports this notion whereby educators support a child's learning by creating activities, and once the child understands and can manage alone the educator can withdraw gradually (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny (2017, p 41). Therefore, Vygotsky's concept can inspire educators' pedagogical approach to sustainability education without overcomplicating or risking the young learner becoming bored. Hence, such pedagogy approaches can be useful with a complex subject such as learning about sustainability, this way it can ensure it is incorporated into the curriculum more smoothly (Armstrong, 2015, p. 133-134). However, there has been some debate over introducing complex issues into early childhood education and that it should be steered away from, this is usually influenced by wider cultural and social understandings. Thus, posing challenges for early years practitioners developing suitable pedagogy approaches that include issues such as climate change (Duhn, 2011).

Moreover, an important aspect that can be considered here are the ideas of Fredrich Froebel who was a pioneer on how early years practitioners think about practice. One of the principles Froebel outlined was children learning about nature and the interrelationships of living beings. Froebel explained this helps children start to think about sustainability and the environment (The Froebel trust, no date). However, Bruce (2011b) and Tovey (2013) argue that early year's practitioners are not supporting outdoor learning in practice, despite Froebel's ideas being accepted widely. Thus, an important reminder provided by Bruce and Dyke (2017) was about how Froebel highlighted the importance of not just being outside in the fresh air but ensuring children connect and build a relationship and an understanding of nature (Smedley and Hoskins, 2018). Notably, there is a significant link that needs to be addressed between childhood experiences with nature and pro-environmental behaviours in adulthood (Wells and Lekies, 2006, Passmore et al, 2020 cited in Watts, 2022, p. 86). Therefore, Passmore et al, 2020, cited in Watts 2022, p. 87 states that attention on the adults 'nature connection' is influential on what children experience.

Tinney, (2020) points out how children are becoming increasingly detached from the natural world, instead there is more engagement with it digitally, resulting in fewer opportunities to learn about the interconnectedness of the real world itself.

In response to this, early years practitioners have developed research that links citizenship and sustainability that engages children with any issues. Especially, within the Earth summit (1992) ,the agenda 21 noted there was need to support adults with education to teach children about sustainability. The United Nations conference, (no date) states that from actions taken children will inherit and gain responsibilities for caring for the earth. Furthermore, any actions that are taken on improving the environment should consider children's specific interests, so they have the chance to be part of the process for safeguarding the future and of sustainable development.

To illustrate this point further one might consider how it is enshrined in the United Nations convention on the rights of the child that gives children the right to use their voices and make choices. Article 29 states - *Education should develop each child's personality and talents to the full. It should encourage children to respect their parents, their own and other cultures and the environment.*

Some say the early year's workforce is still much slower to introduce sustainability into education, despite young children being most at risk from the challenges to implement sustainability (Elliott and Davis, 2009, cited in Dymont et al 2013). The Gothenburg Recommendations on Education for Sustainable Development highlights the early years as a 'natural starting point' for children to learn about sustainability and that early years practitioners play a vital role. However, Hedefalk, Almqvist and Östman,(2014) point out that in fact early years settings are clearly showing a keen interest in sustainable development and this is evident with examples such as ECO teams and ECO awards. Boyd, and England, (2016, p. 62) explain that these sort of programmes offer early years settings a good basis that provide children with many opportunities to have their opinions heard and be able to act upon them. Other approaches can be incorporating outdoor learning such as forest school that engages children in a woodland area where they can play with one another and build team-working skills. This allows regular outdoor experiences to take place where children can learn about the non-living and living world, whereby stimulating discussions about nature and how to care for it (Tinney, 2020).

Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Davis, (2014, p. 236) highlight how much children are active participants in initiating sustainability actions and are recognised as an essential part to promote sustainability. However, just involving children is not the answer to tackle issues regarding sustainability. Nevertheless, as more recognition and research in education for sustainable development increases, there is anticipation that these research studies will report on young children actively making a difference.

To conclude it is clear to see that involving children from an early age with exploring outdoor environments can naturally create curiosity in children about the world they live in, consequently learning about how to care for and look after the planet. Considering the ideas by Froebel and how early years practitioners can support young children's outdoor learning, and teach the impacts of sustainability. It is understood that Education for sustainable development is fundamental to achieve the necessary goals, and embedding behaviours and values in early childhood can have a significant effect during this crucial time of their development.

This brings this presentation to an end. Thank you for listening.

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