Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years

No AI was used in this assignment.

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1. Reflection on the John Muir Award experience

Hello, my name is Lucy, and today I'd like to share my John Muir Award journey with you using my scrapbook to reflect on my experience.

When I first started thinking about which natural space I was going to use for my John Muir Award, I was undecided because I thought it had to be a public place. However, once I found out it could be any natural space, the choice was actually very easy. I chose my nan and bampi's garden because it has always been a very special place to me. I spent a lot of my childhood with my family in this garden. We would spend hours outside, whether we were swimming in the pool, having barbeques, playing games or just sitting together enjoying the garden.

A big part of my love for being outdoors comes from my bampi because he loved spending time in the garden. He was always looking after the flowers, working on the pond or just sitting outside watching nature go by. Since he passed away, I still feel really close to him whenever I visit the garden because everywhere I look reminds me of him. When I'm in the garden, it doesn't feel like he's completely gone, and that made completing the John Muir Award in this space even more meaningful.

My nan and bampi have spent over fifty years creating and caring for their beautiful garden, which has become a thriving habitat for wildlife. Before I began this scrapbook, I thought I knew the garden really well, but I realised I'd never actually taken the time to stop and explore it properly. The John Muir Award encouraged me to slow down, look more closely at everything around me and appreciate the garden in a completely different way.

One of the first things that caught my attention was how many bees and butterflies the flowers attracted. Before starting this award, I knew bees visited flowers, but I'd never really stopped to watch them. Observing them it made me realise how important even a small family garden can be for pollinators, as well as understand that sustainability isn't just about protecting big natural spaces, because even small gardens can support biodiversity.

I also spent some time looking at the different trees, herbs and fruit plants around the garden. Even though I've visited this garden thousands of times over the years, I hadn't realised just how much variety there was until I slowed down and looked

properly. Of course, I couldn't resist trying some of the raspberries and strawberries, and I was a little too keen to eat them before remembering to take a photograph.

I thoroughly enjoyed observing all the wildlife in the garden. I found it really fascinating to learn that ladybirds are much more than just colourful insects. Before starting this award, if someone had asked me what ladybirds do, I would've had no idea, but they help protect plants by eating aphids, which are tiny insects that feed on the stem. This means that we don't always need chemicals, because nature can often do it itself. I also learnt why dragonflies are attracted to ponds and still water, because it gives them a place to rest, feed and lay their eggs, which made me appreciate how much wildlife even a small pond can support. Another thing I noticed was the birds swooping down to the bird baths, but because there was no water in them, they quickly flew away again. It made me think they must know this garden really well because they came straight to the bird baths expecting to find water. Seeing that made me realise how important fresh water is for wildlife, which is why I later refilled them as part of my conservation work.

One of my favourite activities during this award was experiencing the garden through all of my senses and really taking the time to notice everything. I think this was one of my favourite activities because it made me slow down and feel really calm. Normally, I would have walked straight through the garden without thinking about all these little things, but this activity helped me notice and appreciate them much more.

I also decided to write a poem about my nan and bampi's garden for my John Muir Award because I wanted to include the wildlife I had discovered, but also the memories I have of my bampi and the garden. Writing the poem made me realise how many of my memories of him are connected to nature, and it made me appreciate even more why this garden has always felt and will always be so special to me.

As part of the award, I also explored Tennant Canal and Kilvey Hill. I found it really interesting that both places have industrial histories but have now become important habitats for wildlife. I don't think I'd ever really thought about that before, but visiting these places showed me that nature can recover and thrive when it's given the chance. It also made me realise that if we look after these spaces, we can help protect the wildlife that depends on them.

During the Conserve section of the award, I researched John Muir because I wanted to learn more about the person behind the award. Before starting this award, I didn't know much about him, but one thing that really stood out to me was his belief that spending time in nature helps people appreciate it more. After completing this award, I completely understand what he meant. Taking the time to properly explore my nan and bampi's garden changed the way I look at nature and made me realise that even small green spaces deserve to be cared for and protected.

I also wanted to give something back to the garden, so I carried out a few small jobs to help look after it. As we had some very hot weather recently, I watered the plants to help keep them healthy and planted some wildflower seeds to attract more pollinators. Although these jobs were quite simple, they made me realise that sustainability isn't always about making big changes. Small actions, carried out regularly, can make a real difference to wildlife and help keep natural spaces healthy.

For the final part of my John Muir Award I shared my scrapbook with my colleagues at work because I hoped it might encourage them to complete the award in the future. I also shared it with my family, including the poem I wrote about my bampi's garden, which brought back lots of happy memories for all of us.

Looking back, I can honestly say this award has changed the way I look at both nature and sustainability. I now understand how much wildlife depends on places like this and how everything in nature is connected.

The biggest thing I've learnt is that sustainability isn't only about global issues like climate change. It also means looking after the green spaces around us, supporting local wildlife and encouraging biodiversity. This award has shown me that even small actions can make a real difference, and that even a small family garden can play an important role in protecting nature.

Thank you for listening. I hope you've enjoyed hearing about my John Muir Award journey.

2. A critical evaluation of how the John Muir Award supports the philosophy and principles of early childhood education for sustainability

During this discussion, I will critically evaluate how taking part in experiences, such as the John Muir Award, can support the philosophy and principles of early childhood education for sustainability. In order to complete the John Muir Award individuals must discover, explore, conserve and share a natural green space of their choosing over a 25-hour period, as well as research an inspirational naturalist whose work has influenced people to value and protect the natural environment around them (John Muir Trust, no date, a). I will explore how experiences such as these align with current Welsh policy, the Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship [ESDGC] framework, and early childhood theorists, whilst also recognising some of the challenges practitioners may face when implementing them.

It is important first to understand what sustainability means within early childhood education. Sustainability refers to sustainable development, and according to Brundtland (1987, cited in DEFRA, 2005) sustainable development is described as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This highlights the importance of considering how the decisions and choices made today may affect the lives of people in the future. Purvis, Mao and Robinson (2019) suggest that sustainability is made up of three connected pillars, environmental, social and economic. Environmental sustainability focuses on looking after the planet, for example by protecting wildlife and natural habitats. Social sustainability is about supporting and looking after people through things such as education and strong communities. Economic sustainability involves using money and resources responsibly, for example by using resources carefully and ensuring there are enough resources for future generations. This shows that sustainability is about much more than simply caring for the environment, and this is no different within early childhood education. This is reflected in UNESCO's (2026) guidance on Education for Sustainable Development [ESD], which explains that its aim is to help children develop the understanding, skills, values and confidence they need to make positive choices, care for both people and the environment, and take part and contribute to a more sustainable future.

These aims are reflected in Welsh education through the Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship [ESDGC] framework, which encourages children to develop an understanding of sustainability, recognise their responsibilities and think about how their actions can impact both their local community and the world (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). Experiences such as the John Muir Award provide children with opportunities to develop these ideas through meaningful experiences and exploration in nature. Children are encouraged to explore, conserve and share natural environments, rather than just learn about sustainability through a lesson in the classroom (John Muir Trust, no date, a). This also reflects Dewey's view that children learn best through meaningful and hands-on experiences, as when children explore the natural environment, they are able to build on what they already know whilst developing new knowledge and understanding through play and investigation (Luff, 2018). However, one limitation is that it relies on practitioners to support children's learning through conversation, asking questions and reflecting for it to be effective. The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (Welsh Government, 2022a) highlights the importance of the enabling adult in supporting and extending children's learning and thinking to help them make meaningful connections through their experiences.

The aims of the ESDGC also align with the Curriculum for Wales through the Four Purposes, one of which is to support children in becoming 'ethical, informed citizens' who understand the effect their actions can have on others, society and the environment (Welsh Government, 2022b). This also links to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), which says that the people responsible for making important decisions in Wales must think about how the decisions they make today can affect the wellbeing of both the current and future generations. Taking part in the John Muir Award can support this in the 'Conserve' section by encouraging children to think about how their own actions, such as caring for local natural spaces or protecting wildlife, can have a positive impact on the environment and help protect it for future generations (John Muir Trust, no date, b). This also reflects Froebel's belief that spending time in and experiencing nature is an essential part of children's learning. He believed that when children explore the natural world, they can begin to understand how everything in nature is connected and why looking after it is important (Froebel Trust, no date). However, in early years settings, it can be a

challenge for all children to have the same opportunities to spend time in nature. This is because some settings may not have access to suitable outdoor areas (Learning Through Landscapes, no date), which means that those children may have fewer opportunities to develop a connection with nature through experiences, such as the John Muir Award.

This is also supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], where Article 29 highlights that education should help children develop into confident and responsible individuals who respect other people and care for the natural environment. Article 12 also recognises that children have the right to share their thoughts, feelings and opinions about things that affect them, and for adults to listen to and take their views seriously (UNICEF, 2019). This also links to the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), which encourages children and young people to have a voice in decisions about the future and highlights the importance of listening to what children have to say. The John Muir Award supports these rights by encouraging children to make decisions throughout the award, for example choosing the natural space they explore, or who and how they share what they have learnt with others afterwards (John Muir Trust, no date, a). This helps children feel involved in their own learning, whilst supporting them in developing an understanding of why caring for the environment is so important. Both the UNCRC and the 'Share' part of the John Muir Award reflect Vygotsky's belief, which is that children develop their knowledge and understanding through social interactions with adults and others around them (Barnett, 2019). When children share their experiences, listen to other people's ideas and discuss what they have discovered, it can help them develop a better understanding of sustainability by learning from each other’s experiences. However, this can be a challenge if children are not given opportunities to share what they have learnt with others. The Education Endowment Foundation (2021) explains that collaboration does not happen on its own and requires practitioners to support and encourage collaborative experiences to make sure all children take part, otherwise, some children may not fully benefit from these opportunities.

Even though experiences like the John Muir Award can support early childhood education for sustainability, it is evident throughout this discussion that they rely heavily on practitioners to support children and have the confidence and skills to

provide meaningful outdoor learning experiences. Research by Welsh Government (2023) suggests that although many practitioners recognised the value of child-led learning, they lacked confidence in taking that learning outdoors or using it as an approach to teaching. This highlights how important it is to provide practitioners with regular professional development to help them confidently implement sustainability into everyday practice (Welsh Government, 2023).

There are also other challenges when trying to make sustainability a part of everyday practice in early years settings. Tinney and Hirst (2017) found that some practitioners felt there was not enough time within the curriculum to teach sustainability alongside other subjects, and that it was often viewed as an extra topic rather than something that could be included in everyday learning. As a result of this, opportunities such as the John Muir Award may not always be used to their full potential. This emphasises the importance of supporting practitioners to make links between sustainability and other areas of learning, which could help make sustainability a more natural part of children's everyday experiences.

Even though experiences such as the John Muir Award do provide many valuable opportunities for children to develop an understanding of sustainability through real-life experiences, outdoor exploration and caring for the natural environment (John Muir Trust, no date, a), many of the activities within the award have a strong focus on environmental sustainability. Purvis, Mao and Robinson (2019) suggest that sustainability also includes a social pillar and an economic pillar, meaning that practitioners may need to help children understand how sustainability links to people, communities and using resources responsibly, as well as caring for the environment. To do this, the ESDGC guidance (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008) suggests that sustainability can be explored through activities and conversations focusing on issues such as waste and consumption, food production, health and wellbeing, and identity and culture, all of which can help children develop a better understanding of sustainability.

Overall, experiences such as the John Muir Award can support early childhood education for sustainability because they encourage children to learn through meaningful, hands-on experiences in nature. They also support many of the philosophies and principles of early childhood education by encouraging children's

exploration, participation, curiosity and understanding of the world around them. However, for these experiences to work well, practitioners need to have the confidence and skills to make sustainability part of their everyday practice. By giving children opportunities to explore, enjoy and care for nature from an early age, the John Muir Award can help children develop a connection with the natural environment and understand how their own actions can make a positive difference (John Muir Trust, 2025).

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