

Sustainability in the Early Years

Self-Reflection -

Good afternoon, I am Rosa Morgan, and this presentation explores sustainability in early years education through my participation in the John Muir Award. The aim is to reflect on my experiential learning and consider how nature-based approaches can support understanding sustainability in early childhood settings. This reflection is informed by principles of experiential learning, as highlighted by John Muir, who emphasised the value of learning through direct experience (John Muir Trust, No Date).

The project was carried out at Gnoll Country Park, where I engaged with a natural environment rich in biodiversity. I completed the three stages of the award, discover, explore, and conserve, and recorded my experiences in a reflective scrapbook. These stages encouraged active engagement with the environment alongside opportunities to develop awareness of sustainability and environmental responsibility, reflecting broader educational aims within the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022).

Throughout this presentation, I will reflect on my experiences across each stage and consider the value of such approaches in early years education, drawing on relevant theory and policy to inform my understanding.

The discover stage of the John Muir Award involved developing an initial understanding of Gnoll Country Park and recognising its environmental and personal significance. Through this stage, I developed my knowledge of the park's historical background, including its origins as a former estate and the lasting presence of features such as ponds and landscaped gardens. I also became more aware of the park's biodiversity, observing wildlife such as animals and plants, which highlighted the importance of maintaining natural habitats.

In addition, I began to consider wider sustainability issues, including the need to protect green spaces from environmental damage and human impact. This stage encouraged a sense of curiosity, aligning with Friedrich Froebel's emphasis on the importance of exploration and

interaction with nature in early learning (Froebel Trust, No Date). It prompted me to observe a familiar environment more closely, developing a deeper awareness of the relationship between people and nature. However, it also raised initial considerations regarding how such exploratory opportunities may vary depending on access to natural environments.

During the explore stage, I engaged more deeply with the natural features of Gnoll Country Park through direct observation and interaction. This involved closely examining a variety of plant species, including bluebells and woodland strawberries, highlighting how seasonal changes influence growth and life cycles. I also explored the presence of Pontic rhododendron, developing an understanding of how invasive species can disrupt native ecosystems by limiting the growth of other plants.

Furthermore, observing animals such as mute swans, grey squirrels, and magpies enabled me to consider how different species adapt to their environments and contribute to ecological balance. This stage supported the development of practical skills such as careful observation and identification, while also encouraging a more thoughtful and reflective approach to the environment. Engaging with the sensory aspects of the park strengthened my connection to nature, reinforcing the value of experiential learning approaches, although such experiences may require careful facilitation within early years settings.

The conserve stage focused on identifying practical actions to protect and sustain the natural environment within Gnoll Country Park. This involved considering how everyday behaviours can contribute to environmental preservation, such as reducing litter, protecting plant life, and respecting wildlife habitats. I also reflected on the importance of being a responsible visitor by minimising disturbance to natural areas, particularly water environments and woodland spaces.

A specific focus was placed on the mute swan population, where conservation practices include avoiding littering, refraining from feeding inappropriate foods such as bread, and maintaining a safe distance during nesting periods. This highlighted how small human actions can significantly impact animal welfare and ecosystem health. Overall, this stage reinforced the importance of

active environmental responsibility, while also suggesting the need for ongoing education to ensure such practices are widely understood and consistently applied.

This experience has significantly developed my understanding of sustainability by demonstrating how environmental awareness can be fostered through direct interaction with natural spaces such as Gnoll Country Park. I now recognise sustainability as a practical and ongoing responsibility that involves protecting ecosystems, respecting wildlife, and making informed choices that reduce environmental harm. Engaging with the John Muir Award has encouraged me to think more critically about human impact on nature and the importance of conservation at a local level.

It has also influenced my attitudes and behaviours, increasing my awareness of actions such as reducing waste and respecting natural habitats during outdoor experiences. As a future early years practitioner, participation in the award highlighted the importance of modelling sustainable values and providing children with meaningful outdoor learning opportunities. It has strengthened my commitment to fostering early environmental awareness and supporting children to develop respect for the natural world, recognising this as an important foundation for lifelong sustainable behaviours.

Critical Evaluation -

This section provides a critical evaluation of the value of nature-based experiences, such as the John Muir Award, in supporting sustainability education within early childhood practice. It considers how outdoor, experiential learning can contribute to children's understanding of environmental responsibility and long-term ecological awareness. The analysis is drawn on key early years theories, policy, and current research relating to education for sustainable development. It examines how engagement with natural environments can support holistic development while fostering environmental values from an early age (Fasting, 2025). The evaluation will explore both the strengths and limitations of such approaches, considering their accessibility, inclusivity, and practical application within early years settings. Overall, this section

aims to critically assess the educational value of experiential learning in nature and its role in shaping sustainable attitudes and behaviours in young children.

The experiences undertaken through the John Muir Award can be strongly linked to early years theorists who emphasised the importance of learning through direct experience and connection with the natural world.

For example, according to Watts (2021), Froebel viewed nature as an interconnected whole that supports children's holistic development, with learning emerging through play and interaction with the environment. The exploration of Gnoll Country Park reflects this principle, as it provides opportunities for children and learners to engage with natural elements such as plants, animals, and changing seasons. This aligns with Froebel's view that outdoor experiences nurture curiosity, independence, and a sense of connection with nature.

Similarly, Williams (2017) suggests that John Dewey's theory of experiential learning argues that education should be grounded in real-life experiences, where unique learners actively engage with their environment rather than passively receiving information. The discover, explore, and conserve stages of the John Muir Award reflect this approach, as they encourage observation, interaction, and reflection within a real natural setting (John Muir Trust, No Date). This hands-on engagement supports deeper understanding and helps learners construct meaning through experience.

Rudolf Steiner (2017) also emphasised the importance of nature in early development, particularly in fostering imagination and emotional connection. His Waldorf approach encourages outdoor learning and sensory experiences, which are evident in the exploration of textures, sounds, and wildlife within the park. Such experiences support not only cognitive development but also emotional and imaginative growth.

Overall, the experience strongly reflects experiential education principles, as learning occurred through active participation in a real environment rather than abstract instruction. Repeated engagement with natural environments has been shown to foster environmental awareness and long-term commitment to nature-related behaviours, particularly when individuals develop

ongoing, direct experiences with familiar settings (Asah *et al.*, 2018). This connection to place is significant in early childhood education, as it helps children develop respect for their environment and an early understanding of sustainability.

The Welsh Government (2012) Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) is a significant element of the Curriculum for Wales, aiming to support learners in developing the knowledge, skills, and values required to engage with environmental and global challenges. Completing the John Muir Award reflects these principles through the integration of reflection, critical thinking, and creativity within a nature-based context. Reflection was evident throughout all three stages of the award, which enabled ongoing consideration of personal experiences and environmental interactions. This process supported the development of critical thinking, as observations of the natural environment were extended to consider wider sustainability issues, including biodiversity, conservation, and human impact.

In addition, the engagement with the park encouraged creativity through engagement with the natural environment in open-ended and exploratory ways. Observing seasonal changes, interacting with wildlife, and considering conservation practices provided opportunities to think imaginatively while developing a deeper understanding of environmental processes. These approaches align with the aims of ESDGC and OXFAM (No Date), as they promote active engagement and encourage learners to question and reflect on real-world issues.

The exploration also contributed to an increased awareness of sustainability, both at a local and wider level. While the focus was on Gnoll Country Park, the environmental issues identified, such as habitat protection and the impact of human behaviour, reflect broader global concerns. This highlights the interconnected nature of environmental systems and reinforces the importance of sustainable practices.

Furthermore, the experience supports the development of global citizenship by encouraging a sense of responsibility and ethical awareness. Through recognising how individual actions can affect the environment, there is an increased understanding of the role individuals play within a wider global context. Within early years education, this is particularly important, as it helps to

establish foundational values such as respect, care, and responsibility for the natural world (UNESCO, No Date). Overall, the John Muir Award provides a valuable example of how ESDGC can be embedded within practice, supporting the development of informed, reflective, and environmentally responsible learners.

The experiences undertaken through the John Muir Award align closely with key sustainability policies, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Both frameworks emphasise the importance of developing environmentally responsible, informed, and active citizens, which is reflected throughout engagement with nature-based learning.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) identifies seven well-being goals, several of which are particularly relevant to nature-based pedagogy (Welsh Government, 2015). For example, the goal of a resilient Wales focuses on maintaining and enhancing biodiversity and ecosystems. Engagement with Gnoll Country Park directly supports this aim by encouraging awareness of wildlife, habitats, and conservation practices. Similarly, a healthier Wales is promoted through outdoor activity, recognising the physical and emotional benefits of connecting with natural environments. The emphasis on a globally responsible Wales is also evident, as reflecting on sustainability issues at a local level to support understanding of wider environmental challenges.

In addition, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a global framework for sustainability education. The practical engagement particularly reflects SDG 13 Climate Action, SDG 15 Life on Land, and SDG 4 Quality Education (United Nations, 2015). Observing ecosystems and considering conservation strategies promotes environmental responsibility, while experiential learning supports inclusive and meaningful educational practices (UNESCO, 2017). These goals highlight the importance of equipping learners with the knowledge and values required to respond to environmental challenges.

While the primary focus of the activity is environmental, there are also elements of social awareness, particularly in recognising shared responsibility for protecting public spaces.

However, economic aspects of sustainability are less explicitly addressed, in result, children may develop an understanding of sustainability that centres primarily on nature conservation without recognising the interconnected social and economic systems that contribute to environmental challenges suggesting a potential area for further development within early years practice.

Overall, the John Muir Award demonstrates strong alignment with Welsh and global policy expectations by promoting sustainability, encouraging reflection, and supporting the development of environmentally responsible behaviours from an early age.

A key strength of the John Muir Award experience is its ability to support children's learning through active, experiential engagement with the natural environment. Barrable and Boot (2020) maintain that nature-based approaches encourage hands-on exploration, which has been shown to enhance cognitive development, problem-solving skills, and observational abilities in early childhood. The structured yet flexible stages of discover, explore, and conserve provide a clear framework while still allowing for child-led inquiry, supporting both guided and independent learning.

The experience also effectively promotes engagement with sustainability by making environmental concepts tangible and meaningful. Direct interaction with ecosystems enables learners to develop an understanding of abstract concepts, such as biodiversity and conservation, in a concrete and accessible way. Research by Chawla and Gould (2020) points out that early, positive experiences in nature are strongly associated with the development of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours later in life. This suggests that such approaches are particularly valuable in fostering long-term sustainable thinking.

In addition, the project supports the development of an emotional connection to nature, which is a significant factor in encouraging environmental responsibility. Lumber, Richardson, and Sheffield (2017) suggest that emotional engagement, developed through sensory exploration and repeated interaction with natural spaces, can strengthen children's sense of care and respect for the environment. This connection is essential in early years education, as it underpins the formation of values and attitudes towards sustainability.

In summary, the experience demonstrates how nature-based, experiential learning can effectively support holistic development while fostering meaningful and lasting engagement with sustainability.

Despite the significant benefits of nature-based learning experiences such as the John Muir Award, there are several limitations that must be critically considered when applying these approaches within early years education. One key limitation is that the approach places a stronger emphasis on environmental sustainability than on the social and economic dimensions of sustainability. While activities within Gnoll Country Park promoted awareness of biodiversity, conservation, and environmental responsibility, there was less focus on issues such as social inequality, cultural diversity, or the economic factors that influence sustainability (Manas, 2026). According to UNESCO (2020), effective education for sustainable development should adopt a holistic approach that integrates environmental, social, and economic perspectives equally. Therefore, although the experience supported ecological awareness, it may not fully develop children's understanding of sustainability as a broader global issue.

Accessibility also presents a significant challenge. Waite *et al* (2023) argues that not all children have equal access to safe, natural outdoor environments due to factors such as geographical location, socioeconomic disadvantage, disability, or limited resources within settings. Consequently, outdoor learning may unintentionally reinforce educational inequalities unless settings actively adapt to provision to ensure inclusivity. Maynard and Waters (2007) suggest that opportunities for outdoor learning can often be restricted by safety concerns, staffing ratios, weather conditions, and limited practitioner confidence. This may result in inconsistent implementation across early years settings, reducing opportunities for some children to benefit from experiential learning approaches.

Furthermore, Arvanitis *et al* (2024) demonstrates that while nature-based learning encourages child-led exploration, effective implementation requires careful planning and skilled facilitation to ensure activities remain inclusive, meaningful, and linked to learning outcomes. Practitioners may also experience pressures relating to curriculum demands and time constraints, limiting the frequency of outdoor experiences (Education Scotland, 2022). Overall, although the John Muir

Award provides valuable opportunities to support sustainability education, these limitations highlight the importance of ensuring accessibility, inclusivity, and a more balanced understanding of sustainability within early years practice.

The experiences gained through the John Muir Award have significant implications for future practice within early years education, particularly in relation to embedding sustainability within everyday learning. Nature-based and experiential approaches can provide meaningful opportunities for children to explore, question, and develop positive relationships with the natural world through active engagement rather than passive instruction. Activities such as wildlife observation and outdoor exploration may support children's understanding of environmental responsibility while simultaneously promoting wellbeing, communication, resilience, and problem-solving skills (Barrable and Booth, 2020). This reinforces the value of outdoor learning as a holistic pedagogical approach rather than an additional aspect of the curriculum.

However, for sustainability education to be effective, it is essential that such approaches remain inclusive and accessible to all children, regardless of ability, background, or access to outdoor environments. Waite *et al* (2023) suggest that barriers relating to location, resources, and practitioner confidence can limit opportunities for outdoor learning experiences. Therefore, practitioners may need to adapt activities to meet individual needs, utilise local community spaces, and incorporate natural or recyclable materials into indoor provision where outdoor access is limited. Furthermore, greater emphasis should be placed on integrating the social and economic aspects of sustainability alongside environmental awareness to promote a more balanced understanding of sustainable development. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that education for sustainable development should equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to contribute towards environmental, social, and economic wellbeing.

Overall, embedding sustainability within early years practice can support children in developing respect, care, and responsibility for the environment while contributing towards the aims of the Curriculum for Wales and wider global sustainability objectives. Importantly, it also positions early years practitioners as role models in fostering environmentally responsible behaviours and

encouraging children to become active and informed participants within a sustainable future (Welsh Government, 2022).

In conclusion, this assignment has critically reflected on the value of sustainability education within early years practice through participation in the John Muir Award at Gnoll Country Park. The experiences of discovering, exploring, and conserving the natural environment demonstrated how experiential and nature-based learning can support environmental awareness, responsibility, and holistic development. Links to theorists such as Friedrich Froebel, John Dewey, and Rudolf Steiner highlighted the importance of learning through direct experience and interaction with nature. The discussion also demonstrated strong connections to the Welsh Government Curriculum for Wales, ESDGC, the Well-being of Future Generations Act, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. While limitations relating to accessibility and the balance of sustainability aspects were acknowledged, the process reinforced the importance of embedding meaningful and inclusive sustainability practices within early years education to encourage environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviours.

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