SCRIPT

Reflection:

Hello everyone. My name is Cristiane de Freitas, and today I am going to share my experience of completing the John Muir Award as part of my studies in early years sustainability.

For this award, I chose my back garden in Swansea, in the Sketty area. It is a small domestic garden behind my house, surrounded by everyday life, with a busy road and a college nearby. It is not a dramatic or remote place, and that is exactly why I chose it. I wanted to find meaning in somewhere ordinary and familiar, somewhere I had passed by for years without fully appreciating. I also chose it because I could return to it regularly, observe it at different times, and notice small changes.

What I found there surprised me.

I grew up in Brazil surrounded by nature. After moving to Swansea, life became busy, and I gradually lost some of that connection. My garden had always been there, but I had stopped paying real attention to it. Through this project, I began to reconnect with something I had not realised I was missing.

The first thing I noticed was how much life was already present in that small space. I began to see birds, snails, slugs, a seagull at my window, and even a fox passing through the neighbouring garden early in the morning. None of these creatures had suddenly appeared. They had always been there. The real change was in the way I was seeing them.

The bees, however, had the greatest impact on me.

For most of my life, I had been afraid of them. What I thought I knew about bees was very limited. I associated them with stings, danger, and something to avoid. I had never really stopped to watch them properly. Once I did, my perspective began to shift.

I became curious about their behaviour and started asking questions. I noticed that they kept returning to the same flowers, so I photographed them, looked more closely at the images, and compared them with identification guides. Through this process, I learned that there are 22 species of bumblebee in Wales, which amazed me. I also learned more about solitary bees and the important role they play as pollinators.

This new understanding gave me more than knowledge. It gave me confidence. The more I understood, the less fear I felt. Using a plant identification app, I discovered that the flowers the bees kept returning to were blackberry flowers. I loved realising that the same plant supporting the bees would later provide berries for us to enjoy.

By the end of this experience, I no longer saw the bees as something to fear, but as something to appreciate and respect.

That change shaped the way I cared for the garden.

I placed a bee hotel near the flowers that were already attracting pollinators. I prepared pollinator-friendly planting and put out birdseed in response to the birds I had been hearing each morning. These were small actions, but they mattered because they came directly from what I had observed. I was no longer acting only out of duty. I was responding to a place I had come to know and value more deeply.

One especially meaningful part of this experience was sharing it with my daughter. Watching her curiosity and enjoyment reminded me that children are not born fearing nature. She was so happy to take part, painting the bee hotel, checking on the birds each morning, and walking up excitedly to say, “Mummy, let’s check the bees!” That warmed my heart and made me reflect on how often adults pass on fear without meaning to. It also made me think carefully about the messages I want to give, both at home and in my professional practice.

This process also reshaped the way I understand sustainability. Before, I often thought of sustainability as something large, distant, and complicated. Now I see that it can begin in much simpler ways. It begins when we pay attention to what is living around us, recognise how those lives depend on a place, and realise how easily that place can be overlooked or harmed.

That is what I want to carry forward into my practice in the early years. I want children to have opportunities to notice, ask questions, feel curious, and understand that caring for the natural world begins with forming a relationship with it. This award has shown me that sustainability is not only about teaching facts. It is also about helping children feel connected to the world they are part of.

There is still much more I want to learn, but I no longer see nature, or my place within it, in the same way. My garden is no longer just an ordinary space behind my house. It has become a living place that deserves attention, care, and respect.

I do not think I have a complete answer to everything this experience has opened up for me, but it has helped me begin. What started in a small garden in Swansea will continue to shape the way I live, learn, and support children in building connections with the natural world.

It also left me with a wider question. If a small, everyday encounter with nature could reshape my thinking so deeply, what might this experience mean within early childhood education more broadly? For me, the value of this work lies not only in personal reflection but also in what it reveals about sustainability, global citizenship, and the kinds of relationships with the world that early years practice can help to nurture.

From that point, I now want to move into a more critical discussion. To understand why experiences such as these matter educationally, it is first necessary to consider what is meant by sustainability itself, since it is a term that is widely used but not always clearly defined.

Part 2:

Introduction

One of the most widely cited definitions comes from *Our Common Future*, which describes sustainable development as meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own (WCED, 1987). This definition mattered because it moved sustainability beyond a purely environmental concern and framed it as a matter of responsibility across time. Understood this way, sustainability is closely linked to global citizenship, since it involves thinking about other people, other places, and future generations. The 1992 Earth Summit (UNCED, 1992) reinforced this shift by establishing sustainability as a global political and educational concern. Since then, it has increasingly been recognised as multi-dimensional, involving environmental protection, social wellbeing, economic fairness and educational change (UNESCO, 2002). This broader view is reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), which connect sustainability to concerns such as quality education, climate action and responsible consumption.

In Wales, sustainability carries particular weight. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places sustainable development at the centre of public decision-making. In education, the Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship framework, introduced in 2006, aimed to move beyond a narrow environmental focus by linking sustainability to interdependence, social justice and ethical citizenship (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). As Croke *et al.* (2021) suggest, the Welsh context is distinctive because it brings sustainable development into dialogue with children's rights in internationally unusual ways.

This presentation critically evaluates how far nature-based experiences such as the John Muir Award can support early childhood education for sustainability. It focuses on three aspects: practical learning, learning from nature, and taking action. It argues that experiences such as the garden-based work in Part 1 can strongly support early childhood education for sustainability, yet their environmental strength may leave the wider citizenship aims of ESDGC insufficiently developed unless deliberately extended.

Theory

The John Muir Award is organised around four principles: discovering, exploring, conserving and sharing wild places (John Muir Trust, 2025). These principles connect strongly with early years pedagogy through their emphasis on learning by direct engagement with the world. Froebel's work makes the connection especially clear. Froebel (1826) viewed nature as central to children's learning and development. Nature was not simply a backdrop, but a living context through which children develop awareness of connection, pattern and interdependence. The implication for sustainability is significant: care for the world develops through relationship rather than through instruction alone. Watts (2022) extends this idea by describing Froebelian pedagogy as a form of everyday activism, cultivating attentiveness, care and ethical responsibility towards the more-than-human world.

The garden-based experience in Part 1 illustrates this. Returning to the same place over time, observing bees and birds, and responding through practical action were not only enjoyable. They cultivated the very dispositions sustainability requires: attentiveness, connection and care. Yet the Froebelian vision must be viewed critically. Bruce (2021) notes that Froebel's ideas emerged in a very different context, and that access to nature can no longer be assumed. Ward Thompson *et al.* (2016) show that access to green space is uneven, especially in deprived urban communities. Nature-based pedagogy is therefore powerful yet unequally available, its benefits distributed by circumstances children do not control.

Dewey's work adds a further dimension. Dewey (1938) argued that learning is most meaningful when rooted in lived experience, inquiry and reflection. This supports hands-on, real-life learning and helps explain the educational value of place-based activities. Ye and Shih (2021) extend the principle into sustainability in the early years, arguing that children learn through participation, inquiry and reflection rather than passive transmission. The garden experience enacts this precisely. Photographing the bees, identifying the flowers they returned to, and responding through pollinator planting were forms of learning in a real situation, in which experience became educative because it led to thought and further action.

Even so, Dewey's model depends on conditions that are not always in place. Davies and Hamilton (2018) show that lack of time, limited resources, curriculum pressures and practitioner confidence restrict what is possible in practice. Approaches of this kind are pedagogically strong but require institutional support if they are to move beyond aspiration into consistent practice.

Practice

Prins *et al.* (2023) highlight how nature-based experiences support the integrated character of early learning, while Johnstone *et al.* (2022) demonstrate their developmental breadth. Educational value, however, does not mean these experiences automatically fulfil the wider aims of sustainability. Grindheim *et al.* (2019) remind us that early years sustainability is multi-dimensional, encompassing environmental care, justice, collective responsibility and concern for future generations, dimensions that may at times pull against one another. Experiences such as the John Muir Award may provide a strong ecological foundation without fully addressing the citizenship dimension.

Knight *et al.* (2024) argue that outdoor learning frameworks must be adapted for young children if they are to be meaningful in the early years. The point matters because the John Muir Award is not primarily designed for the under-fives. What matters, therefore, is not applying the Award mechanically, but reinterpreting its principles in developmentally appropriate ways. Larimore (2019) locates this within developmentally appropriate practice, while Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) show that nature-based learning is especially rich when grounded in child-led experience.

Boyd, Hirst and Siraj-Blatchford (2018) argue that sustainability is better understood as the ethos of a setting rather than a series of isolated activities. It is expressed through everyday values, routines and relationships. The Welsh Government's *A Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings* (2022) supports this

position through its emphasis on meaningful experience, belonging and children's developing sense of *cynefin*. In this context, the significance of repeated everyday engagement becomes clearer, since *cynefin* is formed not through isolated events but through familiarity with place over time. Small and consistent acts such as caring for plants, observing seasonal change and spending time outdoors are not minor environmental gestures but daily processes through which children begin to develop a sense of place, connection and responsibility. Ernst and Burcak (2019) strengthen this claim, providing evidence that experiences of this kind cultivate curiosity, care and executive function, the capacities on which later responses to sustainability challenges may draw.

Practical learning is central here. In Part 1, sustainability did not remain at the level of observation but led to practical action through pollinator-friendly planting, a bee hotel and feeding birds. These actions were small but educationally significant because they emerged from paying attention to a real place rather than being imposed from outside. Small everyday acts of care of this kind can become early forms of futures thinking and intergenerational responsibility, the orientation the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places at the centre of public decision-making. Hirst (2019) argues that early years sustainability should be approached through collaborative inquiry rather than passive instruction. Similarly, Bascopé, Perasso and Reiss (2019) show that the value of sustainability education depends not only on the activity itself, but on the pedagogy through which adults guide children's thinking. Taken together, these arguments suggest that a task only becomes educationally meaningful when children are encouraged to notice, question, reflect and participate.

The bees illustrate this clearly. Photographing them, comparing them with identification guides and asking why they returned to the same flowers were acts of creative and reflective inquiry. UNESCO (2017) identifies reflection, critical thinking and action as central principles of Education for Sustainable Development, helping to explain why this was educationally significant rather than merely observational. Reflection changed fear into curiosity, and curiosity led to practical action, showing how an ordinary domestic garden can become a site of meaningful sustainability learning.

The experience must also be critically examined. Early years sustainability has often been framed mainly through environmental concerns. Rodrigues-Silva and Alsina (2023) argue that social justice and global citizenship have frequently received less attention, meaning that the frameworks practitioners inherit may reproduce this imbalance. There is a risk, then, that experiences such as the John Muir Award remain mainly ecological in focus, addressing children's relationship with the natural world while leaving the citizenship ambitions of ESDGC underdeveloped.

This critique should be qualified. Chawla (2020) argues that early emotional bonds with nature may form the developmental foundation for later citizenship, since children who care for the living world may later be more likely to act responsibly towards the environment and, potentially, towards others and future generations. Read in this way, the environmental emphasis of the John Muir Award may be less a flaw than a developmentally appropriate starting point. However, this does not remove the limitation entirely. While Barrable's (2019) framework valuably

foregrounds children's relationship with the natural world, Pramling Samuelsson and Park (2017) argue that early years sustainability must also encompass social responsibility and collective futures. Collins and Garrity (2025) extend this further by suggesting that sustainability education should move beyond nature activities alone to position children as rights-holders, active participants and developing systems thinkers.

A rights-based perspective strengthens the argument. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that education should prepare children to live responsibly and develop respect for the natural environment, while General Comment No. 26 (UNCRC, 2023) makes clear that environmental harm is inseparable from children's rights. Taken together, these documents position sustainability not as an optional theme, but as part of children's educational entitlement. In Wales, Croke *et al.* (2021) argue that the interaction between the UNCRC (1989) and the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 reinforces this position, rendering sustainability an ethical and educational responsibility. In this sense, sustainability should be understood not as an abstract ideal, but as a practical orientation through which settings help children develop the habits of mind, care and agency that living sustainably demands.

Conclusion

To conclude, nature-based experiences such as the John Muir Award can contribute meaningfully to early childhood education for sustainability. Interpreted through Froebel and Dewey, their principal strength lies in supporting practical learning, reflection and care for place. Their principal limitation is that this ecological foundation may leave the citizenship dimension of sustainability underdeveloped. This shortfall may be attributed less to individual practitioners than to wider frameworks that have long positioned justice and global responsibility as secondary concerns. Such experiences should not be set aside, but their environmental foundation must be deliberately extended towards fairness, interdependence and global responsibility if early years settings are to prepare children not only to value the natural world, but to live responsibly with others in the present and for the future.

Thank you for watching!

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