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ECEY 6005/C

## **Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the early Years.**

Part 1.

Good afternoon, my name is Michelle, and my student number is 2308630. I would like to begin by reflecting on a personal experience that has deepened my understanding of sustainability through engagement with nature by taking part in the John Muir Award. Following this, I will critically evaluate how these insights can support key theories and principles of early childhood education for sustainability, drawing on detailed academic sources.

My experience of visiting Hendre Lake regularly, helped me see how natural systems are connected, especially in terms of water quality and biodiversity. As part of the Gwent Levels, the lake is shaped by both nature and human activity. Watching the reed drainage systems, plants, and wildlife like birds, amphibians, and insects showed how caring for water and habitats supports healthy ecosystems. This experience made sustainability feel real, not just something from literature, and helped me understand how local environments are affected by wider political decisions, such as land use and conservation plans. It highlighted why early years education should include hands-on, local learning about sustainability.

Hendre Lake, is in St Mellons, Cardiff, it has a fascinating blend of natural beauty and human-made history. It was created in the 1970's as part of a flood prevention

strategy to protect new housing developments in the area. The lake spans approximately 40,000 square metres, forming part of the wider Gwent Levels.

The lake and parkland area were further enhanced in the 1990's with European funding, transforming it into a valued public space for recreation. Today, it serves not only as a popular spot for dog walking and cycling but also as a functional floodplain and a living classroom for sustainability and biodiversity. However, during my visits, I observed a concerning amount of litter, including plastic waste floating in the water, despite the presence of rubbish bins. This was disappointing and highlighted a disconnect between the space's intended purpose and how it is respected in practice. Plastic and other rubbish in aquatic environments pose serious threats to ecosystems, wildlife, and water quality. At Hendre Lake, litter such as plastic bottles, food wrappers, and bags disrupts both the visual landscape and ecological balance. Over time, these plastics degrade into microplastics, entering the food chain and even reaching human consumption. These plastics can be detrimental to animals and habitats harming entire ecosystems.

In response to the environmental issues I observed at the Lake, I organised a litter-picking group with family and friends. Our collective effort successfully reduced visible waste and improved the immediate surroundings of the lake. However, we also encountered longstanding pollution, with some litter embedded deep within the banks, evidence of ongoing neglect. This experience not only illustrated the power of grassroots action but also highlighted the critical need for sustained environmental care. Short-term clean-ups are valuable, but lasting change requires consistent community involvement, education, and support to protect and nurture natural spaces over time.

This initiative deepened my understanding of environmental responsibility within a real-life condition and highlighted how local action contributes to broader sustainability goals. It also reinforced the importance of involving children in meaningful, community-based projects that link learning to lived experiences. In an early year's context, experiences like this could translate into child-led litter collections, nature walks, or discussions around protecting wildlife, helping children to develop care, curiosity, and a sense of agency.

I was amazed by the rich diversity of wildlife living there. I observed waterbirds such as mute swans, mallards, tufted ducks, and great crested grebes on the lake, while grey herons were perched quietly near the reeds. I even spotted a bird of prey; likely a buzzard, based on my research. This deepened my appreciation for how vital this area is for nature. The green land around the lake was full of bird song, which was so lovely to hear and gave me a sense of peace and tranquillity. It made me feel nostalgic, creating memories of early childhood when I used to visit places of beauty full of nature with my family. This experience highlighted just how important it is to protect our green spaces. It made me pause and truly reflect on the natural world around us and how privileged I am to have such a vibrant, living landscape right on my doorstep. It made me question how easily we take this for granted. These spaces aren't just for people, they are essential sanctuaries for wildlife and form a crucial part of a thriving, balanced planet. Having access to green spaces right on your doorstep is a true gift and one that is easy to overlook until you stop and really engage with it. These areas improve our mental wellbeing and connect us to something much bigger than ourselves. Observing the animals up close, helped me understand how learning about local nature can be meaningful and inspiring in early years education but just as important within the local community. It also encouraged me to reflect on who uses this space and the wide range of activities taking place. There was a real sense of community, children eagerly searching for insects, older adults quietly enjoying the scenery with a newspaper or book in hand, families gathered for picnics, and individuals making use of the grounds for exercise. Witnessing such diverse engagement highlighted the inclusive and restorative nature of green spaces, not only for wildlife but for people of all ages and backgrounds.

## Part 2.

According to David (2012), early years practitioners must adopt a realistic approach when engaging young children in sustainability initiatives. He argues that focusing on a limited number of well-planned projects can foster a sense of achievement and enhance wellbeing. Attempting to implement too many initiatives simultaneously may lead to fragmented efforts and diminished outcomes. When children are actively involved, slow and thoughtful progress is often more successful and developmentally appropriate. Likewise, The Children & Nature Network (2023), suggests that developmentally appropriate sustainable experiences can enable young children to become effective advocates for environmental change, this interconnects with The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Early years education is increasingly shaped by a focus on sustainable development. Approaches such as Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) encourages holistic, inquiry-based learning that nurtures children's ecological awareness and sense of responsibility, (Davis, 2015). The Curriculum for Wales reinforces this, by embedding sustainability and global citizenship across learning areas, promoting outdoor experiences and critical engagement from an early age (Welsh Government, 2022a). Initiatives such as Eco-Schools and the John Muir Award offer structured opportunities for children to engage with the natural world and contribute to conservation. Although these programmes support experiential learning, they must be carefully tailored to suit young children's developmental stages and avoid tokenistic implementation (Elliott, and Davis, 2009). Furthermore, disparities in access to green spaces and environmental resources present ongoing barriers, raising important concerns around equity and inclusivity. Communities in more deprived areas and from minority ethnic backgrounds are significantly less likely to have access to quality green spaces (Health Foundation, 2024). However, BMJ Open scoping review protocol (2024) asserts that green spaces are distributed and that planning procedures must prioritise marginalised and vulnerable community areas. The Welsh Government's *Anti-racist Wales Evidence Report* (2024) argues that unequal access to green spaces remains a pressing concern in Wales,

especially for ethnic minority communities who are disproportionately affected by environmental inequalities.

The John Muir Award Challenges Discover, Explore, Conserve, and Share can be adapted through playful, age-appropriate activities such as nature walks, storytelling, collecting litter, and making natural inspired art. These hands-on experiences can foster a sense of connection, responsibility, and respect in nurturing the natural world. (John Muir Trust, 2025; Keep Wales Tidy, 2025).

Education Scotland (2023) underscores that although the John Muir Award promotes outdoor learning and wellbeing, its effectiveness relies on thoughtful integration into inclusive and contextually relevant educational practice. Furthermore, Elliott and Årlemalm-Hagsér (2019) argue, that sustainability education should be both context sensitive and reflective, stressing that standardised methods may fail to resonate with children in meaningful ways. The Equality Act 2010 reinforces these perspectives, by mandating that all educational opportunities including those centred on outdoor learning and sustainability are inclusive and free from discrimination, highlighting the importance of addressing systemic and structural inequalities.

The DfE's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy (2023) sets out a national commitment to embed sustainability across all education phases, including early years. By 2025, each setting is expected to appoint a sustainability lead and develop a climate action plan. This aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals particularly SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 4.7, which promotes education for sustainable development, global citizenship, and cultural understanding (United Nations, 2015; Welsh Government, 2022b). However, the National Audit Office (2023) highlights problems with implementation, such as the lack of a clear monitoring system and major funding cuts, including the Resilient Schools Programme being reduced from £90.5 million to £4.6 million. Stakeholder reports also show that early years data is missing, making it hard to track progress or hold settings accountable (DfE Stakeholder Group, 2023). These challenges contrast with the aims of SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 4.7 (education for sustainability and global citizenship) (United Nations, 2015; Welsh Government, 2022c). Using Lipsky's (1980) theory of "street-level bureaucracy," it appears that early years educators are

expected to apply complex policies with little support. Therefore, turning sustainability into a checklist task rather than a meaningful educational focus.

According to Birth to 5 Matters (2021), holistic practice in the early years encourages sustainability through opportunities for children to explore nature, develop environmental awareness, and cultivate a sense of care for the world around them. This perspective is reinforced by Clark (2023), who advocates for the importance of slowing down to fully engage with and appreciate the natural environment.

To truly embrace all three pillars of sustainability it is important to actively engage children, their families, and the wider community. Collaboration across these groups helps embed sustainable values and practices in meaningful, lasting experiences (Boyd, Hirst and McNeill, n.d.).

Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) was designed to help learners understand how their actions affect the world around them, environmentally, socially and economically. Whilst encouraging children to make responsible choices that are thoughtful and make a difference (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). The three key principles are Learn, Care and Act these were introduced in 2004, Estyn introduced a Common Inspection Framework that required all school inspection reports in Wales to include observations on (ESDGC) a distinctive aspect of the Welsh inspection process (Estyn, 2014a). Scott (2014) highlights in '*Estyn's deafening silence on the effects of ESDGC*', the importance of delivering training to governors to strengthen their ability to support and challenge the school's implementation of ESDGC effectively. However, during a study conducted by Glenda Tinney *Perceptions and understanding of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) by teachers and teacher trainees and the opportunities and challenges of integrating ESDGC into early childhood learning within the Foundation Phase*, uncovered there were several key challenges in implementing ESDGC. Teachers and trainee educators expressed a need for greater access to resources and more comprehensive training. Concerns were raised about finding enough time within the school curriculum to effectively integrate ESDGC, as well as uncertainty about where it best fits. Additionally, some participants felt that certain ESDGC topics might be too complex or sensitive for younger children (Tinney, 2013; Estyn 2014b).

Although the strategy's overarching goals are worthwhile, impact is directly affected on how successfully it is implemented. Research highlights that practitioners working in the early years sector often face challenges such as insufficient training, mastery of policy and a lack of suitable resources. Without funding or the necessary skills there is a great risk that sustainability initiatives will be a token gesture (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2016). Sterling (2010) refers to this as "shallow sustainability," falling short of the transformative change that is needed.

In conclusion, early years practitioners must reflect on what they teach, how, and why, considering their values and the cultural influences on their practice (Davis, 2015; Paujik *et al.*, 2020). By modelling sustainable, ethical choices, they help children understand their rights and responsibilities (UNCRC, 1989; UNICEF, n.d.), contributing to a more knowledgeable and sustainable future (Boyd *et al.*, 2022).

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