

Section 2

Reflection-5 minutes

Good afternoon, my name is Rebecca Hayde, during this presentation I will be talking about my journey in recognizing the importance of sustainability and taking part in the John Muir Award. The first part of my presentation will be a reflection.

At the start...

think about

- How has this practically supported your own understanding of sustainability.
- What did you learn?
- How has it changed you?
- What have we lost?
- How can we make things better?

Academic Evaluation- 15 minutes

Now I will move on to my academic evaluation.

Sustainability is increasingly recognised as a vital component of early childhood education (ECE), with growing consensus that it should be embedded across pedagogy, curriculum, and daily experiences rather than treated as a separate subject (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2018; Elliott, Årlemalm-Hagsér and Davis, 2020). According to Davis (2015) Early Childhood Education for Sustainability fosters children's awareness of their relationship with the natural world, supporting emotional and cognitive development, and cultivates values essential for creating a more equitable and ecologically responsible society. This part of my presentation will critically evaluate how practical experiences in early years settings support Early Childhood Education for Sustainability, with reference to relevant policy, curriculum, and theory. Furthermore, I will draw upon educational philosophies from Froebel and Dewey to examine how Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) can be integrated meaningfully into daily practice.

According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2019), sustainability refers to the responsible use of resources to secure environmental, social, and economic wellbeing for current and future generations. In early childhood, this involves fostering young children's connection to nature, developing their sense of agency, and nurturing values such as empathy, fairness, and cooperation (Årlemalm-Hagsér, 2013; Samuelsson and Park, 2017). Additionally, Davis (2015) advocates for a holistic model of ECEfS that promotes environmental literacy alongside social and emotional competence, suggesting that sustainability should be lived through everyday experiences rather than taught in isolation, promoting a holistic approach. It is recognised by Elliot, Arlemalm-Hagser and Davis (2020) that humans are not currently living within the Earth's capacity to provide clean air and clean water supplies. This is something I mentioned in my personal reflection, it really resonated with me during the first lecture, and it was something that I had never considered before.

According to Elliot, Arlemalm-Hagser and Davis (2020) it is important to consider the needs of the present, without compromising what is available for future generations.

Internationally, education regarding sustainability in the early years is underpinned by key legal and policy frameworks. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2016) asserts children's right to education that supports environmental respect. Furthermore, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 calls for education that fosters sustainable development, human rights, and global citizenship (United Nations, 2015). This reflects a global movement toward integrating sustainability across all stages of education.

In Wales, the Curriculum for Wales (2022) takes a progressive approach to sustainability by embedding it across all Areas of Learning and Experience (AOLEs). One of its core aims being to develop children and young people who are ethically, informed citizens of Wales and the world. Moreover, children and young people who care for the environment and act as responsible global citizens (Welsh Government, 2020). The Humanities AOLE encourages learners to explore global interdependence and environmental ethics, while the Science and Technology AOLE supports investigations into human impact on ecosystems (Welsh Government, 2020). This aligns with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which places a legal obligation on public bodies, including schools, to promote long-term well-being goals such as a more resilient and globally responsible Wales (Welsh Government, 2015). The act promotes a proactive, child-centred, and rights-based approach that reinforces the value of sustainability education in the early years.

In contrast to this, England's Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) lacks direct references to sustainability. However, it supports children's understanding of the world through exploration of nature, weather, and life cycles, and encourages awareness of the impact of behaviour on the environment (DfE, 2024). It is recognised by Roberts (2020) that while ECEfS can be integrated into the Understanding the World area of learning, the lack of explicit curriculum direction creates inconsistency in its implementation. This leads to the effective delivery of sustainability education relying too heavily upon the schools and educators leading the learning and is also dependant upon their attitudes towards the importance of providing sustainability education. This was identified by Newton (n.d) during discussions with teachers, they voiced that curriculum guidance lacked depth and detail, placing the success of its deliverance on the competency of teachers.

ECEfS is deeply rooted in the philosophies of influential educational theorists such as Froebel and Dewey, whose approaches provide a strong foundation for sustainability in early learning environments. Froebel cited in Bruce (2011) viewed nature as an essential part of a child's educational experience. His concept of the "kindergarten" or "children's garden" reflects his belief in the importance of nurturing children through contact with living things and natural materials. Froebel believed that nature teaches children about change, interdependence, and responsibility, which are core principles of sustainability. Additionally, Dewey (1938) championed experiential learning and democratic participation. He believed that education should be grounded in real-world experiences and inquiry-based practice. This pedagogical approach encourages children to actively engage with their environment and make sense of it through reflection and action.

Meaningful experiences in early childhood settings can powerfully support sustainability education by nurturing children's curiosity, agency, and connection to the natural world. As

Hedefalk, Almqvist and Östman (2015) argue, sustainability is most effectively learned through lived experience and reflective practice. This may be seen in practice as encouraging activities such as gardening, nature walks, outside explorations or reusing an upcycling. According to Prince (2010) gardening offers children direct interaction with nature, allowing them to observe life cycles, learn where food comes from, and gain appreciation for biodiversity. Composting introduces concepts of decomposition and waste reduction and encourages stewardship of natural resources. These experiences embody Froebel's principles of learning through nature and Dewey's emphasis on meaningful, real-world learning. David (2010) argues that loose parts play, junk modelling, and upcycling can help children understand that materials have value beyond their initial use. These creative experiences develop critical thinking about resource use and waste, fostering values of care, responsibility, and innovation.

Additionally, regular outdoor experiences provide children with opportunities to observe ecosystems, identify flora and fauna, and build emotional connections with the natural world (MacQuarrie, Nugent and Warden, 2015). These moments not only enhance environmental knowledge but also build resilience and wellbeing (Barrable, 2019).

Furthermore, involving children in decisions about resource use, such as switching off lights, saving water, or recycling, fosters a sense of agency and democratic participation (Hägglund and Samuelsson, 2009). This supports Dewey's belief in education for participatory citizenship and reflects the principles of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (Tinney and Merriman, 2018). Encouraging learners to think critically, make informed decisions, and take positive actions toward a more just and sustainable world.

ECEfS offers several significant strengths. Firstly, it promotes holistic development. As Davis and Elliott (2014) highlight, sustainability education supports cognitive, emotional, and social growth, nurturing empathy, collaboration, and critical thinking. Secondly, it aligns with global policy aims such as the UNCRC and Sustainable Development Goals, which are 17 global goals adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The overall aim being to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity and peace for all by 2030. Thirdly, ECEfS fosters community engagement with projects such as gardening, recycling, and eco-school initiatives which often involve families and local organisations, strengthening partnerships and promoting shared environmental values (Miller, 2012; Korkmaz and Guler Yildiz, 2017).

Despite its benefits, several barriers limit the widespread adoption of ECEfS. A primary challenge, as previously mentioned, is the lack of explicit curriculum direction, especially in England. Without clear guidance, practitioners may be unsure how to confidently integrate sustainability into their daily practice (Roberts, 2020). Additionally, the confidence and beliefs of educators can impact the effective delivery of sustainability education in the early years, with training to promote the importance being limited. Hegarty (2022) found that many early years professionals feel ill-equipped to address complex sustainability issues. While some professional development initiatives exist, such as those explored by Dymont et al. (2014), more systemic support is needed. Furthermore, contextual and socioeconomic barriers can also play a role. Cutter-Mackenzie, (2014) identifies that urban or under-resourced settings may lack access to green spaces or sustainable materials. Engdahl (2015) also argues that cultural

differences may also influence how sustainability is understood and practised in early years settings.

Tools such as the Early Childhood Environmental Education Rating Scale (ECEERS) (Ardoin, Clark and Wojcik, 2013) can offer a useful framework for settings to evaluate and enhance their sustainability practices. However, widespread uptake remains limited without broader systemic support. Moreover, early years practitioners must adopt sustainability education as a pedagogical orientation rather than a set of isolated activities (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2018; Elliott, Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Davis, 2020). According to David (2010) this pedagogical shift requires practitioners to be role-modelling sustainable behaviour throughout all learning experiences, including storytelling, song, and play (Hadland, 2020). Educators should encourage the design of biodiverse outdoor environments (Barrable, 2019) and implement reflective tools like ECEERS (Ardoin *et al.*, 2013) to access sustainability within the environment. Furthermore, work needs to be done to establish strong partnerships with families and communities to encourage sustainability more widely (Hirst, 2019) and investments should be made into sustained professional development (Dyment *et al.*, 2014). Davis (2015) and Elliott and Davis (2009) argue that when sustainability is viewed as a core educational value, it naturally becomes integrated into curriculum design and everyday interaction.

Sustainability is a vital component of early childhood education, supporting children's holistic development, environmental awareness, and capacity for social responsibility. Drawing on the philosophies of Froebel, Steiner, and Dewey, educators can embed sustainability meaningfully through experiential and inquiry-based learning. Despite barriers such as unclear curriculum guidance and limited training, the transformative potential of ECEfS is profound. By adopting sustainability as a foundational pedagogical value, early years settings can help encourage compassionate, informed, and active citizens who are equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

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