

Script – A reflection on my John Muir Award experience at the Gnoll Country Park

This presentation is a reflection on my experience of completing the practical element of the John Muir award at the Gnoll Country Park. Focusing on discussing how this experience developed my understanding of sustainability and environmental responsibility. Critically evaluating how outdoor learning experiences support the principles Early Childhood Education for sustainability using research, theory and policies.

For the John Muir Award I chose to use the Gnoll Country Park as it is one of the largest green spaces within my local community. The Gnoll provides a range of natural environments including woodland areas, lakes and ponds, and open grassland making it an ideal location to explore its sustainability. As stated in the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), being outdoors has a marked effect on improving wellbeing for young people. Lessons outside and spending time in an outdoor environment is beneficial to children's learning and development according to various different studies (French et al., 2023). This supports why I chose to use the Gnoll Country Park as it is an ideal environment to explore biodiversity as well as recognising its ecological importance and the role it plays in supporting wildlife, encouraging community engagement and promoting environmental awareness.

One of the most valuable aspects of this experience was developing and understanding and appreciation for biodiversity. Through exploring the different areas and habitats within the Gnoll Country Park I became aware of the types of species that rely on this environment. It also made me appreciate a pedagogy way of learning within Early Years Education. Pedagogy is the heart of the Curriculum for Wales. Designing lessons that create ambitious and capable learners, ethical citizens and healthy individuals. Outdoor learning is recognised as a significant pedagogical approach that offers both physical and cognitive benefits. The Wales Council for Outdoor Learning emphasises the importance of outdoor learning as a consistent and expected part of every child and young persons experience. High quality outdoor learning becomes a core approach to learning across settings (Welsh Government, 2023).

Through exploring the different areas and habitats I was able to understand that even local parks contribute environmental sustainability by protecting habitats and maintaining healthy eco systems including the woodland area that provides a home for birds and insects and the ponds and lakes which provide a space for aquatic wildlife. It also helped me understand that conservation is not limited to national parks and larger outdoor environments, it also begins within local parks and outdoor areas.

Before completing this project, my understanding of sustainability focused mainly on the protection of an environment. However, engaging with this experience has broadened my perspective and created an understanding that sustainability also involves protecting biodiversity and creating a positive relationship with the outdoor environment in the early years. Observing the different environments including the woodland area, highlighted the importance of conserving these areas for future generations as they provide essential habitats even in small green spaces.

One of the most valuable aspects to the environment in the Gnoll Country Park is the entrance sign made entirely out of wood that is used as a home for insects and small animals. The large wooden entrance sign welcomes visitors to the Gnoll Country Park and marks the beginning of the nature reserve. The sign reflects the parks natural setting as it using wood for the whole sign rather than metal or plastic. Using natural materials to compliment the nature environment, creating a positive first impression. This demonstrates how conservation does not always require large scale projects, and that even small community projects and individual ideas can contribute to wider environmental sustainability.

Throughout completing this project for the John Muir Award I was also encouraged to reflect on my own responsibilities as a practitioner in the Early Years Sector. From researching theories such as Friedrichs Froebel's theory who strongly advocated outdoor play as a central component of early education. Viewing children as active, curious and creative learners who thrive directly through self-directed play, exploration and interaction through nature. Froebel's theory emphasises the importance of gardening, observing natural cycles, and hands on experiences to develop problem solving skills, sensory awareness and an understanding of ecological relationships. He believed that children learn best when they are emotionally secure and engaged in meaningful and practical experiences and activities (Tovey, 2017).

Providing opportunities for children to explore natural environments, observe wildlife and encouraging them to participate in conservation can help develop curiosity and support their physical and emotional wellbeing. These experiences encourage children to become active in their local community and develops an understanding of environmental responsibility.

This experience has strengthened my understanding of sustainability and environmental protection. It has also reinforced the importance of community involvement and the importance of providing children in the early years with meaningful experiences in outdoor learning environments that will support their wellbeing and development as well as developing their understanding for the importance of protecting sustainability in outdoor areas such as the Gnoll Country Park.

Sustainability is embedded throughout the Curriculum for Wales and emphasises it as a core value, integrating it into various subject areas to promote a holistic understanding of environmental and social issues. Natural Resources Wales offers educational resources and activities to help learners understand sustainability concepts, including discussions on how to live sustainably and activities to calculate individual carbon footprints (The Sustainable Academy, 2024).

This educational approach encourages children and young people to develop knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that are needed to contribute to a more sustainable future. The curriculum recognises outdoor environments as valuable spaces for developing children's curiosity, wellbeing and understanding of the world around them. This reflects the principle that children learn most effectively through first hand experiences rather than passive instructions.

This philosophy closely aligns with Froebel's work, whose approach to sustainability in education emphasizes the importance of nature and outdoor learning. He believed that children should experience all aspects of nature, not just plants and animals, which is crucial for their development and understanding of the environment. Froebel's ideas encourage children to engage with nature through play, fostering a sense of connection and respect for the world around them as well as promoting a holistic view to learning and development (Tovey, 2017).

Similarly to Froebel's theory, Loris Malaguzzi described the environment as the "third teacher" suggesting that thoughtfully designed outdoor environments stimulate children's curiosity and independent thinking. The outdoors is seen as a space for imaginative play, where children can learn through hands on experiences and interactions with the environment (Worsley, 2023).

However, educating children on sustainability should not be seen as just providing children with activities in an outdoor environment. Davis (2015) argues that sustainability education should encourage children to think critically about their relationship with the environment and have an understanding that their actions will have consequences for the community, wildlife and future generations. Suggesting that outdoor play experiences should be paired with discussion and reflection for children to be able to develop a genuine understanding of their effect on the environment and sustainability in the outdoors.

Although exploring the outdoor environment when completing the John Muir Award increased my understanding of local biodiversity, it allowed me to reflect and consider how conservation activities contribute to protecting ecosystems and can develop children's understanding of sustainability.

The Curriculum for Wales places considerable emphasis on authentic learning experiences and recognises outdoor environments as valuable spaces for children's holistic development. It is widely recognised as a fundamental component of early

childhood education and enables children to develop meaningful relationships with the natural environment (Welsh Government, 2023). Through child centred play children are encouraged to ask questions and investigate their surroundings to develop a deeper understanding, this also supports a paedology way of learning.

This is also supported by the Curiosity Approach which is a modern-day Early Childhood Education method that emphasises active learning and critical thinking. It is inspired by various early years pioneers and focuses on play based and child led learning. In Wales, outdoor learning is embedded into the Curiosity approach, promoting children's curiosity, exploration and holistic learning. The approach supports the development of social, emotional, spiritual and physical skills, providing authentic opportunities for children and young people to develop and consolidate cross curricular skills (French et al. 2023).

Research from French et al. (2023) shows that outdoor learning in Wales encourages children to become more engaged learners whilst fostering a positive attitude towards sustainability in the outdoors. Similarly, Tovey (2017) suggests that outdoor learning and play provides children with the opportunity to explore and investigate independently, promoting confidence and resilience. This research shows that teaching children about sustainability should be used as an approach that supports children's overall holistic development.

This is also further supported by Froebel's theory who believed that an outdoor environment could provide children with rich opportunities that support their development and wellbeing.

However, outdoor learning is not without its challenges. Early Years settings in Wales face challenges including the need for a coherent strategy and budget allocation to support outdoor learning resources. There is a lack of clarity concerning a definition of outdoor learning, which can complicate its implementation. Additionally, there are challenges in collecting data due to the over researching of practitioners during challenging times, such as the Covid-19 recovery period. These factors can hinder the effective use of outdoor learning as a pedagogical approach in early years settings. The lack of confidence in some early years practitioners can also present as a barrier, as they may feel insufficiently trained to deliver meaningful outdoor play experiences or may be concerned about managing risk. Taking children outside does not automatically enforce and understanding of sustainability, as there is a need for meaningful opportunities that require questioning and reflection (French et al. 2023).

Reflecting on my own experiences in the John Muir Award deepened my understanding for sustainability and demonstrated that the outdoor environment provides opportunities for children to develop environmental knowledge. This experience has reinforced my understanding that planned outdoor learning should form an important part of children development and education.

UNICEF is dedicated to the Sustainable Development Goals, a seventeen-point plan aimed at improving the lives of people and the planet by 2030. UNICEF works to alleviate child poverty and improve nutrition and food security. UNICEF argues that climate change and loss of biodiversity is a children's rights issue and these issues disproportionately effect children despite them contributing the least to these global challenges. Sustainability should not just be focused on protecting the environment but also on protecting children's health, education and future wellbeing. As Article 24 states, children have the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including protection from environmental pollution (UNICEF, no date).

Several articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are practically relevant to Education for Sustainability including Article 12 which recognises children's rights to express their views and have them taken seriously in matters that affect them. meaningful outdoor learning means children should be given the opportunity to express themselves, investigate independently and ask questions. Similarly, Article 29 states that education should develop children's respect for the natural environment. Throughout my experience in the Gnoll Country Park for the John Muir Award, reflecting on biodiversity and conservations, demonstrated how practical experiences can encourage a greater appreciation for nature and outdoor environments (UNICEF, no date).

The Curriculum for Wales also supports these principles by promoting ethical, informed citizens who understand their impact of their actions on society and the environment (Welsh Government, 2023).

However, although policy strongly supports children and young people's participation in sustainability, there is of children's voices not being heard if adults and practitioners potentially predetermine activities without listening to children's ideas or their needs and interests. Practitioners need to move beyond providing activities in outdoor environments and instead create environments where children can actively contribute to decision making that will help them develop and understanding for sustainability and support their holistic development.

In conclusion, my experience with the John Muir Award has developed my understanding of sustainability and reinforced the importance of a pedagogical way of learning and child led experiences in outdoor environments. through exploring the Gnoll Country Park, reflecting on local biodiversity and considering conservation activities helped develop a broader understanding of sustainability as a concept that encompasses children's rights, community responsibility and environmental protection.

Through critically evaluating how outdoor learning supports the philosophy of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability and conserving different policies, legislation and theories, I have been able to develop a deeper understanding of the benefits that outdoor learning has on children's overall holistic development. However despite these benefits, my evaluation has shown that children having an understanding of

sustainability and the world around them can only be successfully implemented when practitioners have the confidence, knowledge and resources to encourage purposeful experiences and opportunities that will allow children to be independent reflect and ask questions.

Overall, the John Muir Award has demonstrated that teaching children about sustainability is about nurturing lifelong relationships with nature and empowering children to become active participants in their community. Providing them with the skills and knowledge they need to build a sustainable future.

Thank you for listening.

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