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Bachelor's Thesis

How do children experience Nature school? A case study of a Nature school program in Youth Center Villa Elba

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Adventure and Outdoor education

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ABSTRACT

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Title of thesis: How do children experience Nature school? A case study of a Nature school program in Youth Center Villa Elba
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The aim of this exploratory qualitative case study was to answer the research question: *Which interests are expressed in children's descriptions of the Villa Elba Nature school, and how do these interests relate to the program's intended learning outcomes?* The goal of the study was to gain insight of children's views on their experience of Villa Elba's Nature school to further improve the sponsored class nature school program.

This study, commissioned by the Finnish Youth Centers Association, used participant observation, participant-driven photography, and a photography-driven group interview as participatory methods to gather qualitative data from primary school children in the Villa Elba Nature school program. Its key contribution was demonstrating participant-driven photography as an effective way to gain insight into what interests children.

The theoretical framework of this study consists of an overview of environmental education, nature school pedagogy, the educational aims of Villa Elba Nature school, and interest development theory.

The collected data revealed three central themes*: interest in nature, finding familiarity in the surroundings,* and a*ppreciation of nature*. These were then compared with the study's theoretical framework to offer insight for the field of adventure and outdoor education and the commissioner on improving educational programs. Overall, the themes showed positive experiences of nature by the children. Such experiences enables the development of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors later in life.

Keywords: environmental education, nature schools, qualitative research, case study, participatory research

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Humanistinen ammattikorkeakoulu
Seikkailukasvatuksen tutkinto-ohjelma

Tekijä: Henrik Andersson
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Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoitus oli selvittää, millaisia kiinnostuksen kohteita lapset tuovat esiin kuvatessaan Villa Elban luontokoulua, sekä miten nämä kiinnostuksen kohteet suhteutuvat ohjelman tavoitteisiin ja oppimistuloksiin. Tarkoituksena oli syventää ymmärrystä lasten omista kokemuksista Villa Elban luontokoulussa, jotta kummiluokkatoimintaa voidaan kehittää entistä paremmaksi.

Tämä tutkimus toteutettiin Suomen nuorisokeskusyhdistys ry:n toimeksiannosta. Aineistonkeruussa hyödynnettiin havainnointia ja osallistavaa lähestymistapaa, johon kuuluivat osallistujalähtöinen valokuvaus sekä valokuvien pohjalta toteutetut ryhmähaastattelut. Näiden menetelmien avulla kerättiin laadullista aineistoa alakoululaisilta, jotka osallistuivat Villa Elban luontokoulun kummiluokkatoimintaan. Tutkimuksen mentelmävalinta osoitti, että osallistujalähtöinen valokuvaus on toimiva tutkimusmenetelmä lasten kiinnostuksen kohteiden ymmärtämisessä.

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys koostuu ympäristökasvatuksesta, luontokoulupedagogiikasta, Villa Elban luontokoulun kasvatuksellisista tavoitteista, sekä i*nterest development theory*, joka mallintaa kiinnostuksen kehittymistä.

Aineiston analyysin tuloksena tunnistettiin kolme teemaa. Näitä teemoja peilattiin teoreettiseen viitekehykseen, jotta voitiin tuottaa hyödyllisiä näkemyksiä seikkailukasvatuksen alalle sekä tutkimuksen toimeksiantajalle luontokoulun kehittämiseksi. Teemat osoittivat lasten myönteisiä luontokokemuksia. Tällaiset kokemukset mahdollistavat ympäristömyönteisten asenteiden ja käyttäytymisen kehittymistä myöhemmässä elämässä.

Avainsanat: ympäristökasvatus, luontokoulut, laadullinen tutkimus, tapaustutkimus, osallistava tutkimus

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1 INTRODUCTION

A recent survey made in 2024 by the Ministry of Environment of Finland showed that 97% of Finnish people agreed that nature has a positive impact on their well-being. 89% of the respondents also agreed that municipalities should take more action in facilitating access to nature for their inhabitants. The respondents' ages were above 15 years old, and it did not reach out to younger children. (Koistinen 2025)

In the city of Kokkola, the nature school sponsored class program has been one way to help children connect to nature. Until 2025, the nature school sponsored class program was funded by the city of Kokkola's educational and environmental departments. In 2025-2026, the program is funded by private sponsors. The continuation of the program is uncertain due to financial uncertainty caused by the City of Kokkola's spending cuts.(Kluukeri 2025)

Based on the 2024 survey, people want more access to nature, and there is a big value gap between the expectations of the public and the decisions made by the city council of Kokkola to cut the funding of Villa Elba Nature school.

nature school can be seen as a far-sighted educational investment in the upcoming citizens and future generations to come. Shaping the ecological attitudes through local, experiential, hands-on environmental education could be seen as a true investment in a future facing unprecedented environmental issues that need to be tackled on a local and global level. Shaping positive attitudes towards nature and the environment is crucial early on in life as these attitudes has the possibility to impact the choices that future generations make concerning the environment.

The aim of this study is to answer the research question: *Which interests are expressed in children's descriptions of the Villa Elba Nature school, and how do these interests relate to the program's intended learning outcomes?* The desired output of the study is to gain insight of children's perspectives on their experience of Villa Elba's nature school to further improve the program. The study uses participant-observation, participant-driven photography, and a photography-driven group interview, also known as photo-elicitation, as participatory research methods to gather qualitative data.

The outcomes of this study were the discovery of three central themes that emerged as a result of thematic analysis of the collected data and the comparison with the learning outcomes of

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Villa Elba. These themes were then compared with the theoretical framework of this study, that consist of an overview of nature school pedagogy, the pedagogical aims of Villa Elba Nature school, and interest development theory.

With this exploratory study using alternative data collection methods, I wish to inspire the field of adventure and outdoor education to further implement and develop creative and participatory research methods in the evaluation of learning outcomes of environmental education programs. This study aims to inform practitioners of the aforementioned fields of alternative qualitative evaluation tools that can be used in their practice, in addition to the more commonly used outcome evaluation tools.

On a personal level, the reason why I chose this topic for my thesis was that I have an interest in giving a voice to children in educational settings. To hear what they have to say about the educational programs they experience. I also have an interest in how we as humans create meaning to places and form connections to our environment. However, my primary reason for choosing this topic is showing the value of an educational project, namely the sponsored nature school class program of Villa Elba Youth Center in Kokkola, to municipal decision makers in Kokkola.

1.1 About the commissioner

The commissioner of this study is Finnish Youth Centers Association. It is a non-profit organization that coordinates and develops the services of the eight youth centers in Finland. There is a youth center in Inari(Vasatokka), Kannonkoski(Piispala), Kokkola (Villa Elba), Kouvola(Ankkapurha) Kuusamo(Oivanki), Nurmes(Hyvärilä), Rautavaara(Metsäkartano), Virrat(Marttinen).(Finnish Youth Centers Association 2025a)

The educational goals of the Finnish Youth Centers Association are to promote internationalism and sustainable development among young people. Finnish Youth Centers are supervised and subsidized by the Ministry of Culture and Education. The services that are provided by Finnish Youth Centers are non-formal education programs that follow the educational goals of the Finnish national core curriculum.(Finnish Youth Centers Association 2025b)

Environmental education and a sustainable way of living play a significant part in the most recent national core curriculum of Finnish elementary schools(Finnish National Agency for

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Education 2014). Finnish Youth Centers provide a nature school service for schools to teach children and youth about nature and to foster a connection with nature and their local area based on the Finnish core curriculum.(Finnish Youth Centers Association 2025c)

One of the eight youth centers in Finland is named Villa Elba. Villa Elba is located in Kokkola, Ostrobothnia. The nature school of Kokkola is located in the premises of Villa Elba. It was established in 1992 and has been active for thirty-three years, making it one of the oldest nature schools in Finland.(Villa Elba 2025a.) Kokkola nature school organizes annually a “sponsored class” program that schools in the Kokkola region can apply to. Elementary school classes from grades three to five can apply.(Villa Elba 2025b)

Kokkola nature school is part of LYKE- network. It is a network that is coordinated by the Finnish Association of Nature and Environment Schools association, that coordinates and certifies nature schools according to environmental education goals and the Finnish core curriculum. In addition to the sponsored class nature school program, the staff of Villa Elba Nature school organizes also Mobile nature school activities for Swedish speaking schools and daycare centers in the areas of Kruunupyy, Larsmo, Pietarsaari, Pedersöre, and Uusikaarlepyy, Nature camps for schools, and day trips for daycare groups. (Villa Elba 2025c)

1.2 Key points of this study

The aim of this study is to gain insight into the impact nature school has had on children, namely what interests emerge in children’s expressions when they participated in Villa Elba Nature school. The main research question is: *Which interests are expressed in children’s descriptions of the Villa Elba Nature school, and how do these interests relate to the program’s intended learning outcomes?*

The commissioner needs to demonstrate the impact of the nature school service for the Ministry of Education and Culture and the municipality of Kokkola. In addition to funding needs, there is growing interest in understanding how nature school supports children’s learning, well-being, and relationship with nature and the local environment. There is also a need to hear and acknowledge children's own experiences and views on educational programs to further improve them.

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The results of this study can help further develop nature school activities by providing insight into what children find meaningful. Additionally, more diverse evaluation tools for measuring affective responses of participants are needed in the fields of environmental education, nature schools, and adventure and outdoor education. The output of this study is a qualitative case study on the impact of the commissioner’s nature school service on children, focusing on how children describe their experiences of the program. The output can guide the future refinement of nature school programs and inspire and encourage reflection among participants.

The study aims to bring out children's voices and highlight how they see and feel about nature school activities. This information can support the development of the nature school service and show its value to decision-makers. The expected outcomes are to identify key themes expressed by participating children and show the meaning and value they place on their nature school experience. The results can support the development of nature school services and provide additional evaluation tools for measuring affective responses in nature school programs.

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2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the theoretical framework used to answer the research question, *Which interests are expressed in children's descriptions of the Villa Elba Nature school, and how do these interests relate to the program's intended learning outcomes?*, is described. The chapter starts with a description of previous studies, followed by an outline of the theoretical framework.

The framework consists of the educational principles of nature schools in general and the Villa Elba Nature school specifically, which provide context and serve as points of comparison. The development of understanding towards the environment staircase model, or Palmbergs's staircase model, is also described, which is a central educational model used in Villa Elba Nature school.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how children experience Villa Elba Nature school and to gather experiential, qualitative data. However, experience as a concept is broad, multifaceted, and subjective, which makes it difficult to operationalize within the limited scope of a bachelor's thesis. Therefore, a theoretical framework that emphasizes more concrete and observable elements, such as engagement and directed attention, was needed. In this regard, interest development theory provides a suitable theoretical lens. Interest development theory, developed by Suzanne Hidi and K. Ann Renninger(2006) is used as a guideline for understanding the emerging situational interests of children and it is described in this chapter.

2.1 Previous studies

In 2023, a similar study was conducted by Miia Yli-hukka(2023) about the experiences of children participating in outdoor education and learning outdoors. The learning environment of the study was Villa Elba Nature school. In her study, Yli-hukka wanted to answer the research question of how children experience outdoor education and learning outdoors, and she interviewed six children who had participated in Villa Elba Nature school sponsored class program. The findings of the study showed that learning outdoors and outdoor education is meaningful, inspiring and engaging for children(Yli-Hukka 2023, 55).

Previous studies have shown that, nature schools and environmental education programs in Finland and internationally, lack the implementation of diverse evaluation tools of the outcomes of their programs, as was stated in a case study about nature schools in Finland

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(Jeronen, Jeronen and Raustia 2009) and an exploratory case study made in the USA(Ardoin, DiGiano, Bundy, Chang, Holthuis & O'Connor 2014). Yli-hukka also concluded in her study, that the research topics of learning outdoors, outdoor education, nature as a learning environment, sustainable development, and environmental education are less researched topics in Finland, despite Finland being well known for using outdoor as learning environments in its educational approaches(Yli-Hukka 2023, 54)

The exploratory study made by Ardoin et al.(2014) suggested in its findings that photography in combination with journaling can be used to reveal thematic indications of what sparks the interest and curiosity of participants of environmental education programs. This study draws inspiration from the case study made by Ardoin et.al(2014) both on a methodological and theoretical level.

2.2 Nature School

Since the 1960s, the realization in the Western world of the negative impact humans have had on global and local ecological environments has led to the development of several measures aimed at addressing climate change and environmental destruction. One such measure has been environmental education, developed to improve the relationship between humans and their environment. The goals, objectives and guiding principles of environmental education were drawn up in 1977 at a United Nations Environmental Program conference in Tbilisi. The Tbilisi declaration continues to form the foundation of environmental education programs today(Cantell et al. 2020, 12)

The objectives of the 1977 United Nations Environmental Program environmental education declaration are as follows:

*"**Awareness**—to help social groups and individuals acquire an awareness and sensitivity to the total environment and its allied problems.*

***Knowledge**—to help social groups and individuals gain a variety of experience in, and acquire a basic understanding of, the environment and its associated problems.*

***Attitudes**—to help social groups and individuals acquire a set of values and feelings of concern for the environment and the motivation for actively participating in environmental improvement and protection.*

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Skills*—to help social groups and individuals acquire the skills for identifying and solving environmental problems.*

Participation*—to provide social groups and individuals with an opportunity to be actively involved at all levels in working toward resolution of environmental problems."*

(United Nations Environment Programme 1977, 26-27)

In 1985, the principles of environmental education were integrated into the Finnish core curriculum. The first nature school in Finland was founded in 1986 in Siuntio, Southern Finland. Since then, nature schools have become part of the Finnish educational landscape. The most recent Finnish core curriculum includes educational goals related to sustainable development that support environmental education and nature school programs. Contemporary models of environmental education place increased emphasis on the development of relational, experiential, and emotional aspects of learning that may subjectively emerge when engaging with one's environment. (Cantell et al. 2020, 13)

The goals of environmental education are broad and thus difficult to evaluate effectively for teachers and instructors alike(Palmberg 2003, 41). As the goals and contemporary models put emphasis on the affective responses towards nature, it creates a need for meaningful reflection of the participants both during and after the nature school program(Ardoin et al. 2014).

nature schools are informal educational programs that put the principles of environmental education into educational practice. They are often services provided by organizations outside formal school settings, such as youth centers or non-governmental organizations. In Finland, nature schools are nationally certified by the Finnish Association of Nature and Environment Schools. According to the association, nature and environmental school activities are based on national early childhood education and school curriculum plans and support the goals of education for sustainable development outlined in them. Learning in nature schools is multidisciplinary, experiential, and exploratory. The learning environment is typically nature or another environment that enables activity-based learning, such as a museum or a nature center.(LYKE 2025.)

nature schools can be understood as a form of outdoor education combined with environmental education, with a particular focus on kindergarten and primary-school children. Similar educational practices exist internationally, although they may be referred to using

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different terms. One such example is forest school, which is a term used for nature schools in the United Kingdom. (Harris 2021, 1217.)

The Forest School Association in the United Kingdom defines forest schools as a long-term educational process consisting of regular sessions rather than one-off or infrequent visits. Forest schools take place in woodland or other natural environments and use learner-centered pedagogical processes to support learning and development. The approach aims to promote the holistic development of learners by fostering resilience, confidence, independence, and creativity. Forest schools also offer opportunities for supported risk-taking appropriate to both the environment and the learner and are led by qualified practitioners who continuously develop their professional practice.(FSA 2025.)

nature schools can also be viewed as enablers of access to nature by creating understanding and appreciation of one's surroundings and by fostering a sense of place among participants. Bonds created with local environments during childhood have the potential to support a deeper sense of belonging. This, in turn, may foster sustainability-oriented attitudes and practices later in life, as individuals may be more likely to care for environments with which they have developed an emotional connection. (Harris 2021, 1223-1224.)

These characteristics position nature schools as educational contexts that emphasize experiential and emotionally engaged learning, making them a relevant setting for examining children's expressed interests and experiences.

2.3 Villa Elba Nature School - Educational practice & goals

This study focused on the sponsored nature school class program of Villa Elba. The aim of the sponsored class program is to provide long-term environmental education for children in elementary schools. Villa Elba operates throughout the year, with nine sponsored class nature school days structured around seasonal themes that support learning outcomes defined in the Finnish core curriculum. It occurs once a month from September to May.(Villa Elba 2025b)

The aim of the Villa Elba Nature school is to support teachers in teaching children the core principles of environmental education through an activity-based pedagogy. Through observations, games, and experiential learning situations in natural environments, participants develop environmental awareness alongside practical and social competencies(Villa Elba 2025b). The overarching educational goals of the program are to offer positive experiences in

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nature, attract interest, and increase responsibility towards the environment and other people. (Villa Elba 2025b.)

All of the nine sponsored class nature school days are organized around a specific theme and each theme contains specific educational objectives and goals. The theme for the day of participant observation was called *Lighthouse Adventure*, and the theme on the day of the participant driven photography and group interview in November was called *Large Systems*.

The educational objectives and goals for the first one, *Lighthouse Adventure*, were (translated from Finnish):

"Objectives:

- Developing the group's collaboration skills through increasing self-awareness.

- Building team spirit through cooperative problem-solving tasks.

- Increasing awareness of the local environment.

Goals:

- Pupils learn to move in nature as a group with respect for each other.

- Pupils gain new positive experiences as part of a group.

- Pupils learn how snacks are packed in an environmentally friendly manner.

- Pupils familiarize themselves with the surroundings and history of the Rummelö-Harrbåda area."

(Viirre & Vidjeskog 2025, 13, author's own translation)

The second one, *Large Systems*, had the educational objectives and goals (translated from Finnish):

"Objectives:

- Pupils understand that matter cycles and energy flows on Earth, that everything is interconnected, and how we ourselves are part of this whole.

- Pupils observe that interaction is constantly occurring in nature: cooperation and competition.

Goals:

- Pupils learn what the food chain is about, how it is formed, and what meaning it has in nature.

- Pupils reflect on where they are placed in the food chain.

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- *Pupils learn how the food they eat ends up on their plate."*

*(*Viirre & Vidjeskog 2025, 14, author's own translation)

2.4 Palmberg's staircase model

As a pedagogical framework for environmental education, Villa Elba Nature school uses the staircase model of Irene Palmberg that she endorsed in her book *Environmental Pedagogy. Theory and practice in environmental teaching.* The model consists of six steps for developing an increased understanding of one's environment(Palmberg 2003, 44; Viirre & Vidjeskog 2025, 5).

The first and second step in the staircase model is about developing skills, the third and fourth is developing understanding of the environment and the fifth and sixth steps are about developing attitudes towards the environment. Villa Elba Nature school operates mainly on the steps 1-4 in their sponsored class program to match the developmental stages of the participants of the program(Viirre & Vidjeskog 2025).

The staircase model aims at facilitating positive experiences and understanding about nature, in nature, as a starting point for environmentally responsible behavior.

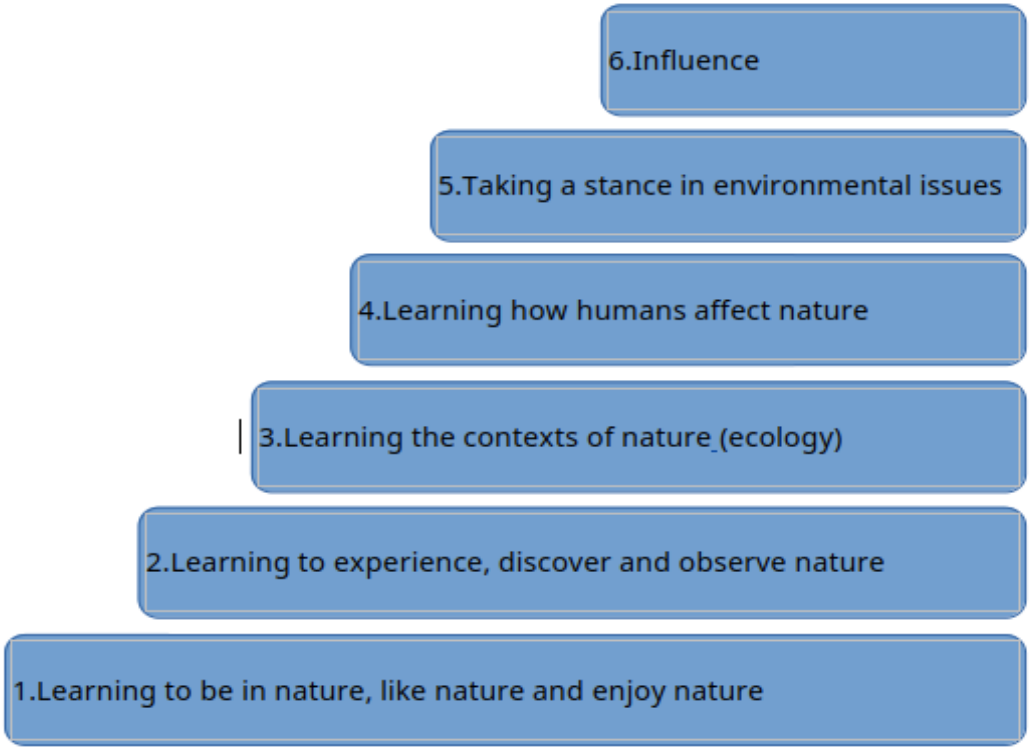


Figure 1: Palmberg's staircase model. (author's own translation.)

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2.5 Interest Development Theory

In a study made by Ann Renninger and Suzanne Hidi, interest as a psychological state is described and conceptualized into a four-phase model of interest development(2006). According to Hidi and Renninger, interest is seen as a psychological state where one is involved in something, or tends to keep coming back to certain kinds of things, activities, experiences, or ideas over time. Hidi and Renninger state in their study that interest develops gradually over time and that it contains both an affective and cognitive element. The affective element means feelings developed towards the topic of interest, typically of the positive kind such as curiosity and the cognitive element means the thought processes relating to the topic of interest, such as articulated thoughts indicating engagement with the topic(Hidi & Renninger 2006, 112).

The four-phase model consists of triggered situational interest, maintained situational interest, emerging individual interest and well-developed individual interest. Each phase of interest has various amounts of affect, knowledge, and value given by the learner; and the length of each phase is influenced by experience, temperament, and genetics(Hidi & Renninger 2006, 112). The two first phases of interest development consists of attention and positive feelings, while the later two phases consists of positive feelings as well as the acquired knowledge about particular content. The four-phase model works as a concept to identify the early indications of developing interest by directing focus on expressed positive feelings or liking of particular content(Hidi & Renninger 2006, 114)

Triggered situational interest is the first phase of interest development. It is a psychological state, in which the feelings and thoughts towards and about particular content, is changed for a short period of time. It can be sparked by environmental triggers, such as surprising elements in the surroundings, or by something that has relevance to the learner. External support, such as a learning environment that includes puzzles or group work has been found to trigger situational interest. It is seen as a fundamental starting point for immersion into a topic of interest(Hidi & Renninger 2006, 114)

The first phase of triggered situational interest is predominantly used is this study as it describes the first stage of interest development, which is usually the phase of interest in children who participate in nature school. Being in nature and participating in a nature school session is a new experience for many children, who are more used to spending time indoors in classrooms or at home.

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Focusing on the first phase of triggered situational interest gives also the advantage to explore emotional responses and interest development of participants of a nature school program and thus understand better how to improve the program. It gives the opportunity to open the *"black box of environmental education experience"*, as Ardoin et al. wrote in their research(2014), by gaining understanding on the affective impact the program has had on participants.

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3 METHODS

In this chapter, the chosen methods, the justifications for using them, and the process of fieldwork are described. Additionally, the target group, sampling, research ethics and permits, data-analysis and limitations of this study are outlined in this chapter. The aim of the study is to answer the research question: *Which interests are expressed in children's descriptions of the Villa Elba Nature school, and how do these interests relate to the program's intended learning outcomes?*

For this study, appropriate method(s) to collect the experiences of children participating in nature school were chosen to ensure that the data is reliable and that the method is efficient and fits within the time frame of a bachelor's thesis. The methods also needed to be age-appropriate to collect qualitative data from children aged nine to ten years old. As this study focuses on the experiences of children, the research design accommodated the view of children as experts of their own lives, allowing agency over what is discussed and the right to withdraw from the study.

Recent childhood studies have put more emphasis on using participatory and creative research methods to gain more engagement in the child participants. For example in an ethnographic study made in 2025 by Muhammed Mughal, in which photo-elicitation was used with interviewing children in Pakistan(Mughal 2025). Further examples of this show a shift in the field of child research from studies *on* children to studies *with* children that uses participatory methods such as drawing, storytelling, and digital photo or video activities to help children express their perspectives more fully(Karlidag-Dennis et al. 2025 & Ardoin et.al 2014).

To address the research question and adhere to the criteria stated above, three research methods were chosen for data collection: participant-observation, participant-driven photography and photo-elicitation. The combination of these three methods was intended to provide rich qualitative data from the participating children about their nature school experiences. Although a survey could have been used as a quantitative method to collect data from the children, this method was excluded because it was potentially not age-appropriate, and a low response rate was anticipated. Similarly, a lengthy interview with the children was also excluded as not age-appropriate.

The Practitioner Guide to Assessing Connection to Nature(Salazar, Kunkle, Monroe 2020), worked as a theoretical guideline for justification of chosen methods. It lays out different

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evaluation tools to assess the impact of nature school programs from an environmental education theoretical framework. Participant-driven photography, photo-elicitation and ethnographic observation are portrayed in the guidebook as methods that can be used to collect qualitative data from participants of nature school programs among other data collection methods(Salazar et al. 2020, 6).

The data collection part of the research process, using the aforementioned chosen methods, began with a participant-observation of a school class attending a nature school session in Villa Elba in October. It continued with the participant-driven photography, with some of the same children using instant cameras in November to document their experiences. It was finalized on the same day of the participant-driven photography, with a semi-structured group interview, with the pictures taken by the children serving as prompts for discussion.

3.1 Participant-observation

The benefits of observation as a method is the direct engagement with the studied phenomenon, providing insight how something factually works and that it gives a perspective about how for example an educational practice takes place. (Flick 2018, 325).

To better understand the nature school operations in Villa Elba and the experiences of children who participate in the program, I joined as a passive-observer in one of the nature school sessions in October 2025. During the session I observed fourteen children, one teacher who was accompanying them and one nature school instructor from Villa Elba. The name of the nature school session for that day was “Lighthouse adventure” and the educational aims were: inter- and intra- personal skills related to group work and familiarizing with one’s local environment.

A semi-structured observation protocol was drafted, and I wrote field notes during the observation. The semi-structured observation protocol consisted of two observational goals to focus on during the nature school session in November 2025. The primary goal for the observation was to familiarize with Villa Elba Nature school program and operations to gain a better understanding of the learning environment and educational practice. The secondary goal was to observe the engagement of the children during the nature school and take note of comments and behavior that showed curiosity about the activity, natural artifacts or the environment where the session took place. The observation protocol for the observation day is found in the appendix section (Appendix 1).

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3.2 Participant-driven photography

For this study, I used participant-driven photography as one of the three data-collection methods. This meant providing cameras for the children to use during their nature school session to document what they found important and meaningful from their own perspective. I had obtained five instant cameras for this purpose from friends and acquaintances and acquired instant camera film for each of the cameras. Each child had ten pictures at their disposal. To keep track of the photos taken by the children, I created a spreadsheet file and provided a photo album to collect the pictures in one place.

An exploratory study made by Ardoin et al.(2014) suggested in its findings that photography in combination with journaling can be used to reveal thematic indications of what sparks the interest and curiosity of participants of environmental education programs. The study also supported the idea that pictures taken by participants are about choices and meaning making and can as such be used to as indicators of where the attention of the participant is directed. This perspective gives the possibility for a researcher to interpret not only what is captured with the picture, but why it is captured.(Ardoin et al. 2014, 8). As was stated in the study, the findings could only be used as indicators of interest and could not be generalized as such(Ardoin et al. 2014).

The reason for choosing the method of participant-driven photography, was to make the research design more participatory and engaging for the children. As Salazar et al.(2020) present, choosing the age-appropriate method for the chosen target group and the research design of the study is essential for assessing the the connection to nature. A decision making tool is found in the guide to simplify the process that takes into consideration the age of the target group and research design(Salazar et al. 2020, 14).

To make the participation for children more engaging, I introduced novelty to the process by providing instant cameras, instead of digital cameras or smart phones. Instant cameras are a rare commodity and used only on special occasions such as weddings to capture moments. Due to the exotic nature of instant cameras, excitement triggered in the children was anticipated. Using instant cameras was also in line with the smart phone restrictions that has been implemented in Finnish schools the recent years(Kluukeri, Rautanen 2025)

The use of the instant camera’s occurred in November 2025 during the visit of the class in Villa Elba Nature school. The temperature was a few degrees below zero and the first snow

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was on the ground. There was a cold wind blowing from the south and handling a camera was not that easy for the children as it was cold on their fingers. At the start of that day I instructed the children on the use of the cameras and what the task was about. The instructions given to children and nature school instructors for taking pictures is found in the appendices (Appendix 2)

In total, 43 photographs were taken by five children, of which three pictures were excluded due to technical failure. The remaining 40 photographs were inductively coded into content-based categories and grouped into themes as indicators of triggered interests in the surroundings of Villa Elba. To introduce more transparency in the labeling process, two additional coders were involved in the labeling.

3.3 Group interview

After the nature school activity, during which the photo activity took place, lunch and break, I interviewed five children based on the photos that they took. The Villa Elba staff had reserved a comfortable and quiet space for the interview indoors. Before the children arrived I set the tables, checked that that the microphones were working and lit a fire in the fireplace for comfort.

Five children and one teacher attended the interview. Before the interview, I told the children that this interview will be recorded. Before I started recording, I asked a few warm-up questions about their nature school day. I then asked the children if any of them would like to press the record button on the recording machine, but there was no interest by any of the children, so I pressed the record button instead with their consent.

I asked first each child to choose five out of the pictures that they had taken to present. The reason for this was to save some time in the interview but also as a way to give the children a chance to assign special significance to the pictures that they selected. The children chose five photos from the photo album on their turn. I proceeded with asking open ended questions that each child answered on their turn(interview protocol in the appendices, Appendix 3).

After receiving answers from the children to these questions, I thanked them for participating, complimented them on the pictures they had taken and let them take with them their chosen pictures as memories of their nature school day.

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3.4 Target group, sampling & research ethics

The target group of this study was children participating in the Villa Elba sponsored class program in Kokkola. Elementary school classes from the third to the fifth grade in Kokkola region can apply to the program.

Due to the scope of this study, ethical considerations and permits required for research of minors, geographical distance, resource and time restrictions, one school class that participated in the program was chosen. The group size of the chosen class was fourteen and the children of that class were on the fourth grade, ages nine to ten.

To study children according to ethical guidelines, the parents of the child needs to be informed about the research and a consent needs to be obtained from them. For this, a participant information document and a consent form was drafted and sent to the parents via Villa Elba staff members. Webropol survey tool was used to collect consents from the parents. Eight consents were received from the parents.

Out of the those eight children, five were chosen for the photo-elicitation. The decision to further narrow down the participation size was due to the amount of available cameras and to keep the group interview more manageable time wise.

Children as research subjects involve special care as they are a vulnerable social group. Interview permissions were requested from the parents of the children who participated in the interview and instant photo sessions. The interview/instant photo session was voluntary, and at any point in the research process, the participant had the chance to withdraw. The group interview was recorded, and after transcribing the interview, the recording was destroyed. Instant photos and participant names were anonymized. To ensure the psychological safety of the children during the group interview a teacher accompanied the children.

Any data used in this study will be temporarily stored in an encrypted cloud storage(Proton Drive) for the period of analysis and then destroyed. No demographic information about the participants was used in this study. The ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences drafted by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research integrity (TENK 2019) was followed when writing this thesis. Data handling of this thesis was guided by the GDPR legislation of the European union.

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3.5 Data-analysis

The analysis of the data was drawn from clearly written field notes, photographs taken by the children and the transcribed interview document. The analytic approach was both data-driven(inductive), and theory-informed(deductive). The interests of children was inductively identified from the collected data and compared deductively to the learning outcomes of Villa Elba Nature school and the Interest Development theory.

The primary data source of this study was the 40 pictures taken by children. It was supplemented with the interview, which connected to 21 of those pictures to verbal data gathered in the group interview. Additionally, the observation of a nature school session that occurred on a different date, provided context on the educational program and the behavior of children during a nature school day.

The data was analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, drawing on Braun and Clarke's step-by-step, six phase guideline on thematic analysis. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, coding, and the development and refinement of themes. Thematic analysis can be both inductive and deductive at the same time(Braun and Clarke 2006, 86-93).

The thematic analysis process for this study started with writing the field notes clearly, transcribing the interview audio, grouping the pictures into content based categories, and connecting the pictures that the participants selected with the interview answers they provided. It continued with creating spreadsheets of all the three data-sets that I had gathered to assist with the initial labeling process. The initial labels were then grouped into codes and further refined into themes. To create relevant categories and themes when analyzing the gathered data, I used the question: *What sparks the interest in the participants?*

Thematic analysis is primarily used for analyzing text material according to Braun and Clarke(2006), but in this study it was also applied in analyzing pictures and observation field notes.

3.6 Limitations

Qualitative studies emphasize the reflexivity of the researcher and the validity of the research process. Reflexivity of the researcher means the belief that the researcher cannot be separated from their personal point of view and must thus be transparent about their research process by reflecting on the choices that are made. Validity means the trustworthiness of the research

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process, which can be ensured with research strategies such as triangulation of methods and reporting contradicting evidence in the findings of the research(Creswell & Plano Clark 2018, 216-217)

In this study, a triangulation of methods was used to increase the validity of the emerging themes. Participant-observation served as a tool to gain understanding how the nature school operates and what behaviors and comments children expressed during a nature school session. Additionally, the participant-driven photography was combined with a group interview to establish and verify a shared understanding between the researcher and participants what was represented in the pictures and why certain pictures were taken.

The participant observation occurred on a different date than the participant-driven photography and group interview, but the same children were present during both of the nature school days. All the three combined on the same day would have given more valid and rich findings, as it would have triangulated the methods more efficiently.

Although this study is a snap-shot of Villa Elba Nature school and does not fit the purist definition of an ethnographic study, due to its limited time frame, the methods and analytic techniques that are used in this study are also used in ethnographic studies. As Karen O'Reilly stated in her book, Ethnographic methods(2012), most ethnographic theorists accept that it is impossible to approach a research problem without preconceived ideas or theories, but approaching the emerging data inductively with an open mind and reflectivity about those preconceived ideas and theories is the best way to conduct an analysis in an ethnographic study(O'Reilly 2012, 29.)

All of the chosen research and analysis methods have their limitations and problems and are designed for collecting and analyzing certain data. Participant-observation has a heavy reliance on the reflexivity of the observer in the research process and it has a strong emphasis on focusing on only specific aspects of what is observed to provide validity for the gathered data and making the observation humanly possible for a single researcher. Participant-driven photography on the other hand relies on the visual medium of pictures taken by the participants and for the method to be valid the content and meaning of the photographs need to be verified by the participant and interpreted with caution by the researcher. Group interviews, especially with children, needs to be conducted such that the participants have built trust with the researcher.

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During the participant-driven photography, 43 pictures were taken by the children during one nature school session, and 21 of those pictures were presented in the group interview. Three of the 43 pictures were excluded from the analysis due to technical issues with the cameras. The photographs are interpreted as indicators of interest towards the objects and surroundings that the photograph captures.

Concerning the group interview with the children, I noticed that there was a tense atmosphere and shyness in the children, which is understandable, as I was an unfamiliar adult. This led most likely to the limited depth in the interview, which was a lot less than I aimed for. If I had familiarized myself with the children for a longer period of time, the findings could have been richer.

3.7 Use of AI

The use of artificial intelligence(AI) in this study follows the guidelines provided by Humak that outlines the use of AI in an ethical way(Humak 2026). The Microsoft Word transcription tool was used to assist with the transcription of the group interview. Chat GPT and Grammarly was used for proofreading and formatting the text. No personal data of the participants was shared with the AI.

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4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study. The chapter proceeds in a chronological order, and the findings are organized by used method. The subchapters consist of findings drawn from participant-observation field notes, participant-driven photography pictures and photo-elicitation group interview transcripts. The primary data is the pictures taken by the children, as it was the most rich data, supplemented with data from the group interview and observations made on a separate observation day.

4.1 Participant-observation

On the day of the observation, the name of the nature school session was “Lighthouse adventure”. The educational goals were to develop inter- and intra- personal skills related to group work and to familiarizing with one’s local environment. The duration of the session was approximately three and a half hours, including a snack-break. During the session, the children participated in five structured activities and a initial warm-up led by the instructor. The session was a story-driven treasure hunt set along the Rummelö-Harrbåda nature trail, which started at the Villa Elba Youth Center main building and culminated at the Harrbåda lighthouse.

When observing the structure of the nature school day and how it was the instructed by nature school instructor, elements of structured play was observed, as the session was story-driven and the activities were structured such that four of the activities needed to be completed in order to complete the final, fifth, activity. The puzzles were designed such that they were hands-on and had to be solved together as a group and were thus meant to be engaging for the participants and develop on their inter- and intra- personal skills. By telling stories that were supported by the structured activities, the instructor facilitated creating a connection to the local area for the participants.

The secondary objective during the observation day was to examine children’s levels of engagement during the nature school sessions, with particular attention to behavior and comments expressed by the children indicating curiosity toward the activities, natural artifacts, and the surrounding environment. The comments and questions were shared and directed to each other, the accompanying teacher, the researcher and the nature school

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instructor. To illustrate selected findings, these observations were summarized in a table, drawn from the observation field notes, with categories, selected comments and context :

Categories	**Selected comments & questions**	**Context**
Curiosity about the activity	*”Mitä sulla on eväänä?”/ "What do you have for snacks?"*	Some children asking the teacher what she has to eat for the snack-break.
	”Olemmeko hukassa?”/ “Are we lost?”	The children were assigned each on their turn, the role of guiding the group with a map.
Curiosity about natural artefacts	*”Mikä sieni tämä?”/ “What kind of mushroom is this?”*	During the snack break a child asked me this, holding a mushroom in their hands.
	“Mikä lintu tuo on? Se on sinitiainen?”/ “What kind of bird is that? Is it a blue tit?”	Some children showed interest in recognizing birds.
	”Mitä tuolla puussa on?”/ “What’s in that tree?”	There was big bird nest made of a barrel on the path, which caught the interest of some of the children.
	“Näyttää olevan lintupönttö, siinä on reikä”/ “It looks like a birdhouse, there’s a hole in it”	
Curiosity about the environment	*”Onko tää sun lempipaikka?”/ “Is this your favorite place?”*	At the start of the nature trail there was a playground and a child asked another child that question.
	“Siellä asuu Rölli!, se on Röllin koti!”“Rölli lives there!, that’s Rölli’s home!”	On the nature trail there was a shelter made of branches, which reminded some of the Rölli fictional character.
	“Onko toi hylätty?”/ “Is that abandoned?”	A question the children asked the instructor when they saw the abandoned Harrbåda lighthouse at the end of the activity

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4.2 Participant-driven photography

Five children were given the task to take pictures of what they found meaningful during the nature school session. The majority of the 40 pictures taken by the children depicted snow and its placement in the surroundings(16), of human-made objects placed in the surroundings(14) and followed by pictures of the sun and its light(10).

To provide context, the nature school day was the first day of snow in Kokkola, which seemed to intrigue the children, as several pictures showed spruces covered with snow. The newly arrived snow seemed to interest the children, particularly in how it weighed down the spruce branches. The day of the photography was in November and the surroundings of Villa Elba was decorated with Christmas themed decorations by volunteers and trainees, who were preparing for an upcoming Christmas event that was arranged in Villa Elba. The decorations were Christmas gnomes and a snowman hanging from a tree. It was also a bright, sunny day, and the contrast between the warm sunlight and the newly arrived snow appeared to fascinate and the light of the sun, invigorate the children. There was not a single picture in the collection that captured other children or adults, even though the children were not instructed to avoid taking pictures of each other.

Overall, the pictures taken indicated an aesthetic appreciation of natural environments and the novelty of human-made objects placed in the surroundings. To illustrate the above mentioned three categories, here are some selected pictures from each of the category:



Figure 2: Picture of spruce branches with snow(on the left), picture of a Christmas gnome(middle) and a picture of the sun(on the right)

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4.3 Photo-based group interview

In the group interview, five children were asked to choose five pictures out of the pictures they took. The participants are referred to as P1-5. In total 21 pictures were chosen out of the 40 pictures. This table illustrates the descriptions that the children gave to the pictures, and comments they said about the chosen picture, both in Finnish and translated to English by the author:

Participant	Chosen pictures	Comments
P1	Aurinko,Puita ja tonttu, Lumiukko joka roikkuu puusta, Aurinko, Käpyjä kulhossa/ Sun, Trees and a gnome, A snowman hanging from a tree, Sun, Pine cones in a bowl.	“Aurinko.”/ ”Sun.”
P2	Aurinko nousee, “Elsa” tonttu, Kuusi, Polku./ The sun rises, “Elsa” gnome, Spruce tree, Path.	”No näyttää hienoilt ja mä tykkään niist. No koska ne oli hienoi.”/ “They look nice and I like them. Well because they were nice.”
P3	Kuusia ja polku, Tonttu x2, Aurinko ja pitkospuut/ Spruce trees and a path, Gnome x2, Sun and duckboards.	”No, että mitä kaikkea hienoa metsästä löytyy. No ne on musta hienoja. No niissä on luontoa ja kaikkee puita.”/ “Well, what kinds of nice things you can find in the forest. Well, I think they’re nice. Well, they have nature and all kinds of trees.”
P4	Auringon nousu, Kuusenoksia, Kuusi, Pieniä kuusia/ Sunrise, Spruce branches, Spruce tree, Small spruce trees.	“Koska ne ovat oli mun mielestä kauniita. No, toi oli siks että valo tuli vähän niinku tuolta puitten takaa. No, että luonnossa on kaunista.”/ “Because I thought they were beautiful. Well, that one was because the light came kind of from behind

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		the trees. Well, that nature is beautiful.”
P5	Kuusen oksa missä lunta, Auringon nousu, Kuusen oksa, Auringonvalo ja puita./	“Koska ne on hienoja. Koska niissä on niin paljon lunta. Luonnossa on hienoa.”/
	Spruce branch with snow, Sunrise, Spruce branch, Sunlight and trees.	“Because they are nice. Because they have so much snow on them. Nature is beautiful.”

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5 ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the main themes that were discovered from participant-driven photography pictures, photo-elicitation group interview transcripts, and participant-observation field notes that were presented in the previous Findings chapter.

Three themes were discovered: *Interest in nature, Finding familiarity in the surroundings,* and *Appreciation of nature.* These themes were discovered as a result of thematic analysis that was discussed in the Data-analysis subchapter of the methods chapter.

In this chapter, the first part of the research question, *Which interests are expressed in children's descriptions of the Villa Elba Nature school...* is answered. The interest development theory, that was introduced in the theoretical framework chapter, was used to guide the interpretation of the findings and assist in answering the research question.

5.1 Theme 1: Interest in nature

This theme, that was discovered from the findings across all the data-collection methods, illustrates how children showed interest in nature and natural phenomenon around them during the nature school session.

During photo-activity, all of the children who participated, chose to take pictures that depicted natural phenomenon, such as how the snow placed on the ground and on spruce branches(16 pictures) and of the sun and how its light shone past the trees(10 pictures). Both of these categories combined, sum up to 26 pictures, which cover over half of the total 40 that were taken.

The first day of snow in Kokkola seemed to intrigue the children, as several pictures showed spruces covered with snow. The newly arrived snow seemed to interest the children, particularly in how it weighed down the spruce branches. One participant(P5) replied when asked why they took pictures of snow on spruce branches: "Koska niissä on niin paljon lunta."/ "Because they have so much snow on them".

They also took several pictures of the sun and how its light shone past the trees(10 pictures). One participant(P4) replied when asked why they took that picture that they appreciated in particular how the light shone past the trees: "No, toi oli siks että valo tuli vähän niinku tuolta puitten takaa."/ "Well, that one was because the light came kind of from behind the trees."

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Drawing from the observation field notes, there were two instances where the children expressed direct questions about flora and fauna, indicating curiosity towards learning about them. One instance was during the snack break, when a child asked me directly, holding a mushroom in their hands: “Mikä sieni tämä?”/ “What kind of mushroom is this?”. In another instance, some children showed interest in recognizing birds by asking: “Mikä lintu tuo on? Se on sinitiainen?” /“What kind of bird is that? Is it a blue tit?”

From the interest development theory perspective, it is observable from the children's expressions of awe and wonder of the sun and fresh snow to suggest that these elements sparked their interest on an emotional level. Also, the nature related questions that the children asked suggested engagement with the topic, indicating the development of an interest on a cognitive level. Both of these observations can be interpreted as elements of triggered situational interest.

5.2 Theme 2: Finding familiarity in the surroundings

This theme, that was discovered from the findings of all three data-collection methods, illustrates how children engage and make new connections with new surroundings by drawing on familiar stories and fictional characters.

Drawing from the observation field notes, on the day of observation, a child remarked excitedly: “Rölli lives there!, That’s Rölli’s home!” as we were passing a shelter made of branches on the nature trail toward the Harrbåda lighthouse. This referred to the Rölli fictional character, who is a troll-like hermit living in the fictional forest of Röllimetsä(1986).

Christmas time decorations interested the children and sparked some playfulness during the photo activity and the interview, as some children found it amusing to find placard gnomes in the forest during the nature school session. One particular gnome placard caught the attention of several of the interviewees, as it reminded them of a fictional character called “Elsa” from the animated Disney adaptation, Frozen(2013), that is loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's book, The snow Queen(1844/2020). The children named the placard gnome “The Elsa gnome”. Two of the interviewed children chose this particular picture depicting “The Elsa gnome” as one of the five pictures they were assigned to select from their selection. One interviewee(interviewee 2) commented amusedly on the picture that they took of “The Elsa gnome”: “*Ja sitten tässä on vähän niinku joku tämmöinen Elsa tonttu, tai tämmöinen”/“Then*

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here is this Elsa gnome, or something", and when asked why they took that picture, they replied: "*Joo se oli hieno ja hauska"/"Yes it was nice and funny"*.

To Illustrate the "*The Elsa gnome"* placard, here is an example:



Figure 3, Picture of a gnome placard, named by the children as "The Elsa gnome"

Although the Christmas decorations were not part of the nature school program, their placement at the same time as the nature school session revealed that stories and fictional characters have an influence on how children make connections with their surroundings through storytelling. These cultural references appear to help them connect unfamiliar environments to prior experiences. The amusement and joy that the children expressed when they found connections with the familiar and the new surroundings of Villa Elba Nature school suggest meaning making through stories and the development of an interest towards new surroundings.

Out of all three themes, this was the most surprising one to discover, as it was unexpected that the participants would find familiar connections around them and create meaning about those connections.

5.3 Theme 3: Appreciation of nature

The third theme, which was discovered from the findings of two of the data-collection methods, namely, participant-driven photography pictures and photo-elicitation group interview, captures how children appreciated nature by their selection of pictures and expressing comments of appreciation towards nature.

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For example, two participants (P5 and P4) said how they appreciated nature in general when asked why they took the pictures that they took(P5): “Luonnossa on hienoa.”/ “Nature is beautiful.” and(P4): : ”No, että luonnossa on kaunista.”/ ”Well, that nature is beautiful.”

Another participant said along the same lines(P3): ”No, että mitä kaikkea hienoa metsästä löytyy.”/ “Well, what kinds of nice things you can find in the forest.

Although there were no direct findings in the observation field notes to support this theme, the theme had strong support from the findings in the participant-driven photography pictures and photo-elicitation group interview, as the majority of pictures and comments were interpreted to relate to this discovered theme.

This theme illustrate that being in nature sparked positive emotions, or affects, that the children had towards nature during the nature school session. As the task for the children was to photograph things or experiences that they found meaningful, and combined with the remarks of appreciation towards nature that the children expressed during the interview, this indicates a positive attitude towards nature. According to the interest development theory, positive affects are indicators of a triggered situational interest.

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6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I review the discovered themes that were presented in the previous Analysis chapter and connected them with the theoretical framework chapter of this study. Each theme is compared in this chapter with the learning goals of Villa Elba Nature school, specifically with Irene Palmberg's staircase model. This chapter answers the second part of the research question, *...and how do these interests relate to the program's intended learning outcomes?*

6.1 Review of the discovered themes

This study revealed three themes that represent interests expressed by children participating in Villa Elba Nature school. The themes encapsulate what children found meaningful during their nature school sessions. The discovered themes were *Interest in nature, Finding familiarity in the surroundings,* and *Appreciation of nature.*

The first theme, *Interest in nature*, suggests curiosity and interest towards animals, plants, and natural phenomena. This theme is supported by the comments the children gave to the pictures that they took, and the number of pictures taken by the children that capture natural phenomenon, such as snow weighing down spruce branches, or the sun shining in late autumn. It is also supported by the questions that the children expressed during the observation day, which showed an interest in flora and fauna.

The second theme, *Finding familiarity in the surroundings*, shows the playfulness and joy that the children expressed when discovering elements in the new surroundings that reminded them of fictional characters. This theme suggests the playful and imaginative approach of the children to make connections with new surroundings. It is supported by the pictures that the children took that captured Christmas decorations, which were placed in the surroundings during the nature school session, and the comments that they provided during the group interview. It is also drawn from the comments the children expressed during the observation day.

The third theme, *Appreciation of nature*, illustrates the positive emotional connections that the children made during their nature school session, primarily with expressions of appreciation towards nature during the group interview and the pictures that they took. This theme shows a positive connection being made by the children towards nature.

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6.2 Alignment of the themes with the learning outcomes of Villa Elba

Palmberg's staircase model, that was described in the theoretical framework chapter as the theoretical foundation for Villa Elba Nature school, illustrates the development of understanding nature. The educational aim of the model is facilitating positive experiences and understanding about nature, in nature, as a starting point for environmentally responsible behavior. As was mentioned in the same subchapter, Villa Elba Nature school operates on the first four steps of Palmbergs's staircase model. The first four steps are:

1. *Learning to be in nature, like nature and enjoy nature*
2. *Learning to experience, discover and observe nature.*
3. *Learning the context of nature (ecology).*
4. *Learning how humans affect nature.*

From the perspective of Palmberg's staircase model, it can be interpreted that all the discovered themes align with the two first steps of the model. The two themes, *Interest in nature,* and *Appreciation of nature,* strongly suggests a positive experience and interest about nature. The only theme that could be considered an exception is the *Finding familiarity in the surroundings* theme, which captured human made objects and connections to fictional characters in the surroundings. This theme did not capture nature related objects or direct expressions indicating connections made with nature. Nevertheless, this theme aligns well with the aims of nature school from the perspective of fostering a sense of place by creating a bond with local environments that has the potential to support a deeper sense of belonging, presented by Harris in her study(2021). Additionally, excluding this particular theme would be a narrow interpretation of how children make meaningful connections with their surroundings.

Comparing the discovered themes with the objectives presented in the theoretical framework chapter, shows that the Nature School day in November, which focused on the theme *Large Systems,* can be interpreted to align partially with two of the discovered themes: *Interest in nature* and *Appreciation of nature.* As the objectives of that particular nature school day was:

- *Pupils understand that matter cycles and energy flows on Earth, that everything is interconnected, and how we ourselves are part of this whole.*

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- *Pupils observe that interaction is constantly occurring in nature: cooperation and competition.*

These educational objectives relate also with the third and fourth steps of Palmberg's staircase model, which concern learning about ecology and how humans affect the environment.

Although the first educational objective can be seen as vague and perhaps philosophical, and it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions based on the findings of this study, it can nevertheless be seen to align with the two identified themes: *Interest in nature* and *Appreciation of nature*. This interpretation is supported by the photographs the children took, which captured seasonal changes and natural phenomena and can be understood as reflecting curiosity about how matter cycles and energy flows on Earth. The comments the children expressed in the group interview also demonstrated an appreciation that suggests a sense of belonging to nature and the environment.

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7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I bring together the results and discuss the final outputs of this study and the usefulness of this study for the commissioner, environmental education, and the field of Adventure and Outdoor Education. In this chapter I also reflect upon the research process and what I have learned during my thesis project. The feedback from the commissioner of this study is also presented. The chapter ends with a reflection about the research process and what I have learned during my thesis project.

7.1 Summary of the findings of this study

This study explored the interests expressed by children participating in the Villa Elba Nature schools' sponsored class program and how these interests relate to the program's intended learning outcomes. The research question of this study was: *Which interests are expressed in children's descriptions of the Villa Elba Nature school, and how do these interests relate to the program's intended learning outcomes?* Through participant-driven photography, observation, and a group interview, three themes were identified: *Interest in nature, Finding familiarity in the surroundings*, and *Appreciation of nature*. Together, these themes describe what children experienced and what they found meaningful in Villa Elba Nature school.

Overall, the discovered themes indicate that meaningful experiences in nature take shape through different forms of engagement. For some children, their relationship with nature develops through direct exploration and observation, and for others, through personal associations and playful discovery. Recognizing both perspectives provides a more complete understanding of how children learn to appreciate and feel comfortable in nature.

When examined through Palmberg's staircase model, the results suggest that the Villa Elba Nature school supports the first four steps of environmental learning: *Learning to be in, like, and enjoy nature,* and *Learning to experience, discover, and observe nature, Learning the context of nature and Learning how humans affect nature.* The themes *Interest in nature* and *Appreciation of nature* clearly demonstrate curiosity and enjoyment toward the environment. They also show appreciation towards nature that suggests a sense of belonging to nature and the environment. Even the theme *Finding familiarity in the surroundings*, although less directly related to natural elements, demonstrates how imagination in new environments can play an important role in developing positive connections with nature. Comparing the

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discovered themes with the educational objectives of the specific nature school day also indicates a partial alignment of the themes with the educational objectives of Villa Elba Nature school.

While the findings provide valuable insight, they are based on a limited sample and should be interpreted within the specific context of Villa Elba Nature school. Due to geographical, time, and financial limitations of this study, the sample size of this study was reduced to 5 children participating in the sponsored class nature school of Villa Elba. The study is case specific, snapshot of the Villa Elba Nature school, and the findings are context-specific and not statistically generalizable, but they provide valuable insight into how children experience nature-based learning in this setting. A longer study with participant-driven photography used as an evaluation tool during the nature school program would likely provide more significant empirical data to evaluate the program outcomes.

In conclusion, this study shows that by implementing participatory research methods, one can gain valuable insight into how children experience nature based learning. This insight can be used to inform practitioners on how to further develop their nature school programs and make them even more engaging and meaningful. The findings of this study, suggest that the program contributes to fostering positive early experiences with nature, which are a foundation for creating a connection with one's local environment. As suggested by Harris in her study(2021), such early emotional connections may support the development of more pro-environmental behavior in a later age.

7.2 Final output & Recommendations for the commissioner

As noted earlier, contemporary environmental education models emphasize affective responses to nature, creating a need for meaningful participant reflection both during and after nature school programs (Ardoin et al., 2014).

This study demonstrates a participatory qualitative evaluation tool for assessing participants affective responses in nature school settings. It aims to inform practitioners at Villa Elba and other nature schools and Outdoor educators about methods that complement the commonly used tools such as surveys.

The findings support the development of nature school activities by highlighting what children find meaningful. They also underline the need for more diverse tools to assess

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affective responses in Environmental, nature-based, and Outdoor Education. The discovered themes can guide practitioners at Villa Elba in further enhancing their programs.

This study is possible to reproduce with a larger sample group and a longer time period. This would likely provide more significant empirical data to evaluate the program outcomes. Additionally, more accessible and less costly photography tools, such as using digital cameras instead of instant camera's, could be used for reproducing this research design. The participant photography could also be combined with a reflective diary, depending on the target group. To gain the most out of this research design and evaluation tool would be to integrate them with the existing program. This would most likely yield more in-depth results to enable research of the impact of the nature school program on participants on a longer time period.

7.3 Future studies

As new generations grow with different ways of expressing themselves, the field of Adventure and Outdoor education needs to keep up with the times to better understand the target groups they work with. Instead of imposing preconceived ideas on the groups they work with, understanding the group from within is a preferred option. This option provides a more nuanced perspective on the topic. Qualitative evaluation tools designed with the target group in mind and integration with existing programs as a part of the program could have the potential for improving and evaluating different programs.

As was found out in previous studies(Jeronen et al. 2009; Yli-Hukka 2023), and what I have concluded myself during my research process, nature schools are a less researched topic in Finland, and more empirical studies are needed on a national and local level to better understand the impact of nature schools operating in Finland.

On a general level, a meta-analysis of nature school practices in Finland would be helpful for future studies of nature school practices. Also, what I found during my thesis process that would be interesting to study more, is the long-term attitudinal impact of nature schools on the adult population in Finland, as nature schools have been part of the Finnish educational system in daycare and primary school grades since the end of the 1980's. Research on the impact of informal nature school programs on the environmental values of adults in Finland on a longer time scale could perhaps help answer these questions.

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7.4 Feedback from the commissioner

The feedback I received from the commissioner of this thesis was that the work responds well to the given task. The task was to explore how children experience nature school in Villa Elba, and to give the children a voice. According to the commissioner, the thesis deepens the understanding of children's own experiences at the Villa Elba Nature school, and the findings can be effectively used in developing nature school activities. The findings of the thesis provide valuable insight into how primary school children experience and relate to nature, especially through imagination, storytelling, and play.

The methods used in this study are considered interesting and potentially valuable for broader applications. The participant-driven photography method was seen by the commissioner as a useful method to understand how primary school children observe and relate to nature. The commissioner considers applying it in Youth Centers to support reflection, for example, at the end of a series of nature school days or a camp school.

7.5 Reflection

To complete this study, I traveled twice to a part of Finland that was mostly unfamiliar to me. This was both a challenge and an opportunity for me to familiarize myself with a new environment, as I had no previous connections with Villa Elba Nature school. From my perspective as a learner, I was exposed to a new learning environment, as were the children who participated in the nature school. Both I and the children were on a learning journey, building new connections with new places and familiarizing ourselves with new people and environments.

From my own experience, I have found a sense of belonging with my own living environment with positive interactions in an early age. As a child, I participated in a daycare nature school program, and I believe this has had an impact on my attitude towards nature and the environment. Yet, for this study, I wanted to approach the topic with an open mind and not assume that this would be the same experience for the children participating in the Villa Elba Nature school. Additionaly, reflecting on my experiences as a child in nature school happened in a later age and expecting children to reflect on their experiences in a way that adults do, would over-reach the cognitive capacity of children, not to underestimate the capacity of children to do so either in their own way.

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The goal of this thesis was to investigate how children experience Villa Elba Nature school. When I was considering the research design for this topic, I came to the conclusion that experience as a concept is vague and multifaceted, and deeply subjective, which would be too challenging to directly study within the scope of a bachelor's thesis. For this study, I needed something more concrete and observable, and also accessible data-collection methods that take into consideration the target group of this study, namely, children. As I was doing a review of similar studies, I found out that engagement is something that is easier to observe and a foundation for the development of interest. Interest is not synonymous with experience, but as a concept, it can be seen as an indicator of where the attention is directed to, and thus provides a perspective on what children are experiencing in the moment. This reasoning was guided by the works of Salazar et.al.(2020) and Ardoin et.al.(2014), which were described in the methods chapter. Based on this reasoning, I chose to formulate the research question as: *Which interests are expressed in children's descriptions of the Villa Elba Nature school, and how do these interests relate to the program's intended learning outcomes?*

The works of Salazar et.al.(2020) and Ardoin et.al.(2014) also inspired me to reconsider my data-collection methods. My initial plan was to make surveys for the children to answer and conduct interviews, but the aforementioned works provided me insight about alternative data-collection methods, namely participant-driven photography. The method interested me, because it was something new to me and it seemed also like a promising data-collection method with children, because of its engaging and creative aspect. Based on the works of Salazar et.al.(2020) and Ardoin et.al.(2014), it could also be argued that this method provided more agency for the children to participate in research that concerns them.

I had a deep curiosity in using participant-driven photography as a participatory research method, even though there were methodological, time, and material constraints to consider: access to cameras, expensive film, geographical distance to the location, consent from parents, and restricted time. Despite the constraints, I had the chance during this thesis process to explore alternative participatory research methods.

Although this study is contextual, the sample size was small, and the collected data were limited, this study provided interesting findings about what interests children who participated in Villa Elba Nature school. What makes the findings interesting, was that the discovered themes indicated that meaningful experiences in nature take shape through different forms of engagement. Some children developed their relationship with nature through direct

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exploration and observation, and others, through personal associations and playful discovery. Discovering these two perspectives provided a more complete understanding for me of how children learn to appreciate and feel comfortable in nature.

In retrospect, the scope of this thesis may have been somewhat ambitious for a bachelor's level. This was something I learned in the process. I set out to explore the topic with an open mind and with curiosity, and despite the occasional setbacks and delays, my learning journey was successful, not only in the sense of sustaining the effort of working on a thesis project over a longer time period, but also because of the new knowledge that I gained in the process.

Lastly, I would like to thank the children who participated in this study, the commissioner of this study Heli Eisher from the Finnish Youth Centers Association, the staff of Villa Elba Nature school, my supervisor Tero Lämsä, my dear friends and family who had the patience to read drafts of my thesis and give me feedback, and my partner who supported me in this process.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Observation plan

Observer: Henrik Andersson

Activity/event:Villa Elba Nature school. Lighthouse expedition

Date: 22.10.2025

Time: 0900-1300

Location: Villa Elba/Rummelö-Harrbåda Lighthouse

Persons being observed: 14 children ages 9-10, 1 teacher, 1 nature school instructor.

Planned activities:

-Introduction and warm-up game

-The Lighthouse expedition begins

-Snack break

-Arrival at the lighthouse. Can the treasure be found?

-12- 12.30 Lunch

-Free playtime

-Ending words and instructions for the next session

Educational goals:

-Pupils learn to move in nature as a group with respect for each other

-Pupils gain new positive experiences as part of a group

-Pupils learn how snacks are packed in an environmentally friendly manner.

-Pupils familiarize themselves with the surroundings and history of Rummelö-Harrbåda area.

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Purpose of observation:

-To gain a first hand understanding of nature school operations

-To observe children's behavior in the Villa Elba Nature school environment

-To gather emerging themes of experience from children

-To make myself familiar to the children for the upcoming group interview.

Observational focus:

1. Expressions of enjoyment by children

-Smiles, laughter?

2. Expressions of connection to surroundings by children

-Comments showing curiosity about the surroundings

3. Expressions of experiences during the session

-Comments about what the children experience during the day

4. Expressions about natural objects and environment

-Comments showing curiosity towards natural objects and environment.

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Appendix 2: Interview protocol

Interviewer: Henrik Andersson

Location: Youth Center Villa Elba

Date: 19.11.2025

Time: 12.30-13.00

Amount of interviewees: 5

Introduction:

We will begin with a round of names and a round of free discussion. Before looking at the pictures, a reminder to the children about my request as researcher for them to photograph things that are important to them during the nature school and that we will look at the pictures together and they can tell me about their pictures. Also a reminder that I am interested as a researcher in what they tell me and that everything they say is important.

Interview questions:

Free discussion round: *How did the day go, what did you do?*

Task: *Each of you choose five pictures that you want to tell more about.*

Each in turn: *What is happening in the pictures?*

Each in turn: *Why these five pictures?*

Each in turn: *What do you want to tell with the picture?*

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Appendix 3: Instructions for participant-driven photography method

Instructions for nature school instructors:

In this study, a visual method is utilized to collect experiential data from children. For this purpose, I have acquired five Instax instant cameras and film to implement the method. The limited number of cameras and the number of consents limits the sampling of the study. The participating children share the cameras and take turns taking photographs. The participating children are divided into photography groups and each photographer has three photos available. Do not interfere with the children's photographing; instead, let them freely take pictures of things that are important to them during the nature school. The photos will be discussed later in a group discussion. In addition to these instructions, each camera has usage instructions attached to it.

Instructions given to the children:

-Take pictures during one nature school session.

-Take pictures of things that are meaningful to you during nature school. Take pictures of what you want to tell others.

-Write your name at the top of the picture.

-Also write three words from the picture at the bottom of the picture, if possible.

-Put the picture in a plastic pocket folder, in a row with the other pictures.

-We will talk about the pictures together later in a group discussion.

Instax instant camera instructions:

1. Turn on the camera: Press the power button ("on" button). The flash light will start blinking while it is charging. When the flash is ready, the blinking stops.

2. Take a photo: Compose the picture using the viewfinder. Make sure that you do not cover the camera's light sensor or flash sensor when taking the photo.

3. Press the shutter button.

4. When the camera stops making noise, grab the edge of the photo and take it out.

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5. Develop the photo: Shaking does not help the development. Warm the photo for example in a pocket to speed up its development.

6. Turn off the camera: push the lens inward.

Note! Do not open the back cover of the camera, because then the film inside the camera will become unusable.

The instant cameras already have film inserted, so in principle there is no need to worry about how to insert new film into them. Nevertheless, if it happens that the back cover opens for one reason or another and the film becomes exposed, here are instructions for changing the film:

1. Open the back cover and remove the old film.

2. Insert the new film into the camera.

3. Close the cover and make sure that a yellow dot is visible through the small hole.

4. Press the shutter button, the camera will print the protective sheet. The camera is ready for use.

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Appendix 4: Havainnointisuunnitelma

Tarkkailija: Henrik Andersson

Toiminta/tapahtuma:Villa Elba luontokoulu. Majakkaseikkailu

Ajankohta: 22.10.2025

Aika: 0900-1300

Sijainti: Villa Elba/Rummelö-Harrbådan linjaloisto

Henkilöt, joita havainnoidaan: 14 lasta 9-10 ikäisiä, 1 opettaja, 1 luontokoulun ohjaaja.

Päivän ohjelma:

-Alkupiiri ja alkuleikki

-Majakkaseikkailu alkaa

-Evästauko matkan varrella

-Saapuminen majakalle. Löytyykö aarre?

-12- 12.30 Lounas

-Välitunti

-Loppupiiri ja ohjeet ensi kerralle

Opetukselliset tavoitteet:

-Oppilaat oppivat liikkumaan luonnossa ryhmänä toisiaan kunnioittaen.

-Oppilaat saavat uusia positiivisia kokemuksia osana ryhmää.

-Oppilaat oppivat, kuinka eväät pakataan ympäristöystävällisellä tavalla.

-Oppilaat tutustuvat Rummelö–Harrbådan alueen ympäristöön ja historiaan.

Havainnoinnin tarkoitus:

-Saada ensikäden ymmärrys luontokoulun toiminnasta

-Havainnoida lasten käyttäytymistä Villa Elban luontokouluympäristössä

-Kerätä lapsilta nousevia kokemusteemoja

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-Tulla lapsille tutuksi tulevaa ryhmähaastattelua varten

Havainnoinnin kohteet:

1. Lasten ilmaisemat ilon kokemukset

   -Hymyjä, naurua?

2. Lasten ilmaisemat yhteyden kokemukset ympäristöön

   -Kommentteja, jotka osoittavat uteliaisuutta ympäristöä kohtaan

3. Ilmaisut kokemuksista tuokion aikana

   -Kommentteja siitä, mitä lapset kokevat päivän aikana

4. Ilmaisut luonnon kohteista ja ympäristöstä

   -Kommentteja, jotka osoittavat uteliaisuutta luonnon kohteita ja ympäristöä kohtaan.

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Appendix 5: Haastattelurunko

Haastattelija: Henrik Andersson

Sijainti: Nuorisokeskus Villa Elba

Ajankohta: 19.11.2025

Aika: 12.30-13.00

Haastateltavien määrä: 5

Alustus:

Aloitamme nimikierroksella ja vapaalla keskustelukierroksella. Ennen kuvien katsomista kertaus lapsille pyynnöstäni kuvata heille itselleen tärkeitä asioita luontokoulun aikana. Kerron, että katsomme kuvia yhdessä ja he saavat kertoa kuvistaan minulle. Muistutus myös siitä että minua kiinnostaa se mitä he kertovat minulle ja kaikki mitä he sanovat on tärkeää.

Haastattelukysymykset:

Vapaa keskustelukierros: *Kuinka päivä meni, mitä teitte?*

Tehtävänanto: *Valitkaa jokainen viisi kuvaa josta haluatte kertoa enemmän.*

Jokainen vuorollaan: *Mitä kuvissa tapahtuu?*

Jokainen vuorollaan: *Miksi juuri nämä viisi kuvaa?*

Jokainen vuorollaan: *Mitä haluat kertoa kuvalla?*

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Appendix 6: Visuaalinen aineistonkeruumentelmä

Ohjeet luontokoulun ohjaajille:

Tässä tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään visuaalista mentelmää lasten kokemusaineiston keräämiseen. Sitä varten olen hankkinut viisi Instax pikakameraa ja filmiä menetelmän toteuttamiseen. Rajallinen määrä kameroita ja suostumusten määrä rajaa tutkimuksen otannan. Osallistuvat lapset jakavat kamerat ja vuorottelevat kuvien ottamisessa. Osallistuvat lapset jaetaan kuvausryhmiin ja jokaisella kuvaajalla on kolme kuvaa käytössään. Älkää puuttuuko lasten kuvaamiseen, vaan antakaa heidän vapaasti ottaa kuvia itselleen tärkeistä asioista luontokoulun aikana. Kuvista keskustellaan myöhemmin järjestettävässä ryhmäkeskustelussa. Näiden ohjeiden lisäksi jokainen kamera on tarroitettu käyttöohjeilla.

Annettavat ohjeet lapsille:

-Ottakaa kuvia yhden luontokoulutuokion aikana.

-Ottakaa kuvia teille tärkeistä asioista luontokoulun aikana. Ottakaa kuvia siitä, mistä haluatte kertoa muille.

-Kirjoita nimesi kuvan yläreunaan.

-Kirjoita myös kolme sanaa kuvasta kuvan alareunaan, jos mahdollista.

-Laita kuva muovitaskukansioon, riviin muiden kuvien kanssa.

-Kuvista puhutaan yhdessä myöhemmin ryhmäkeskustelussa.

Instax pikakameran käyttöohjeet:

1.Käynnistä kamera: Paina virtapainiketta(“päälle” nappi). Salamavalo alkaa vilkkua latautuessaan. Kun salama on valmis, vilkkuminen lakkaa.

2. Ota kuva: Sommittele kuva etsimen avulla. Varmista, että et tuki kameran valoanturia tai salamatunnistinta, kun otat kuvaa.

3. Paina laukaisinta.

4. Kun kamera lakkaa antamasta ääntä, tartu kuvan reunaan ja ota se pois.

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5. Kehitä kuva: Tärisyttäminen ei auta kehittymisessä. Lämmitä kuva esimerkiksi rintataskussa nopeuttaaksesi sen kehittymistä.

6. Sammuta kamera: paina linssi sisään.

Huom! Älä avaa kameran takakantta, koska silloin kameran sisällä oleva filmi muuttuu käyttökelvottomaksi.

Pikakameroihin on valmiiksi laitettu filmi, joten lähtökohtaisesti siitä ei tarvitse huolehtia kuinka niihin laitetaan uutta filmiä. Siitä huolimatta, jos kävisi niin, että takakansi aukeaisi syystä tai toisesta ja filmi valottuu, on tässä ohje filmin vaihtamiseen:

1.Avaa takakansi ja poista vanha filmi.

2.Aseta uusi filmi kameraan.

3.Sulje kansi ja varmista että pienestä reiästä näkyy keltainen pilkku.

4.Paina laukaisinta, kamera tulostaa suojakalvon. Kamera on käyttövalmis.

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