



## The Focus on Nature (FON) Program: Summary of Insights from Children’s Photography and Academic Literature

Feb 26, 2018

### Introduction

The following summary highlights key findings from a research study<sup>1</sup> conducted with Focus on Nature (FON) by Mark Shakespeare, URA, at the University of Guelph, with the guidance of Jeji Varghese.

### Methods

The research dataset comprised of 86 photos and 61 comments. Each photo was taken and identified as a favourite by a child between grades 3 and 6 at one of four Guelph Focus on Nature workshops between June 12th and 20th, 2017. During the slideshow, children provided comments regarding their favourite photo.

The visual content of the photos and participant comments were categorized and analyzed using NVivo 11, a qualitative data management software.

### Children Identify Many Elements of Design

The ‘elements of design’ findings captures the design elements that children reported to be present in their photo in addition to design elements the researcher identified within each photo (See Table 1 below. For quick reference, design elements commonly identified are shaded in green and least identified are shaded in orange).

Table 1: Summary of Elements of Design Findings

Design Element	# of students who reported in slideshow	# of photos displaying design element (researcher identified)	% of design elements reported by student versus researcher identified
Space	28	28	100%
Texture	41	54	75.9%
Line	51	71	71.8%
Colour	40	59	67.8%
Shape	30	46	65.2%
Tone	10	57	17.5%
Shoot close up for impact (SCUFI)	6	39	15.4%
Form	5	47	8.5%
Rule of Thirds	1	14	7.1%

<sup>1</sup> The full research report (with references) is available by contacting FON, CESI, Mark Shakespeare (markshakespeare1994@live.com) or Jeji Varghese (varghese@uoguelph.ca). The study was reviewed by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board for compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human participants (REB17-05-036).

## Study Findings and Literature Provide Support for Current FON Practices

- The FON approach provides multiple opportunities for children to connect and reinforce their connection with nature. E.g., photography allows connection to nature through senses, artistically, and behaviorally; the scavenger hunt emphasizes behavioral; nature sculpture emphasizes behavioral and artistic; and the volunteers commentary about children’s photographs and nature brings in a cognitive component.
  - Linzmeyer et al. (2013) found that children can connect to nature cognitively, affectively/emotionally, behaviorally, and sensorally. FON data (photographs and comments) also demonstrates that children can connect to nature artistically.
- FON activities are better in some ways than learning about nature from a classroom, as attitudes formed by direct experience tend to be affectively based and are better predictors of behavior than indirect and cognitive learning (Millar and Millar 1996).
- FON activities on or near school grounds engage children with nature in a space that they may already feel comfortable with and can help children to view these places in a different way. FON increases opportunities to foster sense of place and/or place attachment in children in these easily accessible natural spaces. This is important because fostering a sense of place has numerous benefits for people and for the environment.
  - Sense of place is “a collection of symbolic meanings, attachments, and satisfaction held by a group [or individual towards a place]” (Stedman 2002: 563). It encompasses positive emotional bonds held by people towards places (Stedman 2003).
  - Sense of place is fostered by place attachment, meaning-making, satisfaction, and emotions (Stedman 2002); behavior, experience, and acceptance/inclusivity in the space (Jack 2010); and independence/autonomy in the space (Jack 2010; Kroencke et al. 2015).
  - Sense of place creates a sense of belonging (Jack 2010), forms identity (Jack 2010; Kroencke et al 2015), increases awareness of the environment (Kroencke et al. 2015), general well-being (SDC 2007), and cognitive development (Wilson 1997).

## Study Findings and Literature Support Potential Additions/Alterations to FON Program

1. FON could foster a deeper connection to nature by further emphasizing sounds, smells, and touch as well, to augment FON’s emphasis on vision.
  - Linzmeyer et al. (2013) found that children connected to nature most through the senses, including hearing, smell, touch, taste, and sight.
2. FON could encourage children to think about and express how they feel during the activities, when they are in nature, or how their photos and nature make them feel, in order for children to connect more to the emotional/affective dimension.
  - Children can connect to nature emotionally (Linzmeyer et al. 2013; FON data [comments]), and their appreciation of natural places can vary according to mood (Bonnett and Williams 1998).
3. Volunteers could foster symbolic connections to nature by discussing the difference between seeing “literally” and “symbolically” during the introductory slideshow.
  - FON data (photographs and comments) showed that children can view or connect to nature both symbolically and literally.
4. Volunteers could discuss, or encourage children to discuss/consider, what nature is and what it is composed of. This could encourage free-flow of ideas expression during activities, and promote the idea that nature is whatever children see it as.
  - FON data (photographs and comments) indicates that children conceive of nature in many different ways, including living, non-living, dead, natural, and human-made things, as humans, and non-human beings. Bonnett and Williams (1998), Payne (2014) and White (2015) also support these notions.

5. FON could spend a bit more time exploring form, tone, rule of thirds, and SCUFI (elements least often identified by children). Perhaps, elements of design could be taught by explaining the simplest or most easily understood first, and then explaining the less understood ones by building upon the former (e.g., form is conveyed through shape, and colour or tone variations).