

NEXTCast 2.8: Louise Zimanyi on the Forest Nature Program

In this episode of NEXTCast, we speak to Humber Early Childhood Education professor Louise Zimanyi about the Forest and Nature program she helped create, and about research she has done into the impact of the program.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to *NEXTCast*, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I'm Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. On *NEXTCast*, we talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation at Humber, both inside and outside the classroom. In this episode, we talk to Louise Zimanyi, an ECE professor who helps run the Forest Nature Program out of the Humber Arboretum.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to *NEXTCast*, Louise. I'm a dad. I have three kids, and I'm a big believer in letting them run free in the woods, and getting dirty, and getting hurt. I think that's actually a huge part of their experience. It's also an inexpensive way to keep them amused. So, I was really interested when I was reading about the Forest and Nature School, and this program that you run. Can you tell me a little bit about it? Like how it works, and when it began?

Louise Zimanyi: Sure. Sure. And thanks for having me. It started in ... We piloted in June 2016, and so Kaitlin Beard, who is an early child educator in the Child Development Centre, her and I took the Forest Nature School certificate practitioners' course through Forest School Canada. So we did one week of residential sort of like in-- residence in the forest in Winnipeg, Forest Nature School training. And then we spent the next 10 months doing an outreach engagement strategy with Humber. The culmination of that course is to run six or 10 pilot forest nature sessions.

Louise Zimanyi: You know, there's a lot of research and literature. There's a position statement on active outdoor play, which team came ... interdisciplinary team across Canada came together and said, "How do we get more kids actively engaged outdoors with their educators as part of school, as part of daily life? How do we do that?" And we teach a lot about that in our program. How do we use the resources of the Arboretum? Children were going out, but not necessarily climbing on those big rocks, or doing some more of the risky ... what we call risky play. Students don't often have a chance to see that kind of nature play, outdoor play, in some of the

placements they're in. How could we use the Arboretum to look at ... And Forest School Canada, it's a growing movement. I think it's almost in every province now.

Nathan Whitlock: Could you tell us a little more about that. What is the Forest School Canada? What's ...

Louise Zimanyi: Forest School Canada, so the executive director is Marlene Power, and Marlene, excuse me if I don't get this story exactly right, but when her child ... one of her children was young, she was looking for something, some kind of outdoor or play program. There wasn't really anything, so she started School at Carp Ridge. And now ... I went to visit Ottawa Forest School actually a month ago, and it's brilliant.

Nathan Whitlock: And it flips that model of like daycares or early schooling, early childhood education, where they're sort of in a room all day and maybe get 15 or 20 minutes here and there outside.

Louise Zimanyi: First week of the pilot, all ... I mean, we did have loosely ... We did have ... I wouldn't call them a lesson plan, but there were things that we would like to accomplish, and really what the children wanted to do was run and play with sticks. That's what they did.

Nathan Whitlock: That sounds great.

Louise Zimanyi: It was brilliant.

Nathan Whitlock: Who wouldn't want to do that?

Louise Zimanyi: Who wouldn't want to do that? It seems like a no-brainer, that oh well, why wouldn't they go out to the Arboretum? But, you know, it sometimes, it's also logistics, and the way the routine works, and so we're really trying to shake up a little bit of ... It's kind of un-planning. So all the learning comes as it's evolving. Teachers are not making a plan, but they're kind of setting up the enabling environment for really inquiry-based play.

Nathan Whitlock: I mean, in a sense, this is a very old vision of education-

Louise Zimanyi: Yes.

Nathan Whitlock: ... just letting kids go out and play.

Louise Zimanyi: Absolutely.

Nathan Whitlock: But, in the more formal way, this is a somewhat new idea. And to that end, I know you've recently done some research around the program that you helped establish. Can you tell us a little bit about that research and what you were looking at?

Louise Zimanyi: Well, there were a couple pieces of research we wanted to do. One was physical literacy and our children moving more when they're outside. So, compared to indoors, outdoors on the playground, and in the forest. So we're still ... we're going to be doing that piece of research with ... That's the new TIF. But, the piece that we completed was to really explore with parents what are some of their motivations for wanting their children to go outside? What were their perceptions around the kinds of benefits that children might have when they're outdoors? What a lot of parents talked about was that their children took ... They could see their children taking more risks in the forest setting, and having more confidence, like for example, climbing trees, or climbing like the crack willow has split into two spots, right?

Nathan Whitlock: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Louise Zimanyi: So, they actually can't really climb up to the first little nook anymore because the tree has split, but what it means is that you have these amazing long branch ... like, now trunks, where the children can climb up and walk along that. So they saw the children doing this, and they said they have more confidence than the children in the playground, when they go to the playground. They might not go on that climbing equipment, but somehow watching them in the forest, going down these steep stairs, climbing on the trees, they seem to be more confident in taking risks, than they are in their neighbourhood playground. That was an interesting piece.

Louise Zimanyi: You know, we think that the Forest Nature Program has to be this really ... You know, we don't have any equipment out there. We don't bring anything with us. We might sometimes bring the magnifying glass. We really don't ... There's so much to do. There was one girl who came out the first day, and she said, "When are we going inside?" And I said, "Why?" She says, "I'm bored. Where are the toys? There are no toys, I'm bored." I'm like, "Well, okay." So we fed the chickadees, and we were out for like two or three hours, and then the next day, she didn't want to go in. She said, "I don't want to go in. I like it out here." But it was that first ... we hadn't heard that yet. We had never heard any child saying, "Oh, I'm bored. I don't want to," because it's, you know, such a different environment. Right?

Nathan Whitlock: Right. Right.

Louise Zimanyi: And she was coming out as one of the older girls. She was like, "What do we do out here?"

Nathan Whitlock: Right.

Louise Zimanyi: So I think for some of the children, it's also a chance to ... It's quiet. Another little boy, we were down in the meadow, and we were kind of a little bit spread out, and it was winter, and all of a sudden, he looks up at me and says, "Why are we lost from everybody? Where is everybody?" Because I'm not their teacher, so they know that they should have their ... And the teachers were there. He couldn't see ... But it was because he couldn't hear the noise of 16 children, which is noisy when you're indoors. It's noisy on the playground. I'm like, "You know, if you look there, there is so-and-so, and there's so-and-so, and then the four of them are over there." But there's this really calm and quiet in the ... that you just do not get when you're in the Child Development Centre. It's noisy and busy and happy, but maybe somebody's crying, and the somebody else hears somebody else crying, and they cry, and then ...

Nathan Whitlock: Right.

Louise Zimanyi: So, in the forest, it's calming. And children who have more difficulty indoors, maybe attending or resolving conflict, or ... It's very different when they're outside.

Nathan Whitlock: I wonder, do you have advice for other faculty who have been kind of interested in hearing a lot about other faculty doing this kind of research, and the Teaching Innovation Fund...What would be your advice in terms of getting involved with that, if they've never done it before?

Louise Zimanyi: You mean, like getting involved in doing a teaching innovation?

Nathan Whitlock: In doing like research...

Louise Zimanyi: I think what is brilliant is that there's so much support. I mean, I don't think I've ever been in a place where you could do research and somebody would help you ... support your lit review, or your research analysis, or doing the workshops, the scholarly teaching and learning workshop, and helping you support you in your journey. You don't have to have all the skills and competencies. You can work ... It's a very safe environment to do research.

Louise Zimanyi: We worked on the article for the journal, which is also really supportive, and so we're just in the process. So I did the focus group with Olga Rossovska. She's an early childhood educator in the Centre, and is also a part-time faculty. Her and I worked together ... Because it is, you know, it's a fair amount of work.

Nathan Whitlock: Sure.

Louise Zimanyi: So if you can-

Nathan Whitlock: It's a bit of a leap into the unknown, in terms of like where you will end up.

Louise Zimanyi: It is. I don't think you know how much work it's going to be until you're actually in it, and then it's too late. You got to finish it. You got to ... Heidi is such a great ... "You got to finish it." It's good to be finished. But, the other advice is that it's always easier to work with ... unless, you know ... and it doesn't have to be a huge, huge project, but it's always great if you can find somebody else to co-do it with you. That makes a big difference.

Nathan Whitlock: Right.

Louise Zimanyi: Or even a third person.

Nathan Whitlock: So, it's a little bit like a kid going out in the woods.

Louise Zimanyi: That's right.

Nathan Whitlock: There's some risk. They don't always know what's out there, but-

Louise Zimanyi: Yeah. But it's-

Nathan Whitlock: There are people who are watching them, and there's ...

Louise Zimanyi: Yeah, it's a very friendly, supportive environment, and there's lots of nudges. "How's that paper coming? How's the proposal coming? What do you think? Do you have deadlines?" So you know what? I think it's great. I think one of the challenges is that the academic semester is so loaded. I think the more it connects with what you're already doing or teaching, makes it a little bit easier.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, thanks very much, Louise. This has been great.

Louise Zimanyi: Thank you.

Nathan Whitlock: *NEXTCast* is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at The Centre for Teaching & Learning. Special thanks to Santino Pannozzo and Kristin Valois. To suggest stories for future episodes of *NEXTCast*, or to just let us know what you think, email humberpress, all one word, @humber.ca. That's humberpress@humber.ca. Thanks, and see you next time. That's still not a pun.