

Making the case for loose parts play in primary schools across Europe

Erasmus+ Loose Parts Play Project 2020–2023

Creating the conditions for children to engage in free play with loose parts during school hours brings multiple benefits for children, schools and families.

Key findings and recommendations

- Children enjoy playtime more, especially with the exercise of agency.
- Teachers are more appreciative of play.
- Children's play is more varied.
- Children are less reliant on adults when playing.
- Children are more co-operative when playing.
- Parents are supportive of loose parts play.
- Climate awareness and sustainable thinking are integrated easily through loose parts play.

Any fears that teachers had about the introduction of loose parts play in their school were largely unfounded.

Introducing loose parts play effectively and in a sustainable way does require time, effort and an understanding of the playwork approach. It is not an idea that can be replicated without proper investment, particularly where it is an entirely new approach compared to the existing policy or ethos.

The evidence: Analysis of playtime observations using the System for Observing Outdoor Play (SOOP) showed **marked differences** between control schools and pilot schools and increased variety over time, with **more creative, imaginative, exploratory and risky play** overall.

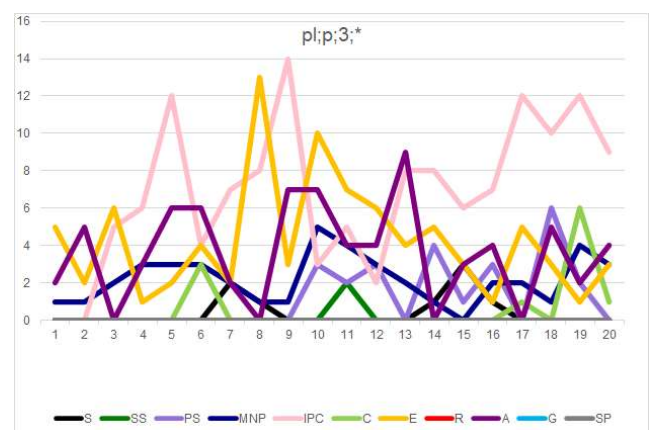
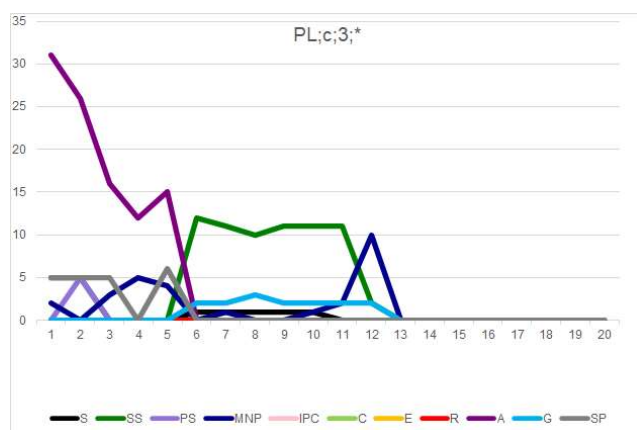


Figure 1, comparison of play types between pilot schools (l) and control schools (r) after a year of loose parts play in pilot schools.

“Introducing free play into our school was the best thing possible, it has become a fantastic part of both school and children’s lives.” (Teacher)

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: National and local policy makers recognise, respect and promote the importance of children's play through the development of national and local strategies for children's play.

Play is recognised as a right for all children in article 31 of the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2013 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published a General Commentⁱ (GC no. 17) on article 31 giving additional guidance to states parties.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Strategies for play should include play in schools, as a right for children and to the benefit of children and schools.

UN General Comment no. 17 specifically states that schools have a major role to play, including through the provision of outdoor and indoor spaces that afford opportunities for all forms of playing and for all children, and that the structure of the school day should allow sufficient time and space for play.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Education leaders work to establish networks of stakeholders that can create local agreements on supporting loose parts play in schools.

Such networks may include policy makers, school leaders, NGOs, businesses and other organisations working with children or in environmental sustainability. The aim would be to create high level in principle agreements and to develop collaborative ways of supporting schools in introduce and sustain loose parts play, including sharing examples of good practice.

RECOMMENDATION 4: National and local policy makers and education leaders work with stakeholders to develop appropriate infrastructures to link loose parts play in schools with environmental and sustainable development policies.

There is potential for excellent synergies between the requirement for private and public bodies to work sustainably and the use of loose parts for play in schools. The European Union's Waste Framework Directiveⁱⁱ promotes the hierarchy of prevention, preparing for re-use, recycling, recovery and disposal, placing much of the responsibility for implementation on municipalities.

RECOMMENDATION 5: National and local policy makers and school inspectors endorse a risk-benefit approach to risk assessment in schools.

Risk-benefit assessment is an approach to risk management which considers the benefits alongside the risks. It is about taking a balanced and proportionate approach to the risk assessment process so that children are able to play in ways that meet their developmental needs, and schools feel supported in offering adventurous opportunities to children.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Planners, architects and municipalities to uphold children's right to play and participation in the design and development of school grounds.

School grounds have enormous potential for children's play and learning, to encourage curiosity about our world with opportunities to explore and learn. School grounds should reflect the need for biodiversity and as such provide opportunities for education for sustainability as well as rich, sensory and inclusive play environments.

Further details on the research are available on the Erasmus+ Loose Parts Play project website alongside a manual, toolbox and curriculum, designed to support schools to introduce loose parts play loosepartsplayproject.eu

The Erasmus+ funded Loose Parts Play project ran from September 2020 until June 2023, working with eight partners: an NGO and a primary school each from **Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Scotland, UK.**

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Enhancing Personal Capacity Building and Climate Awareness of Pupils in Schools



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ⁱ GC17 in UN languages available here: <https://bit.ly/3Ptp6Yo>

ⁱⁱ All languages available here: <https://bit.ly/3NrK9N1>