

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



Erasmus+ Loose Parts Play Partnership Project 2020–2023



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Enhancing Personal Capacity Building
and Climate Awareness of Pupils in Schools



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1. Introduction: Erasmus+ Loose Parts Play project, 2020–2023

This paper is for policy makers, education and school leaders. The policy paper:

- **introduces the Erasmus+ funded Loose Parts Play project**
- **shares headline findings from our research**
- **offers recommendations for action.**

Our research looked at the introduction of loose parts play into schools in countries not previously included in such research, namely Hungary, Poland and Slovakia (as well as Scotland, UK). We show substantial changes in how children played once the loose parts had been introduced and embedded, with attendant benefits.

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.¹

Throughout the project, NGOs have worked with their partner schools to support them to introduce loose parts into the school using the concepts of loose parts and playwork (see definitions below), mostly for use at playtime and lunchtime, but with some additional uses in the classroom. To support the introduction of loose parts into schools beyond the life of the project, the partners used their direct experience to produce:

- **a manual to support theoretical understanding of key principles relating to loose parts play in schools**
- **a toolbox of practical elements to use in the introduction of loose parts play such as posters, letters, sample risk-benefit assessment**
- **a curriculum with training resources**
- **this policy paper based on our research study.**

Integral to the project was a research study to consider changes both in children's play and in children themselves, together with teachers' and parents' views on the introduction of loose parts play into schools. This paper provides a summary of the key findings from the research and their implications for policy makers, education and school leaders. It is not a full report on the research, but rather makes a succinct case for introducing loose parts play into schools.

The manual, toolbox and curriculum, and more details on the research tools, their application and results are available on the project website loosepartsplayproject.eu

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

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 below shows SOOP results from the three schools and control schools, and from the third and final data collection point, after a year of loose parts play in pilot schools. Control schools' graphs are on the left and pilot schools on the right. Table 1 shows the codings of types of play.



Figure 1: comparison of play types between pilot schools (l) and control schools (r) after a year of loose parts play in pilot schools. The vertical y axis represents the numbers of children involved in each type of play (or non-play) and the horizontal x axis represents each short observation.

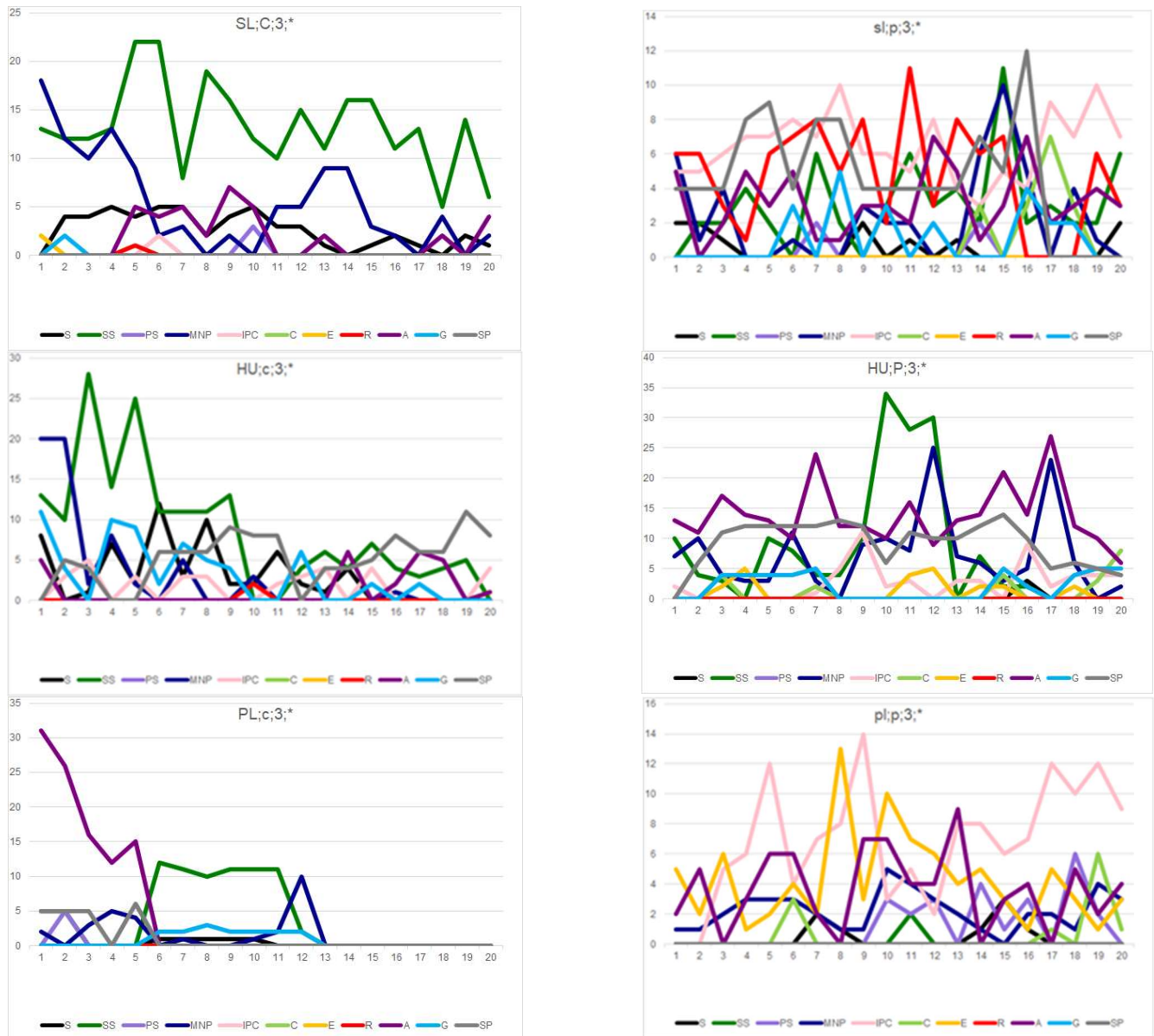
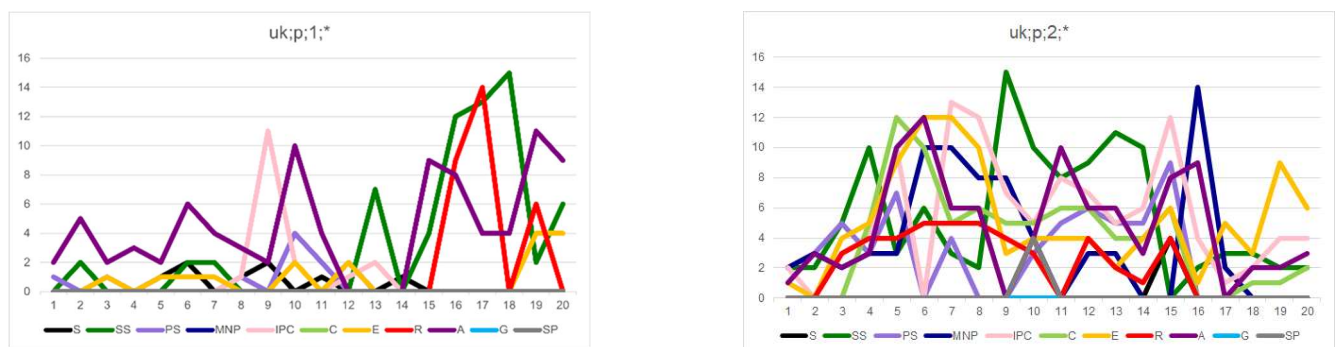


Figure 2: changes in types of play at one school prior to and after introducing loose parts play.



Definitions of loose parts and playwork, as used in the project

Loose parts are objects and materials that children can manipulate, move and combine when they play. They are often scrap, natural or recycled materials making them low-cost, easily available, ever-changing, inclusive and friendly to the environment. Loose parts can be used in any number of ways, they don't have a predetermined use, and it doesn't matter if they are destroyed during play. They can be small like twigs and corks or large like tyres, wooden pallets and tarpaulins.

It is not the object itself that makes it a loose part. It is not a loose part just because it happens to be scrap, recycled, natural. An object or material comes into the category of loose parts if it is available to be used freely, set loose from its original purpose. Children can play with it, manipulate it, move it and combine it with other objects or materials as they choose (from the Loose Parts Play manual).

The project built on previous Erasmus+ partnerships that have worked since 2013 to share the UK concept of playwork, an approach to supporting children's self-organised play.

Playwork is the work of creating and maintaining spaces for children to play and is a skilled profession that facilitates, enriches and enhances children's play.

Playwork is also the support given by adults in an unobtrusive way to support children's play. Playworkers assist a child if needed but strive to be as inconspicuous as possible to allow the children to self-direct their play. A skilled playworker can enrich the child's play experience both in terms of the design and resourcing of the physical environment and the attitudes and culture within the setting (from the Loose Parts Play manual).



2. Research design

A collection of quantitative and qualitative tools was designed to research changes following the introduction of loose parts into the schools. These included changes in children's play; in their creativity, health and agency; in their behaviour in the classroom; and changes in teachers' and parents' attitudes towards play. The research tools used were:

- **System for Observing Outdoor Play (SOOP)**
- **Questionnaires: teachers, parents and schools**
- **Focus groups: teachers, pupils and parents**
- **Critical cartography.**

The tools were administered at three data collection points: before the introduction of loose parts, at the midway point and towards the end of the project. Details of the tools can be found in table 1.

The SOOP observation tool

This observation tool was adapted, with permission, from the System for Observing Outdoor Play (SOOP) tool used in the Sydney Playground Project.¹ SOOP is based on systematic scans of children and their play within a pre-determined area. During a scan, observations are recorded manually on a data sheet with a visual map of the playground. A scan lasts one minute, so during a 20-minute observation approximately 15 scans can be recorded. Numbers of children, weather and other relevant data are also recorded. NGO partners attended an online training session where they observed the same video of a school playtime and compared their activity category codings.

Activity categories: sedentary (S); socialising sedentary (SS); playing sedentary (PS); moving, not playing (MNP); imaginary/pretend/creative play (IPC); construction play (C); exploratory play (E); risky play (R); active play (A); games (G)sports (SP).

Questionnaires

Separate questionnaires were used to gather information on teachers' and parents' views on their attitudes towards loose parts play, on the process and on any changes they observed. In addition, a general schools' questionnaire was used to gather information about each school.

Focus groups

These were carried out with teachers, pupils and parents, gathering their views on the playground before introducing loose parts and on changes following the introduction of loose parts play.

Critical cartography

Critical cartography² is an approach to mapping and documenting how a space works on an ongoing basis, in ways that collect rich stories of play that can be used for reflective practice and organisational development.

The aim of the critical cartography element of the research was to produce an account of how the space supports or constrains children's play and of changes over time. Cartography is about mapping the space(s) where children play. Attention is paid to process, detail and richness rather than objectivity, 'results' and generalisability; as such it complements the other research tools.

The process included drawing significant spaces and creating collective maps of the school grounds. The maps were used to collect stories of play and note movement through the space. The mapping explores the complex interactions of all elements of a space and how play emerges through these interactions.

Notes

Two other tools, an adapted creativity test and a Social and Emotional Development Scale questionnaire, were originally included but not used in the overall analysis due to problems administering the tools in a valid and reliable manner. Some of the tools (questionnaires, SOOP observations, teachers' questionnaire, creativity tests) were also administered in control schools with comparable characteristics that had not introduced loose parts play.

¹ <https://www.sydneyplaygroundproject.com/>

² Russel, W. Rules for Re-enchanting our relationship with Play (2021) <https://elpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ELPA-Enchanting-Play-A4-Document.pdf>



3. The benefits of free play with loose parts

3.1 Previous research on the benefits of improving playtimes

Existing research across anglophone and northern European countries has shown the benefits of paying attention to children's play during the school day. A review of this research shows how improving playtimes at school reaps benefits for children and schools alike.³ Benefits include:

- **greater enjoyment of playtimes and of school itself**
- **engagement in more complex and varied types of play, more collaboration and creativity, fewer reported incidents and accidents**
- **health and well-being benefits, including greater physical activity, improved emotion regulation, healthy stress response systems, social connectedness and sense of belonging, improved vestibular and proprioceptive systems**
- **increased attention on returning to the classroom, especially for neurodivergent children**
- **improved problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.**

In addition, the review showed that:

- **children value playtimes where they can play in their own way**
- **traditional games are not dying out, but are adapted to bring in children's contemporary cultures and lives**
- **playtimes work for children when there is space, time and permission for them to play in their own way.**

Our research looked at the introduction of loose parts play into schools not previously included in such research, namely Hungary, Poland and Slovakia (as well as Scotland, UK). We show similar findings. In particular, the SOOP observation tool, teachers' questionnaires, focus groups and the critical cartography all show substantial changes in how children played once the loose parts had been introduced and embedded, with attendant benefits.



³ Ardelean *et al* (2021) making the case for Play in Schools <https://bit.ly/3XwO7E7>



3.2 Children enjoy playtime more, especially with the exercise of agency

The children's focus groups showed that loose parts play was very popular with the children, particularly that they felt they had more agency (greater independence, control and choice) over the way they played.

Some children said they felt that had a greater voice in decision-making and that meant they had more fun. Children talked about playing more imaginative games and about how they enjoyed making up their own toys and games. Children spoke

enthusiastically about being able to play in their own way and to sort out issues by themselves.

Children were appreciative of the changes made over the course of the project.

The teachers too felt that children greatly enjoyed free play with loose parts. In the final questionnaire, all responding teachers agreed with this statement. Overall, teachers were very enthusiastic about the benefits of free play with loose parts.



3.3 Teachers are more appreciative of play

The teachers' focus groups and the critical cartography also show they experienced a kind of "re-enchantment" with play, evident through the ways that they became animated when talking about the children's play and sharing stories. One partner noted how staff **"love to spend time outside and they see how children love to be on the school yard as well."** Others talked about how the loose parts play allowed children to truly express themselves, allowing them to "work their magic".

Teachers from the UK and Slovakia mentioned how **loose parts play has inspired them to incorporate more creativity and playfulness into their lessons with their students.** Two of the many stories are given below.

After one year of loose parts play, half of the teachers (over twice as many as at the beginning of the project) supported the idea of more time being available for playing across the school day:

- during the school day, for at least 45 minutes period, and
- during the afternoon, after studying, and
- between lessons.



"It's surprising what happens and I enjoy the surprises. It's hard to observe sometimes because they want you to be involved. It's always different." (Teacher)

"The children are always busy and enjoying it and I've got a big smile on my face." (Teacher)

"The cleaning lady put the mop in the school yard to dry and the girls came out and, since they saw it as loose parts, took it and cleaned the mud kitchen corner with it. It was so cute and funny!" (Teacher)

An interesting development in the Scottish school was that as appreciation of play increased, the teachers became less worried about mess. This applied to the way that children played:

"They make a mess, in a good way. One example, is a girl who was mixing everything up. I gave her a stick. Over a few days it turned into mixing potions using everything. She was moving everything around, collecting things, mixing it all up. In a good way. She had a quota of gems and conkers and mixed it all." (Teacher)

In addition, over time in this school not all the loose parts were tidied away: larger items such as tyres, crates and fabric were left out, and children's dens could often be seen in the playground.



3.4 Children's play is more varied

Across the research, introducing loose parts play resulted in children's play that was more creative, imaginative and exploratory (see section 1, figures 1 and 2).

65.6% of teachers responding to the questionnaire felt that after the introduction of loose parts play, the children's play was more varied (see figure 3). This was supported by the focus groups, where teachers talked about play becoming more creative, how the playground was constantly evolving. The creativity test did show that children's creativity improved over the time of the project, but a causal link cannot be assumed, due mostly to challenges with the administration of the tests in control schools.

The critical cartography mapping also showed how children played in much more diverse ways than prior to the introduction of loose parts and the other elements of the project. One partner listed a whole range of ways that spaces had been used by the children in their play:

Sewage treatment plant, tyre house, heat pump house, castle, tank, airport, centre for catching rogues and thieves, base, lucky base, secret boys' base, relaxation base (on a blanket), camping, kitchen x 2, playhouse, office x 3, fashion show, stacking pebbles and twigs.

Some of the notes made on the map were also about the children's outdoor movement paths, such as a suitcase track to the airport for a trip to Spain and trolley races, scooter races and an obstacle course.

“The foil emergency blankets have had various forms over time, they're now shredded t pieces. That's become a game, they are zappers. Different people have been involved at different time. I was included by being zapped unjustly as I had no zapper, so I was given a zapper. It's become a routine game, an assumed bit of play that's going to happen. It's never spoken or said let's play this, you just have a zapper in your hand and it happens.” (Teacher)



3.5 Children are less reliant on adults when playing

68.7% of respondents in the teachers' questionnaire felt that children were less reliant on adult supervisors after the introduction of loose parts play and the playwork approach (see figure 3). This was supported in the focus groups and critical cartography discussions. Teachers realised that their initial concerns that the children would not know how to play with the loose parts were unfounded and that the children were good at making up endless ways to play with whatever was to hand.

In one focus group, teachers said that free play with loose parts had allowed students to “spread their wings”. Not only were children capable players, they also became more able to overcome difficulties and sort out problems for themselves. One focus group reported that the children appeared more empathetic as they paid more attention to each other.

Through the project an increased understanding of play is evident accompanied by an increased positive view of children as capable, active members of the school community.

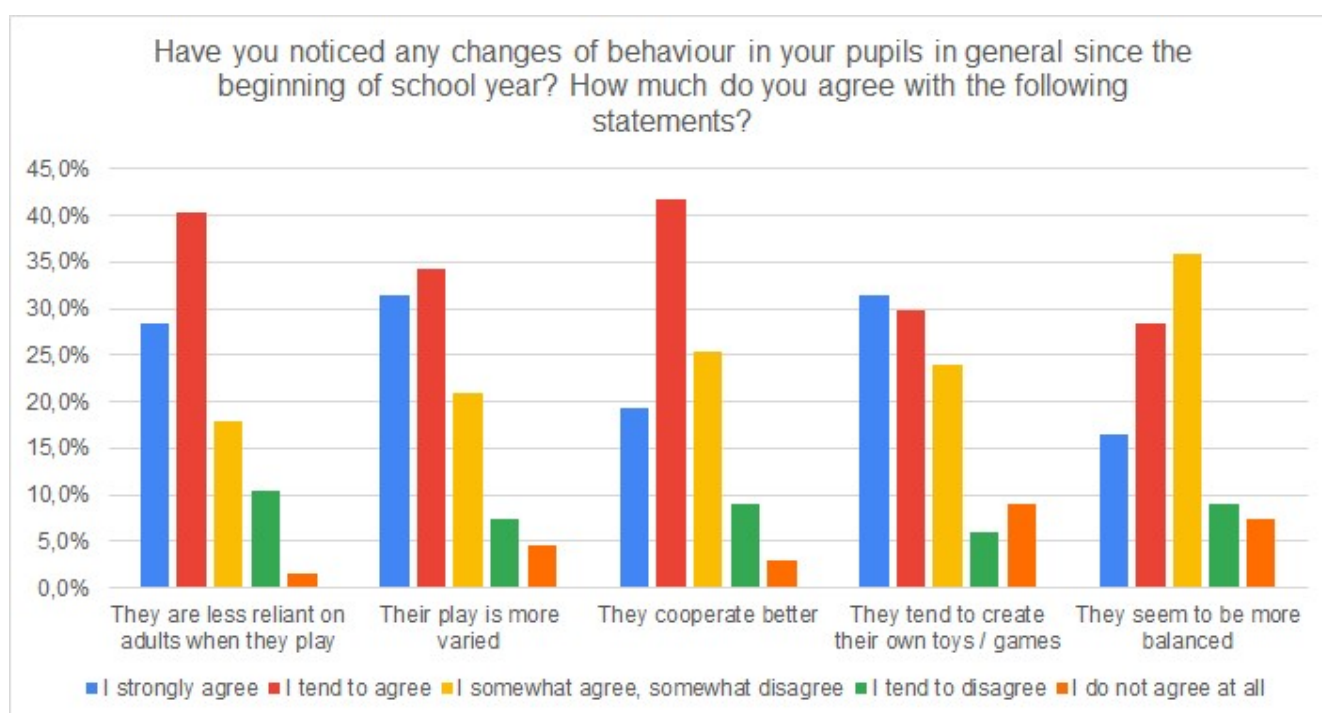


Figure 3: Summary of teachers' questionnaire at the end of the loose parts play project.



3.6 Children are more co-operative when playing

Children played across wider age groups, across genders and ethnic groupings, and disabled children and those with additional learning needs were more included in playing. For one school, seeing how children help each other across all ages, genders and abilities was a key benefit of introducing loose parts play. Almost all of the teachers had been concerned about how the younger and older children would get along during loose parts play but were pleasantly surprised that this helped them to learn to get along and help one another. Even if conflicts happened, children managed to solve their problems amongst each other without a teacher having to step in. There was a sense of community, with fewer children being left out.

”With loose parts, there is co-operation between them. They are listening and talking, playing with other children. They are articulating thoughts; this happens more when playing with loose parts.”
(Teacher)



3.7 Parents are supportive of loose parts play

Parents' views were sought both through a questionnaire and a focus group, each at the three data collection points of the research. At the outset, most parents were supportive of the idea of introducing loose parts play. As the project progressed, the enthusiasm of those responding grew. Parents were pleased that their children talked about how they played with the loose parts and were delighted to see how imaginative children could be in their play and that they had opportunities to be creative. Some felt their children were more creative and less stressed. There were some concerns about loose parts being properly monitored for safety as they changed through use. Some parents talked of how they and their children kept or collected household items for loose parts play at home, as well as encouraging more outdoor play.

“My son is always raiding builders' skips for his own loose parts. Loves it, he has become so creative.” (Parent)

The parents' questionnaires showed how most thought their children were happier to go to school since the introduction of loose parts play, with some saying in focus groups that their children went earlier to school so they could have more time to play.

There was a strong consensus amongst parents surveyed (almost 100% by the end of the project) that it was important for schools to provide time and space for socialising, having fun, making friends and building communities, and that playing was the best vehicle for this kind of learning.

“I am fully in support of the loose parts play project and think it will hugely benefit the pupils. Free play during the school day is so important, especially for children who find the classroom environment a difficult and challenging place to be.” (Parent)

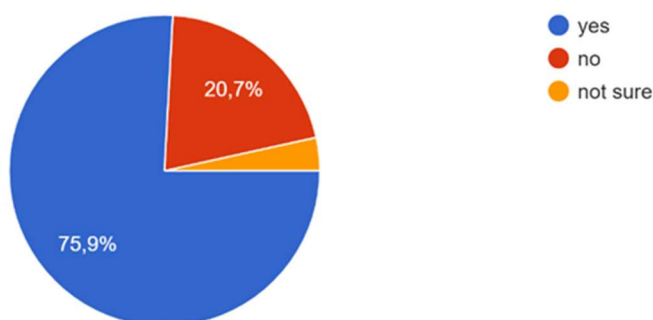


3.8 Climate awareness and sustainable thinking are integrated easily through loose arts play

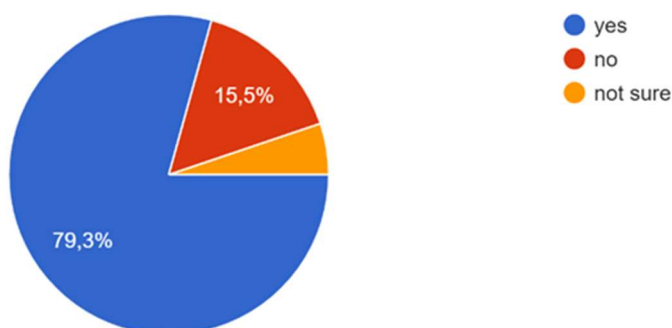
As the Loose Parts Play manual for schools states, **“loose parts play provides an opportunity to talk about the environment, sustainability, zero waste and the circular economy”**. This has been a low-key element of the project, as the main focus has been

on supporting play rather than educating children. Nevertheless, the message has been clear, and children, staff and parents have embraced sustainable ways of thinking about resourcing play.

Has your use of repurposed or recycled items increased as a result of the loose parts play project?



Has the project impacted how you think about sustainability in terms of play resources?



Has the project impacted how you think about sustainability in relation to the school grounds?

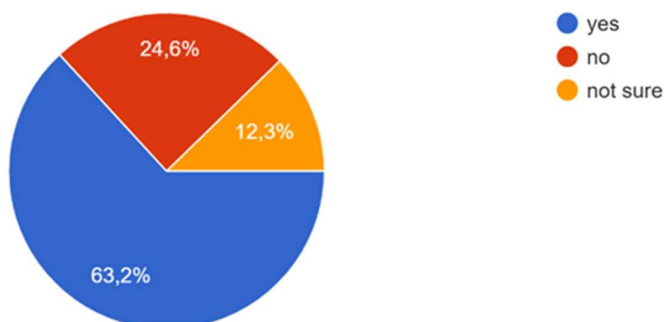


Figure 4: Partners' perspectives on the impact of the project on climate awareness and sustainable thinking



75.9% of questionnaire respondents said that their use of repurposed or recycled items had increased as a result of introducing loose parts play into their school; 79.3% said that the project had had an impact on how they thought about sustainability in terms of play resources; and 63.2% felt it had had an impact on how they thought about sustainability in relation to school grounds.

“There has been a noticeable shift from catalogue based education resources to the found, environmentally friendly, open-ended resources. Children and adults have been reusing and repurposing many different materials and items. Our links with businesses in the community has enabled uses for parts that may have gone to landfill. Our school has found this to be cost effective and sustainable. Within nature play, children have a rich world around them to enhance and extend play.” (Teacher)

“As a result of the project, a lot of teachers, but also students and parents, became involved in providing new things to play with. It’s cool. Children have more and more different objects and in addition these objects get a ‘second life’. It’s an interesting way to care for the environment and it is very consistent with the goals of diversified development. Thanks to this, the youngest learn to care for the environment, use available things creatively, use things in a non-standard way, give objects a second life and not throw everything into the trash. They learn that you can use things for fun that theoretically are not intended for that purpose, and that you don’t need a lot of new, expensive toys to have fun. It’s incredible for their development. The project has had a big impact on teachers and children at school. Sustainability is right there” (Teacher).

These findings clearly show a connection with using loose parts for children’s play and sustainable thinking in schools. There is much potential to be tapped for loose parts projects to work with those promoting environmental education and sustainability, particularly in terms of waste management.



4. Teachers' fears are largely unfounded

At the first data collection point for the project, teachers voiced concerns about the problems they felt they may encounter. By the final data collection point, they overwhelmingly felt that these fears had not been realised:

- children are capable of knowing how to play with the loose parts (80%)⁴
- there are fewer accidents than before (73.4%)
- although there are quarrels, there are few major conflicts over the materials (60%)
- there is little bullying (67%)
- children help to tidy loose parts away (70%)
- children getting dirty is not a problem (76.6%)
- there have been few complaints from parents (80%).

“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)

Fear of accidents, conflicts and bullying

Despite their initial concerns, teachers felt there were fewer accidents since the introduction of loose parts play. The children themselves, in one focus group, showed their capabilities by merely pointing out that they used their eyes and brains to avoid accidents.

Teachers had also been concerned that there may be conflicts over the loose parts, but this was not the case; indeed, as highlighted previously, they commented on how co-operative the children were in their play. Children themselves, in the focus groups, thought there was less fighting, and even if they did tell stories of quarrels, the focus was on the enjoyment of loose parts play.

“I think I’m more relaxed. You know they’re not going to strangle each other. New things bring apprehension for staff and the children. We’re all more relaxed now.” (Teacher)

Some teachers had also expressed concerns about playing out in the rain or snow, but soon realised that the children preferred to remain outside, as the story below shows.

“A winter’s morning, the children are quietly playing in the GratoSfera space. The boys surf using the floor panels, the girls are playing house and cooking. Suddenly, the weather changes and it starts to snow.”

⁴ These figures are from respondents saying they agree strongly or tend to agree.



In fear of getting the loose parts material wet, I suggest the children return into the classroom. The children protest and at the same time communicate that since it is snowing, they will be preparing Christmas dinner. The boys, however, have swapped surfing for snowboarding. We remained outside. It was a pleasure to watch the children continue to play and enjoy the falling snow. They were catching its flakes, observing the variety of their shapes. And through the school windows, the other children watched us with longing and envious eyes as we enjoyed the fact that winter had arrived.” (Teacher)

Tidying away

For loose parts to be effective in supporting play, they need to be plentiful and include both large and small items. Generally, they are stored in a container of some kind. A big worry for teachers was that the loose parts would be left out by children, creating additional work for staff or making a mess. The project manual and toolbox include tips on how to encourage children to help put the loose parts back into the container at the end of playtime. For all countries, this worked well and at the last data collection point after a year of working with loose parts, 70% of teachers said that the children did help to tidy away. In focus groups, some commented that children proactively sought out loose parts to tidy away, keen to be involved in the process.



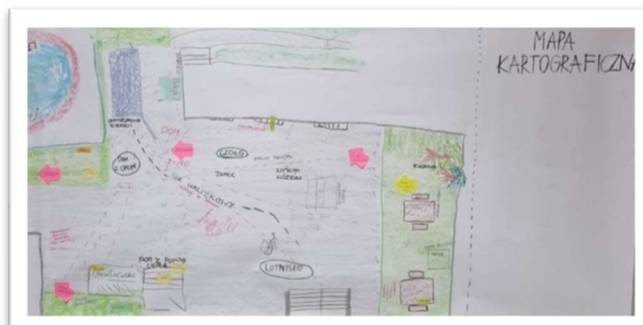
5. Critical cartography

Critical cartography was a research tool used in all schools to pay attention to how a space works to support or constrain children's play. As such this was also a reflective tool used throughout the process of introducing loose parts play.

The process of critical cartography involves collectively creating a map of the playground. This group task highlights personal experiences of space and how space is always in the process of being produced through the relations between people, bodies, desires, mood, material and symbolic objects, rules and timetables, cultures, weather and so on. It is this complex entanglement that the mapping tries to explore.

Once a collective map has been produced, it can be populated in many ways. Our starting point was to ask participants to identify three 'significant spaces', areas of the playground that have some special meaning for them. The shared conversations gave rise to stories that highlighted the importance of how staff and pupils feel about the space. These could be stories of joy and enchantment or equally of anxiety, fear, surprise, anger and so on. Stories are written onto post-its and positioned onto a collectively produced map.

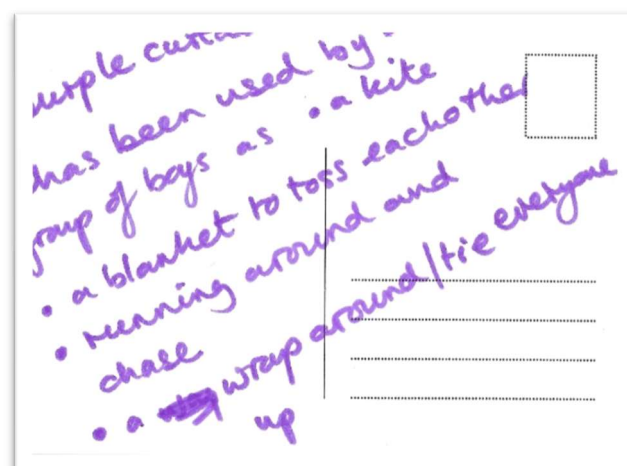
Additional ways of mapping the space, or of populating the large collective map were also suggested, and some partners developed their own. These included drawing lines to map movements and flows, of children, staff or objects, and sending postcards of stories of play.



Identifying significant spaces was a powerful exercise for many staff. The process illustrates well how spaces are *produced* through the encounters between the landscape; the things in it; the children and adults; the rules, ethos and atmosphere; and so on. There are some general commonalities evident in the shared significant spaces across schools, including:

- the importance of quiet and enclosed spaces, like the benches under a roof ("where the good conversations happen") and the 'dungeon' under the stairs (many playgrounds have a space that is used by the children as a dungeon or prison);
- the importance of liminal spaces, those around the edge of open spaces, or at thresholds;
- the importance of attractive features in the space, for example pallets, slopes, dips where rain accumulates to form puddles, the loose parts containers, underneath trees, the playhouse.

These findings have informed new developments in the school grounds in one school and a policy recommendation on the quality of children's play environments.



6. Challenges for schools: Covid-19 pandemic and staff pressures

The significance of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated mitigating measures became apparent from the teachers' questionnaires and other elements of the research. Partner schools introduced loose parts play during the first full school year following a two-year period of major disruption with frequent and prolonged closures. This has affected the research results in two notable ways.

Firstly, teachers found it difficult to remember what playtime was like before the introduction of loose parts play, given the disruption and changes caused by the pandemic-associated lockdowns. This became even more noticeable as the project progressed. Secondly, teachers were acutely aware of the disruption to children's lives, in terms of formal education but also socialising and playing with other children, in ways that affected their social development, skills and behaviour.

Whilst this has affected the research, it could also be argued that loose parts play was **a highly effective and enjoyable way of mitigating such disruption**, bringing as it did **opportunities for experiencing pleasure, for playing together in a wide range of ways, and for developing social skills**. In one focus group at the start of the project, teachers felt excited that **introducing loose parts play was an effective way to give back what Covid had taken from the children**.

A significant minority of teachers found that working with loose parts was not necessarily easy and created more work in an already crowded day. One question asked if teachers felt playtimes were easier to control, and after one year of operation, only 50% felt they were, with 26.7% saying they were not. The survey also asked teachers about how they felt about their work. About 3% of respondents appeared to be in a serious phase of

burnout, and another 10% heading that way, answering in varied ways to these questions. Overall, this minority did not find their work meaningful, they tended to do their job almost mechanically, often feel emotionally drained; they did not feel energised by their work, could not find new and interesting aspects of their work, and felt worn out when the workday was over. The seriously burnt out were the same respondents who found the noise of children playing irritating, felt children got too dirty when playing, felt the parents were too hostile to loose parts play and did not look forward to seeing children play. This does not necessarily mean that these were the only ones who did not like loose parts play or appreciate the importance of play itself. It is just they have no energy left to actively support it. Being burnt out is not a regional phenomenon, it was found in every country group.

Although significant, these findings reflect the experiences of a minority of teachers. For many teachers, loose parts play and participation in this project has brought joy and a re-enchantment with play.

"I'm often excited along with the kids about the things they've made or created. Some children build, some make games with rules. I'm always amazed at the things they come up with. I feel we've facilitated a little colour in their life."
(Teacher)



7. Conclusions: implications and recommendations for education leaders

The experiences of all four participating schools in this Erasmus+ project have been very positive. Teachers, parents and children are enthusiastic about the introduction of free play with loose parts, and this has brought many benefits for the whole school community, as outlined in this paper.

The findings of our research project are in line with many other studies. Uniquely, the Loose Parts Play Erasmus+ project and this research study have shown that it is possible to introduce loose parts play and a playwork approach into schools in countries such as Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, as well as in the UK, and that comparable benefits accrue.

A striking aspect of this research was hearing from teachers how much the aftereffects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated disruption to children's lives are still being felt, in terms of children's sense of well-being and their social skills. Being able to engage in free play, particularly with resources as flexible and open-ended as loose parts, helps to mitigate these effects. Physical activity, creativity, co-operation, pleasure and dealing with the unexpected are all valued outcomes from the play process and have been observed in the four schools participating in this project. It makes sense, therefore, for schools to support children's ability to play.

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 project has produced some helpful resources to support schools who may wish to take this path. These include a manual for schools, a toolbox of template letters and posters, a training curriculum with training resources, and more detailed reports from the research. In addition, three partners have collaboratively produced ten 'top tips' for schools, included here after the headline strategic and policy recommendations.

Project partners have developed recommendations that aim for strategic support for school leaders in terms of both policy and practice. Some of these are generic and some are country specific.

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 Comment⁵ (GC no. 17) on article 31 giving additional guidance to states parties. The guidance states that governments must respect, protect and fulfil children's article 31 rights. In order to fulfil such rights, governments must "introduce the necessary legislative, administrative, judicial, budgetary, promotional and other measures aimed at facilitating the full enjoyment of the rights provided for in article 31 by undertaking action to make available all necessary services, provision and opportunities."

⁵ GC17 in UN languages available here: <https://bit.ly/3Ptp6Yo>



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.

There is a significant body of research that shows the benefits of loose parts play for children and for the whole school community. The research carried out for this project has shown that such benefits apply to schools in countries such as Hungary, Poland and Slovakia as much as those in anglophone and northern European countries.

Country specific recommendations for integrating loose parts play into existing education policies:

In addition to an overarching policy on play in schools, partners also make recommendations for changes to existing policies.

2.1: Loose parts play to form part of the school day for full-day education settings for 6 to 10 year olds (HU)

2.2: Loose parts play is introduced into kindergartens and nurseries (HU, SK)

2.3: Loose parts play forms part of the teacher training curriculum for all teachers (HU, SK, UK)

2.4: Loose parts play is recognised as part of the obligatory time for physical education (HU, SK)

2.5: Loose parts play is incorporated into anti-bullying programmes (HU, SK)

2.6: Loose parts play is included in the training and placements for secondary school students' compulsory community service (HU)

2.7: Play in schools is a national priority in school development plans (Scotland)

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 Directive⁶ promotes the hierarchy of prevention, preparing for re-use, recycling, recovery and disposal, placing much of the responsibility for implementation on municipalities. Our research found that introducing loose parts play in schools has meant that schools are more aware of not always buying new and unsustainable resources (prevention) and are re-using and recycling at local level. The potential is enormous for much wider co-ordination in partnership with municipalities for resources used both within the municipality itself and in other non-domestic contexts to be made available for loose parts play in schools, creating mutual benefit. To this end we recommend:

⁶ Directive 2008/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 November 2008 on waste and repealing certain Directives

All languages available here: <https://bit.ly/3Nrk9N1>



4.1: Municipalities use the EU Waste Framework Directive and other legal requirements on sustainability to inform and strengthen strategies for play.

4.2: Municipalities audit what is thrown away within their own organisation across all departments to identify what can be used for loose parts play.

4.3: Municipalities establish, or support the establishment of, systems for the collection, storage and distribution of loose parts as a part of meeting the EU Waste Framework Directive.

RECOMMENDATION 5: National and local policy makers and school inspectors or regulators endorse a risk-benefit approach to managing play 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. Endorsement of risk-benefit assessment would give a clear message to schools and their communities about the value of risk in play and alleviate concerns.

5.1: National and municipality level statements supporting risk-benefit assessment in schools.

5.2 Clear guidelines from school inspectors or regulators on guidelines and expectations for risk-benefit assessment.

5.3 Sharing of information and good practice on risk in play, benefits and risk management in schools.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Planners, architects and municipalities 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. Children's right to play should be a key consideration in the design, development and maintenance of school grounds, informed by relevant research and in consultation with children.



Top tips for introducing loose parts play into schools

These practical tips for schools have been developed by East Lothian Play Association, Windygoul Primary School and GratoSfera, informed by the collaboration with all Loose Parts Play partners.

1. Involve everyone

Think about who will be involved in all aspects of the project. Discuss ideas with everyone, right at the beginning.

2. Put children at the heart of the project

Remember children's views, ideas and experience will bring a richness and depth to your project which cannot be replicated in any other way.

3. Commit to training and reflection

Increase understanding of play through training and reflection. Introducing loose parts play may require changes to old rules and routines to create a play-friendly culture. Plan for time together.

4. Be practical

Think about your loose parts storage early on in your project. Speak to other local settings to get their ideas about storage solutions and to find out the process and costs if new storage is needed.

5. See the potential

Think about all the spaces for play in your setting. Are they used to their full potential? When we think about loose parts, we often think of objects such as tyres, crates and planks. Features of the space such as grass, puddles or muddy slopes have great play value.

6. Be clear about expectations

Develop your expectations and routines together. Consistent routines can help with potentially difficult moments, such as tidy up time.

7. Don't tidy up

Leave loose parts out in the playground, rather than tidying them all away. Some schools tidy loose parts away every day; in others it's once a week or rarely.

8. Ask, listen and respond

Keep checking how everyone is feeling about loose parts play. Provide regular opportunities for everyone to share their views, through things like surveys, suggestion boxes or graffiti walls. Be sure to let everyone know what has happened as a result of their suggestions.

9. Build relationships and support

Gather support for loose parts play from people working directly with children and those with a wider influence. Share stories of play to bring your project to life. Invite potential partners to see loose parts play in action.

10. Get everyone out to play!

Find time for everyone to play. Through playing and laughing together you'll get to know the children better. Positive relationships will carry over into other parts of the school day.



Further resources and information

Project partners:

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 Alsójászsági Petőfi Sándor Általános Iskola and Iskolánk Tanulóiért Foundation, Hungary

FUNDACJA GRATOSFERA, Poland www.gratosfera.pl
 Szkoła Podstawowa nr 5 im., Poland

TANDEM n.o., Slovakia <https://www.tandemno.sk>
 Majthényi Adolf Alapiskola, Slovakia

East Lothian Play Association, Scotland www.elpa.org.uk
 Windygoul Primary School, Scotland

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Project website: loosepartsplayproject.eu

You will find the project manual, toolbox, training curriculum and research reports

Play-friendly schools website: <https://playfriendlyschoools.eu/>

You will find inspiration, information and resources about play-friendly schools.

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