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Seven Loose Parts Myths Busted

Moving Toward Enhanced Creativity

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Loose parts seems to be a popular buzzword; however, the principles have been around for many decades, and are formative in building creativity and imagination. Simon Nicholson, the landscape architect credited with the theory, explains creativity as “playing around with the components and variables of the world in order to make experiments and discover new things and form new concepts” (Nicholson, 1971). This playing around seems ambiguous, with many misconceptions about the definition and purpose of loose parts.

As researchers, we sought to find a unifying definition around loose parts using a scoping review, searching academic research articles in various databases around loose parts, and visiting early childhood and outdoor classrooms. After wading through over 2,400 articles, we systematically narrowed the articles down to 15. In each article, we searched for loose parts represented, definitions of loose parts, and descriptor words (Gull, Bogunovich, Levenson Goldstein, & Rosengarten, 2019). As we analyzed the

articles, we created lists of loose parts often found in outdoor classrooms, made surprising loose parts discoveries, and created a working definition of loose parts.

Additionally, one author, Carla Gull, hosts the Facebook group Loose Parts Play. Through our research and interaction with loose parts in social media venues, typical myths or misunderstandings stand out as they are repeated often in the group. We found that research busted the many myths associated with loose parts, with no ranking of importance.



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Seven Loose Parts Myths

Loose parts are a new trend or fad.

Loose parts are expensive.

Loose parts can only be natural.

Loose parts are just “stuff.”

Loose parts must be loose or moveable.

Loose parts should be aesthetically arranged and pretty.

Loose parts must always be open-ended.

Myth 1: Loose parts are a new trend or fad.

Educators have mentioned loose parts are a buzzword in the Loose Parts Play group. While the term loose parts is currently popular, the concepts can be found in other educational and play theories, such as work by Friedrich Froebel, Milton Bradley and Maria Montessori (Sutton, 2011). As we present the concept to older audiences, they often remark that playing with nature and things they found outside was their childhood. The concept has been around since the first time someone picked up a rock or stick and used it for a different purpose. Educators have been “doing” loose parts for a long time without even knowing the term, as they allow children to mix blocks and other items, infants to experience a variety of textures, and preschoolers to build with cardboard.

Myth 2: Loose parts are expensive.

Some educators feel they cannot afford loose parts. While some loose parts items may be expensive, loose parts can adapt to any place, budget and situation. Nicholson (1971) stated, “The most interesting and vital loose parts are those that we have around us every day in the wilderness, the countryside, the city.” Children can find and use loose parts anywhere, making these very accessible and potentially inexpensive. Loose parts might be found objects, recyclables,

natural items or cast offs from others. In our research on loose parts in outdoor classrooms, we found many of the loose parts were items found or sourced for free in nature. Manufactured items included basics such as plastic crates, pots and pans. Additionally, some of our favorite loose parts come from garage sales, thrift shops, donations and decluttering at a low cost. See Table 2 of our research study, “Definition of Loose Parts in Early Childhood Outdoor Classrooms: A Scoping Review” (in the resources below), for a complete list of loose parts mentioned in outdoor classrooms in our study.

Of course, there are high-quality loose parts available in many catalogs and stores that are viable options; however, many children are quite content playing with pots, pans and wooden spoons. Classrooms can have a wish list of common loose parts, host a swap, or even grow or collect their own loose parts to add to their stash inexpensively.

Myth 3: Loose parts can only be natural.

Natural loose parts are lovely and some of our favorites! People often request to join the Loose Parts Play Facebook group because they claim they are getting rid of plastics, so they can utilize loose parts. However, Nicholson never said that loose parts only should be natural. In fact, some much-loved loose parts are plastics on their way to the recycle bin. We reuse these items for a time and then send them along to the recycling facility.

In our research, we found manufactured loose parts were often mentioned among the materials used in the outdoor classroom as dramatic props, simple toys, tools and building materials (Gull et al, 2019). Additionally, Maxwell, Mitchell, and Evans (2008) compared outdoor environments with manufactured loose parts versus those with no loose parts at all. The spaces with some manufactured loose parts had more varied and engaged play.

While loose parts can be made from plastic and other materials, nature does offer unique opportunities. Natural loose parts offer more variability due to property changes and seasonality (Gull et al, 2019). Nature is constantly changing, varied and even unpredictable. Monsalvatge, Long, and DiBello (2013) stated, “Whether there are seasonal changes to note, animals and insects to study or gardens to be tended to—nature is the best teacher!” Other authors, such as Kuh, Ponte and Chau (2013), suggest outdoor play spaces should be near nature and use natural items for play. Yes, natural items are important, but they are not the only valuable option for loose parts play.

Myth 4: Loose parts are just “stuff.”

Tree cookies, blocks and fabric squares are great; however, can loose parts go beyond the physical stuff? One of our favorite quotes from Nicholson’s (1971) theory states, “There is evidence that all children love to interact with variables such as materials and shapes; smells and other physical phenomena, such as electricity, magnetism and gravity; media such as gases and fluids; sounds, music and motion; chemical interactions, cooking and fire; and other people, and animals, plants, words, concepts and ideas. With all these things all children love to play, experiment, discover and invent and have fun. All these things have one thing in common, which is variables or ‘loose parts’.”

Nicholson moves beyond “stuff” to smells, magnetism, fire, chemicals, words and concepts. How often do we move beyond physical materials to include these variables or loose parts in our educational settings?

Myth 5: Loose parts must be loose or moveable.

In our research, we found some items, such as a low brick wall, raised garden beds, large trees, and a plastic playset, described as loose parts. Wait a minute! These are not exactly moveable. These items and the environment itself became part of the variables available.

Sutton (2011) noted that the whole environment becomes part of the variables or loose parts in her work in a museum with a nature play area. The more that children can experiment, the more they view and use the whole area as variables. When this happens, the complete environment becomes a loose part. The theory of affordances mentions, “An affordance can be thought of as an ‘action possibility’ for an individual in relation to the environment, dependent on that individual’s capabilities” (Stanley, 2011). Thus, even items that cannot be moved can become a variable. Additionally, in our research we found that living things, bodies and organisms can also be loose parts.

Myth 6: Loose parts should be aesthetically arranged and pretty.

We admit—we also salivate over trays of beautifully arranged loose parts; however, loose parts can move beyond trays to the outdoors. Nicholson (1971) mentions fewer rules and suggests, “By allowing learning to take place outdoors,

and fun and games to occur indoors, the distinction between education and recreation began to disappear.” Loose parts do not have to be presented in a certain way—there are myriad approaches to this. Check out Carla Gull’s blog post and podcast episode on 30 Plus Approaches for more ideas.

Nicholson (1971) mentioned, “Young children (often) find their world incredibly restricted—a world where they cannot play with building and making things, or play with fluids, water, fire or living objects, and all the things that satisfy one’s curiosity and gives us the pleasure that results from discovery and invention.”

By setting up loose parts or provocations, we may restrict children’s curiosity. While invitations and provocations can certainly have a place in early childhood settings, how we allow children to interact with these can make a huge difference in discovery and invention as children are permitted to experiment in their own ways. Having a variety of loose parts available and allowing items to be used for different purposes helps make the classroom Nicholson (1971) described when he wrote, “Children learn most readily and easily in a laboratory type environment where they can experiment, enjoy and find out things for themselves.” If invitations and provocations are used, be sure to allow children to embrace other variables and ideas than what is presented.

It is fine for loose parts to be arranged aesthetically as seen in many popular books on loose parts; however, educational evaluation of the children’s interactions with loose parts is more important than how they are presented. Nicholson (1971) asks, “What did children do with the loose parts? What did they discover or rediscover? What concepts were involved? Did they carry their ideas back into the community and their family? Out of all possible materials that could be provided, which ones were the most fun to play with and the most capable of stimulating the cognitive, social and physical learning processes?”

Let’s move beyond how loose parts look to evaluating their impact on children’s discoveries. Messier loose parts approaches may include having a junk jar where scraps, bits, and pieces are collected and then used for creating. In trainings, we have used bins full of ribbons, tree cookies, small toys, wooden hearts, popsicle sticks and more to create miniature outdoor classrooms—this was a novel approach for many educators. While order and predictability of loose parts have a place, we can also allow a sense of discovery with mixed items as well.

Myth 7: Loose parts must always be open-ended.

We often hear in the Loose Parts Play group that loose parts must be open-ended, with no descriptive purpose. While we still love open-ended scarves, fabrics and sashes as loose parts basics for dramatic play, costume items can also be intermingled. In practice, costume butterfly wings become part of a mermaid tail! Research also supports this, such as Sutton's museum study on loose parts. She found, "Based on prior experience, we knew these props would optimize permission to play in personally defined ways; they would expand the opportunities for interaction and help carry thematic content" (2011). Costumes and props became part of the loose parts that allowed for play in these museum settings.

Similarly, we found simple toys in our research on outdoor classrooms. While an adult may only see a toy car, children may not see the same limitations as adults do. Nicholson's (1971) research supports this stance, as he stated, "In early childhood there is no important difference between play and work, art and science, recreation and education—the either/or classification normally applied by adults to a child's environment."

In one situation, a young boy carefully lined up toy cars, just as he would any other loose part, to be characters at his table. Later, the car was used with variables such as ramps or playdough. The cars were just another character in the child's playful story. Check out Michelle Thornhill's detailed document on schema and potential loose parts (including toys) in the resources below.

Loose parts may often be open-ended; however, children frequently see beyond the intended use of the item to experiment with variables in other ways. We found that open-endedness "may not be a limiting factor" (Gull et al, 2019) as dramatic play props and toys were included in our research and resulted in the "opportunity to see loose parts from many angles" (Gull et al, 2019).

Bust the Myths

In conclusion, let's move beyond the myths and the sense that loose parts are only focused on playing. So much happens in play! Nicholson used the verbs build, construct, play, experiment, invent, explore, discover, evaluate, modify, study, think, consider, measure, draw, model-making,

calculate, destruct, slide, fold, hide, paint and bounce, in his descriptions of loose parts interactions (1971). Kiewra and Veselack (2016) express loose parts as a way to "explore their process, to problem solve together, to negotiate and debate and to have support from a caring adult. They were able to work, rework, consider, test, posit theories and discover." In our own research, manipulate, climb, build, experience, explore, engage, dig, touch, experiment, work, carry, combine, play, redesign and other verbs are listed as part of the definitions in the articles (Gull et al, 2019).

Through our in-depth analysis of carefully selected articles representing loose parts in early childhood outdoor classrooms, we outlined a definition that allows for the diversity within the loose parts movement:

Loose parts are open-ended, interactive, natural and manufactured materials that can be manipulated with limitless possibilities. Interaction with loose parts includes experimentation, exploration, and playful interactions with variables through creativity and imagination. Participants have the freedom to explore variables, combine materials, and react to complex themes and ideas that emerge. Facilitators encourage participation, make loose parts available, stimulate discovery, provide opportunities, allow for open-ended play, and prompt meaningful connections and experiences. Through loose parts exploration, participants develop imagination, creativity, and collaboration skills. Process is more important than the end product, fostering overall growth and development (Gull et al, 2019).

Hopefully this definition and research about loose parts will allow you to more fully embrace loose parts with the children you serve.

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Stanley, E. (2011). The place of outdoor play in a school community: A case study of recess values. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 21(1), 185-211.

Sutton, M.J. (2011). In the hand and mind: The intersection of loose parts and imagination in evocative settings for young children. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 21(2), 408-424.



Helpful Resources

Definitions of Loose Parts in Early Childhood Outdoor Classrooms: A Scoping Review - https://naturalstart.org/sites/default/files/journal/6._gull_et_al._formatted_draft_v2.pdf

Loose Parts Nature Play Podcast - <http://loosepartsnatureplay.libsyn.com/>

Loose Parts Play Facebook Group - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/LoosePartsPlay/>

30 Plus Approaches to Loose Parts Blog Post - <http://insideoutsidemichiana.blogspot.com/2017/05/30-plus-ways-to-approach-loose-parts.html>

Approaches to Loose Parts Podcast Episode - <http://loosepartsnatureplay.libsyn.com/approaches-to-loose-parts-play>

Loose Parts and Intelligent Playthings Categorized by Schema - https://brucecounty.on.ca/sites/default/files/Loose%20Parts%20By%20Schema_0.pdf