One Person’s Junk is a Teacher’s Treasure
Learning with Loose Parts

by Heather Beaudin

About one year ago I heard Bruce Rodrigues, Ontario’s deputy minister of education, speak about education and learning in the 21st century. One thing that Rodrigues spoke about that resonated with me was that as teachers we are preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist. Consequently, we are not able to predict the exact skill sets students will need as they grow; however, we do know that in order to navigate the rapidly changing world, students will need to leave our classrooms as innovative, creative and open-minded individuals.

Laying the foundation for such characteristics begins in early education and the experiences children are provided with frame the type of thinkers they become. Each day, children’s experiences are impacted by their environments. Specifically, the materials within the classroom and the ways in which they are arranged play key roles in the development of experiences.

Take a moment to think about the types of materials you provide for children in your classroom or the types of materials you typically see in the classrooms you visit. Are they natural or manufactured? Are they open or close ended? How are these materials selected? Here in Ontario, many classrooms that I visit as a pedagogical leader have an array of carefully selected materials available to children and often these materials include loose parts.

What Is a Loose Part?

The use of loose parts goes back as far as 40 years ago, though the definition of loose parts is still being established (Houser, Roach, Stone, Turner & Kirk, 2016). Despite the wide range of understanding around what constitutes a loose part, one definition that I find clear is provided by Sutton (2011): “Loose parts can be any collection of fully movable...
elements that inspire a person to pick them up, to re-arrange or create new configurations, even realities, one piece or multiple pieces at a time” (p. 409). A loose part may be a recycled item or something you purchase new at a hardware store, it can be small or large, natural or manufactured. Ultimately, loose parts encourage a variety of types of play to unfold, such as dramatic, constructive, artistic or physical and can be used with all age groups and children of all abilities (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2013). Table 1.1 presents some of the loose parts I have used or seen used in programs.

Bringing Loose Parts into Your Classroom

What would you add to the table above? Getting started with anything in an early education setting can be daunting due to challenges such as lack of time or financial resources. However, incorporating loose parts into your classroom can come with less stress than you may think. Loose parts can often be sourced for free and with ease from families or community connections.

Kim Squires, a pedagogical leader at the University of Guelph’s Child Care and Learning Centre, took some time to share with me her centre’s experience implementing loose parts. The CCLC has been incorporating loose parts slowly over time and has developed a loose parts library. The library provides a central spot in which educators can locate a variety of manufactured and natural loose parts to incorporate into their classrooms. Loose parts are well organized in clear bins, which ensures that loose parts are kept tidy, visible for selection and readily available. When it comes to growing the loose parts library, Squires reports, “You kind of just always have to be looking.”

CCLC sources their loose parts from a variety of places including online stores, home goods stores and through teacher or family connections. Squires shared...

that her partner’s aunt belongs to a quilting group and through her quilting group an array of sturdy stools have been donated to the centre. Moreover, CCLC has a special spot located at the front of their centre where they specifically ask families for donations of loose parts and identify some of the things they are looking for. This request list allows families to more easily know what the centre needs. The opportunities for locating loose parts are truly as open as the materials themselves, and table 1.2 identifies some additional places for sourcing.

Once you have started gathering loose parts you may be wondering how to introduce them to the children in your classroom. Or perhaps you have tried incorporating loose parts and have not had a positive experience. When I visit classrooms in my community I sometimes hear educators express concern around loose parts, such as “the children just aren’t sure how to use them,” or “they just end up all over the classroom.” These valid concerns can often be reduced by the ways in which you arrange loose parts.

Arranging Loose Parts

The presentation of loose parts will influence how children use them and the value they gain from exploring them. Daly and Beloglovsky (2015) present a list of things for consideration when arranging loose parts, such as the sensory appeal, the function of the loose part, how accessible they are and the quantity available to children. In setting up a loose part provocation think about how loose parts are organized. Are they presented to children by colour, texture, design or size? How are they stored? In small or large containers or baskets? When I first started using loose parts, I often segregated them to a special table in the classroom and I sometimes still see them arranged this way. However, loose parts can be incorporated into all areas of your classroom and should be available to children at different levels (on the table and floor), as well as outside, because children play and interact differently in each part of an environment (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2015).

Additionally, consider:

- Loose parts are an excellent way to build on children’s interests within your program, as they are so versatile!
- Children need large uninterrupted blocks of time, over several days, to engage with loose parts. Be patient! Sometimes children do not notice them initially or sometimes they need to observe a peer interacting with them before they will explore.
- Items should be displayed on low shelves and in open baskets or containers or clear jars, with a variety of interesting backgrounds such as mirrors or light tables (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2015).
- Consider identifying, with the children, “staple loose parts” that are always a part of your environment and kept in the same place (this way children have a variety of materials available to them to enhance the complexity of their play).

Loose Parts in Action

Another concern I sometimes hear from teachers when it comes to using loose parts is that they do not necessarily work for certain age groups. For example, toddler teachers seemingly always worry about dumping or choking and school-age teachers consistently worry children will not know what to do with loose parts. Although children may need practice and scaffolding when it comes to using loose parts, they are often a favorable material for all age groups. One item the CCLC has started adding to their classrooms is different books that highlight ways in which children may use loose parts in play. This is an excellent way to model and showcase the many ways loose parts can be put in to action and, according to Squires, allows children an opportunity to see things in a different way.

Moreover, the CCLC continues to generate ways in which teachers can be supported with the implementation and use of loose parts and specifically has done this in three interesting ways. First, a loose parts competition was initiated for staff. This friendly competition allowed each staff member a small budget to purchase some unique loose parts. Staff then came together to judge the collection of items and decide on their loose parts champion. Squires shared that the benefits of this competition were two-fold. Not only did it get educators excited about loose parts, but it helped to grow the loose parts library. Second, the CCLC provides each classroom with spending money each month. This budget provides educators with the autonomy to make purchases for their classrooms, which can include loose parts or storage and display items for loose parts. Third, Squires recently led a lunch and learn series dedicated to further learning about loose parts. Continued professional development around loose parts in action is something from which all educators, regardless of where they are in their loose parts journey, can learn.

With Earth Day around the corner, it is a great time to consider how you can reuse and repurpose household items in new and interesting ways. Consider enhancing or experimenting with loose parts as they serve a dual purpose, giving materials new life and possibility and supporting children’s play without limitations. Once you begin exploring with loose parts in your classroom, renewing materials will undoubtedly become something you, the children and families are more cognizant of (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2013). As Sutton (2011) explains, “Loose parts require the hand and mind to work in concert; they are
catalysts to inquiry” (p. 409). In addition to being an excellent way to repurpose materials, loose parts are truly foundational to deeper learning and discovery.

References


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