

The Theory of Loose Parts

STORY BY
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In 1971, architect Simon Nicholson wrote a piece entitled “The Theory of Loose Parts.” At the time, he was explaining how the design of a space limits the ways in which a person interacts with that space. Creativity and discovery are directly proportional to the number and variety of variables in an environment. Restated to understand in the context of children and creative exploration: if you give a child a toy, they will play with it in certain ways, but if you give a child a box of loose parts, they will create toys that you have never even imagined. This theory has been applied to playgrounds, where instead of the standard equipment and structures, children are handed tools and raw materials and allowed to create play environments for themselves.

This approach is not without risk. At loose parts playgrounds, parents sign waivers related to injury. Instead of pre-approved playground equipment, children may be handed lumber, tires, ropes, and tools, then encouraged to create their own play environment. Creativity and discovery always have a level of risk. In a loose parts environment, the child must learn how to evaluate and manage that risk, necessary skills for facing an ever-changing world.

Putney is a loose parts school. The only one I have ever seen. I once heard it referred to as a “name your own adventure ride” by another parent. Every student is handed a box of loose parts. Each has the opportunity and the agency to create the educational opportunity they want or need. The student truly has the agency to own their education, with its successes and failures. The student retains the joy in that discovery process.

What this means is that if a student wants to study forensic entomology, they can create a project, set up the conditions, get the materials, and have at it. What it does not mean is that the biology teacher is going to create the experiment, procure the materials, and follow up on the research. The education process is available, but the student must drive it. The results are breath-taking. Over the past several years, in addition to learning about forensic entomology, I have seen students create spectacular new pottery glazes (leveraging chemistry to understand the desired composition and firing effects), rebuild the observatory and the telescopes that power it, design and build electric bikes or electric guitars, whatever sparked their imagination and curiosity. Our student has done projects as disparate as exploring microtonality, group reading of economic theory, and examining the representation of torture in children’s entertainment.

The growth opportunity with a loose parts education is spectacular and it carries each student far beyond the Putney years. It demands a lot, too. The students must embrace and engage with the process. No one at Putney is going to hand you your education; you will have to work for it, but in the end, you will own it in a way that is impossible in traditional settings. For the teachers and administrators, it’s very difficult, also. Teachers must give up a certain level of curriculum control. They must allow for failure as well as success in the pursuit of knowledge. And they must support each student, as opposed to one classroom goal. Administrators must have the courage and confidence to enable reasonable risk taking (Ask Danny O’Brien to tell you about taking the entire school to see the full eclipse). Parents must trust their students and the school.

Loose parts schools are exceedingly rare. Putney may be the only one. It demands more from everyone in the process. The results are like no other educational opportunity you can find. ■

“Who made this masterpiece?” asked the students of each other. Ari ’29 created this literal assembly of loose parts this fall. Photo by Howie ’29.