

# TRADITIONAL GAMES PARK – AN INSPIRING EDUCATIONAL PLAYGROUND FOR ALL OR UTOPIA IN MODERN URBAN AGGLOMERATION?

*Traditional Games Park attraction or utopia?*

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** The aim of this study was to find the opinions of the representative groups of Poznan citizens about the introduction of traditional games as a “new” option to activate youngsters and adults physically. **Material and methods.** The data were collected by interviews on three selected groups: 1. headmasters and principles of kindergartens and pre-school and early school teachers (n=51); 2. parents of pre-school and early school children (n=200); 3. retired people – seniors having grandchildren (n=103). **Results.** The obtained results revealed the low knowledge and awareness of traditional games among examined people. The majority of the examined people fully agreed that a Traditional Games Park would be a different offer from other ones concerning physical activity in urban areas. More than a half of them declared they would willingly take their tutees to this kind of park on numerous occasions if various educational and recreational programmes and offers were provided. **Conclusion.** This kind of park might be the right place to show other inhabitants of Poznan and its visitors a part of regional and national culture and history and also to give people the chance to explore our social life of the past and to carry it playfully and peacefully into the future.

**Key words:** traditional games, playful physical activity, recreational park

## Introduction

In the last few decades the recreational park industry has grown rapidly around the world. The United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that by the year 2010 the number of international visits to such parks had reached one billion [1]. In that context traditional games parks with cultural and movement activity facilities have the potential to be a significant factor in the global tourism business. It may also be a fundamental factor in developing local and regional identity. Such unique playgrounds could contribute to and promote a better cross-cultural understanding of diverse values [2] and play an important role in the process of the unification of various “movement” cultures allowing lively integration.

The idea of such an “activity park” in Poland dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Jordan and Rau founded parks with a range of well organized utilities enabling children and teenagers to play. To mark national Polish identity, which the nation was desperate to regain (Poland was then under occupation from Russia, Austria and Germany) the parks were based on traditional Polish activities such as *plinie*, *palant*, *Polish skittles*. It is still believed that play is a part of our cultural heritage, the traditions of play are passed on from one generation to the next with certain verbal and kinetic ideograms helping to preserve the most valuable and unique elements of each culture [3]. But worldwide reality shows that today’s particular right to play is not guaranteed, perhaps because it is not understood, acknowledged or recognized properly by the authorities and thus cannot be appreciated by the society in general. Therefore, as a society we should use our influence as constituents by challenging our local governments to take this matter seriously and consider it in plan-

ning on a local political agenda as a part of the overall vision of the local settings. Most modern parents have few social (and pedagogical) skills to initiate their children into a playful pastime and since there are no ready-to-use facilities (shortage of playgrounds) they are quite happy to keep them entertained by their computers.

Recreational facilities that are provided (or not provided) for children within local settings should be viewed as crucial to create proper social boundaries nowadays in the local surroundings and neighborhoods. In that sense all adults should feel responsible for facilitating and creating playing areas. It is also a good idea to measure its impact on the economy and local environment to estimate potential threats and social consequences in settings where children are not provided with proper opportunities to play. Unfettered diverse play is vital to the development and adaptive to both the young and the elderly. Playing children search for diversity and novelty and they perceive a need for freedom and to explore it in their own way. They long for new solutions, which might lead them back to the past, to old, traditional forms of physical activity, and maintain appropriate dose of stimuli.

Elsley [4] indicates and highlights in her findings that local societies are rarely completely allowed to make their own decisions on the local initiatives. Fortunately, in some countries now (e.g. Spain, Belgium, Denmark) local governments recognize societies’ needs and take efforts to create enterprises for new places which can provide cultural education and at the same time give enjoyment and chance to develop physical activity of a person. It was taken seriously by academics from Denmark. They considered a play as an integral part of people’s social and cultural life and established the Europe Game Park in Gerlev (*Gerlev*

*Idrætshøjskol*) in 1999. In a holistic way, it unites elements of living museum, cultural history, educational innovation and recreational pastime activities for people of all ages [5].

It is then our ambition to initiate the creation of a 'new age playground' of Traditional Games in Poznan, where one can refer to local and other cultural traditions without being physically connected with the place of games origin. Thus, it means that participants would not need to travel to Scotland to play *quoits* or to Russia to play *gorodki*. Participants would be able to get to know those, among other varied games together with Polish ones, in the park mentioned above. The project may contribute to strengthening children's health, motor and movement skills combining and highlighting the widening of multi-cultural knowledge of positive psychosomatic health [6]. This way we as society/citizens and visitors can learn more about sporting heritage in the course of 'old' movement plays and games.

Research on citizens' influences on local policy has recently become a very strong direction in social studies [7]. It is usually taken into consideration with urban organizations and establishments due to local government regulations. It also becomes one of the most important ways of cooperation between academics in the field and local societies.

In the above mentioned context we decided to conduct our research with the main aim to give Poznan citizens a chance to make their point concerning the idea of creating such a place with new forms of lively activities.

### Material and methods

The data were collected in order to investigate citizens' opinions of the idea of organizing a new games place for local communities and city visitors. The questioning was carried out in October and November 2010. Interviews and surveys had a structured form. During the interviews research investigators used a specific list of items, which was prepared prior to the interview as a discussion scenario. This way the essential information to meet the research aims was collected. To get a broader scope of opinions on the idea of creating such a park in the city of Poznan, two different methods were employed: the qualitative and quantitative method. The qualitative data required carrying out individual in-depth interviews by the researchers. It was a lead-in interview conducted by trained staff that collected information about participants' opinions based on the specific questions concerning issues about the Park of Traditional Games on special data collecting sheets. The group of 51 respondents was selected through an "on-purpose" method from the group of *headmasters* of kindergartens and early school *head teachers* from Poznan municipality. Quantitative data analysis was used to refer to the systematic empirical investigation between empirical observation and mathematical expression of quantitative relationships. The research was supplemented by interviews with two further groups: 200 *parents* of pre-school and early school children made up the group representatives from Poznan citizens and the other group of the elderly, retired people (here called *seniors*) with grandchildren, which totalled 103 participants. The research groups were proportional to the geographical distribution of inhabitants within the city. Participants were asked to answer questions about (a) the current situation of sport and leisure on offer for children and adults in the city, (b) the level of knowledge on traditional games, and (c) their opinions on the idea of establishing a Traditional Games Park in Poznan. Furthermore, they had to declare their intention to participate in the activities proposed should such a park be created.

### Results

Below there are selected questionnaire items divided into quantitative and qualitative data according to the topic of the paper.

#### Quantitative data

Data from Table 1 indicate a high interest in the idea of creating a Traditional Games Park in the city of Poznan. Over 56% of the *parent* group and 54.4 % of the *senior* group agreed with the idea of establishing such a place. Some of the rest (34% of *parents* and 27.2% of *seniors*) were not so certain, but on the whole they still agreed with the concept. So, after all, we may assume that there is social readiness to create such a place in Poznan where young and adult citizens could spend their free time playing traditional activities and learning about particular local or national games.

**Table 1.** What is your opinion on the idea of creating a Traditional Games Park in Poznan?

Group	Parents		Seniors	
	N	%	N	%
Certainly agree	112	56.0	56	54.4
Rather agree	68	34.0	28	27.2
Hard to say	17	8.5	11	10.7
Rather disagree	3	1.5	7	6.7
Certainly disagree	0	0.0	1	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 provided complex information based on five statements on the comments concerning the 'Park proposal'. 61.0% of *parents* and 47.5% of *seniors* totally agreed that a Park of Traditional Games would be an offer different from others in terms of physical activity in urban areas. They also strongly viewed such a park as a very attractive place for themselves (56.5% of *parents* and 35.0% of *seniors*), for their kids (60.0%) and grandchildren (33%). Both groups: *parents* (67.5%) and *seniors* (66.0%) also considered the place as a very good opportunity to promote the city of Poznan as a tourist attraction with a specific interest in sports (new and old ones), which stands in line with the city plans of urban development. Finally, more than a half of research group of *parents* (63.0%) and 39.8% of the *senior* group declared they would willingly take their tutees to this kind of park.

**Table 2.** Residents' specific comments on the idea of creating a Traditional Games Park in Poznan

	Totally Agree		Rather agree		Hard to say		Rather disagree		Totally disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Statement 1 – A Traditional Games Park would be an offer different from other offers concerning physical activity in urban areas										
Parents	122	61.0	58	29.0	18	9.0	2	1.0	0	0.0
Seniors	49	47.5	39	37.8	13	12.7	1	1.0	1	1.0
Statement 2 – A Traditional Games Park would be very attractive to me as an adult										
Parents	113	56.5	59	29.5	12	6.0	13	6.5	3	1.5
Seniors	36	35.0	35	34.0	20	19.4	5	4.8	7	6.8
Statement 3 – A Traditional Games Park would be very attractive to my children /grandchildren										
Parents	120	60.0	68	34.0	10	5.0	2	1.0	0	0.0
Seniors	34	33.0	33	32.0	25	24.3	5	4.9	6	5.8
Statement 4 – A Traditional Games Park would be a tourist attraction promoting the city of Poznan										
Parents	135	67.5	54	27.0	10	5.0	1	0.5	0	0.0
Seniors	68	66.0	23	22.3	10	9.8	0	0.0	2	1.9
Statement 5 – I would willingly take my children/grandchildren to this kind of Park										
Parents	126	63.0	62	31.0	9	4.5	3	1.5	0	0.0
Seniors	41	39.8	25	24.3	21	20.3	8	7.8	8	7.8

### Qualitative data

To support the quantitative research it was decided to provide qualitative data as well in order to explore opinions of Poznan inhabitants more deeply as well as the needs for specific entertaining activities through cultural elements of local, national and even international heritage.

Since teachers usually choose the most appropriate and the safest places for kids to visit during day-care or school time, they really know which activities attract children and which make them bored. Due to this, the best research group to ask for was educators working with children in kindergartens and schools (*headmasters* and *head teachers*). The respondents represented all Poznan districts as well as public and non-public educational institutions.

They were asked if a Traditional Games Park should be created in Poznan. Their reaction was positive as the whole research group strongly declared an interest in such a place. They also claimed that there was currently a lack of places where children could play games freely and have other forms of movement fun without any limitation. Furthermore, they agreed that there was no place in Poznan which focused on the development of patriotic traditional attitudes and at the same time engaged children through physical activity.

Nowadays there are some places which concentrate on developing national or regional culture but these are primarily only museums, where games are forbidden. This strict atmosphere makes them less attractive, particularly for young people. Several respondents pointed out that perhaps it would be better to create a number of smaller parks of that kind and spread them all over different parts of the city close to schools and kindergartens. As some *headmasters* of kindergartens said:

1. Indeed, we need them [playgrounds] as many as possible. 'Pseudo playgrounds' which we have lots of now are often dangerous.

2. I guess we need such places in here because our kids do not know any traditional games and sports. It would be a very attractive item for them.
3. Surely I advocate creating a Park of Traditional Games in Poznan. It would be a perfect place for social meetings/team building or 'thematic' weeks and for children to celebrate e.g. birthday parties instead of in McDonalds'. But in that case there should also be some activities organized for parents/caregivers – adults.

During the interviews they were asked: "Do you think your tutees would visit the park if it existed? What conditions do you think you need to bring them in?" Looking at the answers the teachers were all strongly interested in participating in park activities. In their opinion, as the main condition, the offer would have to include recreational attractiveness. They also ranked its educational value highly and they opted for plays and games from all over the world, not only from Polish regions. It would give them a chance to compare various cultures and educational ideas. Extreme safety is also an important aspect of creating such a park mentioned by school principals. They saw this as the fundamental principle in children's plays, and in terms of logistics, the distance from a kindergarten/school to the place was also a matter of concern. These are sample comments on this question:

1. Recreation, rather than education, is more attractive due to the children's age.
2. Plays and games should be from different parts of the world not only from Poland. We are a 'global village' now and, what is more, children have broad experiences from their journeys with parents to different countries. We should not forget this.
3. If such a park existed, we would like to visit it once a month on average as a reward for their children's good behaviour.

When asked about the differentiation between a Traditional Games Park and other opportunities for kids in the city, tutors agreed that there was still less on offer than there should be. At the same time, they demanded that this was a very important and necessary initiative to organize active pastime for young people to give them more opportunities to be involved in physical activities. However, they strongly highlighted the need of the complexity of that place. In their outlook the park should link educational and behavioural tasks appropriately to the childhood stage. They said:

1. It would be something new. We do not have such an offer in the city. More often we organize excursions to agricultural places, but it is so worn out.
2. We are open to learning about our local past. We also feel a social obligation to teach our tutees patriotic manners and develop social and moral values, but at the same time we do not have any ideas on how to do it.
3. It would be wonderful if it was an offer focused not just on children, but also on their parents/caregivers; it would be a unique place. Usually we are offered something only for children, whereas parents feel free to drink coffee not being engaged in playing with their children.

Finally, educators were asked to present their point of view on the level of interest in such a Traditional Games Park idea. The group of *kindergarten headmasters* and *head teachers* claimed that it would be a great idea, but the only concern was that it might be a place which would attract people just for a short time, occasionally because it might swiftly become well-known for children if there was to be the same programme run repeatedly. The solution might be a number of educational programmes which would change in accordance with the seasons and other cultural projects in the city.

### Discussion

It is well-known that recreational parks could bring a stimulating effect and draw the attention of the society to physical activity. Fortunately, new generations start to be more aware of their future. They want to knowingly participate in a social life trying to change or even 'co-create' it on their own terms. What is more, members of local communities seek various opportunities to spend their leisure time more actively and attractively. In this respect, it is useful to highlight conclusions of contemporary research done by Nuci & Nuci [8], in which they indicate a need to create such places. The authors claim that children are better prepared to ethical principles and they more easily learn to cooperate during a play due to its natural environment, which is not associated with school duties. However, Barbarash also emphasizes the cultural context claiming that "a good way to explore other cultures and learn more about one's own is through play. (...) A multicultural, multiethnic approach to education provides children with information they can use to form opinions and practices for they own lives" [9].

The most important conclusion to be drawn from the study presented is that current Poznanian society is looking for individual identity in different spheres of life. "People in general distinguish themselves as much by their games as they do by their languages: the Scottish Caber tossing, American Baseball, English Cricket, Basque Pelote (...) are practices that are as distinctive as their homes or structure of their genetic heritage" [10]. In that context, the research group representing citizens of Poznan view the concept of a Park of Traditional Games as a place with the chance to emphasize local and national heritage and also a venue where they can perceive the opportunity of "ludo-diversity as the value of plays and games for the survival of culture", as Renon believes [11].

This study revealed the social need for this kind of initiative. Previously, Pawlikowska-Piechotka observed [12] that there was a constant pressure from the residents of housing estates in Warsaw, not just parents, who demanded providing more playgrounds. From our research we can conclude that currently also most local educators are calling for more places as playgrounds and 'thematic' parks in the city area. There are already some parks of this kind in Europe, especially in Denmark: 'junk', 'adventure' or 'play on art' playgrounds [13]. They perceive the need to support the young generation education with movement and self-experience. It was also observed that the local society expected constructive action from local governments in highlighting regional or national identity.

The data from Table 1 indicate a high interest in the idea of creating a Traditional Games Park in the city of Poznan. The *parent* and the *senior* groups agreed with the idea of establishing such a place. Therefore, we may assume that there is social readiness to create such a place in Poznan where young and elderly citizens could spend their pastime playing traditional activities and learning particular local or national games.

Most of the *parent* and *senior* groups totally agreed that a Park of Traditional Games would be an offer different from other offers concerning physical activity in urban areas. They also strongly viewed such a park as a very attractive place for themselves, their kids and grandchildren and considered such a place as a very good opportunity to promote the city of Poznan as a tourist attraction with a specific interest in sports. Finally, more than a half of the research group of *parents* and most of the *senior* group declared they would willingly take their tutees to this kind of park.

As it was discovered in the present study, people are open to learning about their past. They also feel a social obligation to teach their children patriotic manners and develop social and

moral values, but at the same time they do not have any ideas on how to do it. In these circumstances, the suggestion of organizing a Traditional Games Park seems like an opportunity to give the next generation a set of different physical activities combined with historical and cultural knowledge of local and also of national customs, all of which would be promoted through, and during, traditional plays and games.

In a globalized postmodern society, there is no time and space for individual identity, but local communities are seeking for cultural diversity [14]. As Femiak and Rymarczyk cite after Synak, the revival of local cultures is seen as a reaction to economic and cultural uniformity, strengthening institutions of a transnational nature [15]. One of the elements of culture are obviously plays and games with their heritage of traditions and values. In that sense, the endeavor proposed above could develop local identity which could coexist with consumerism as a chance to build bridges and a dialogue between cultures in order to enhance mutual understanding.

This kind of park might be the right place to show other inhabitants of Poznan and visitors a part of regional and national culture and history and also to give people the chance to explore our social life of the past and carry it playfully and peacefully into the future. It might also be a good place to share other cultures' achievements and ensure an authentic sense of individual and collective subjectivity.

### Conclusion

This kind of park might be the right place to show other inhabitants of Poznan and visitors a part of regional and national culture and history and also to give people the chance to explore our social life of the past and to carry it playfully and peacefully into the future.

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