

*A Profile:*

# LEARNING THROUGH EXPLORATION

## A Play-Based Toddler Curriculum

### Introduction

Access to – and successful participation in – coordinated, relevant professional development programs is critical to recruiting the talent needed to promote the ECE sector’s ability to meet family demand for early childhood education (ECE) programs, and ensure that ECE programs are high-quality and provide children with optimal and equitable learning opportunities. Foundational to high-quality early childhood education are well-trained educators who have access to resources aligned with the developmental needs of the children in their care. When educators have access to high-quality resources, not only are outcomes likely to be better for children,<sup>1</sup> but the educators themselves are more likely to feel supported and remain on the job.<sup>2</sup> Despite the critical role that ECE educators play in children’s development, however, limited investment has been made in creating inclusive and equitable curricula that are age-appropriate for very young children. Moreover, due to staffing shortages, many programs also struggle to provide educators with hands-on instructional coaching. **Thus, a critical need identified by the field is for high-quality, accessible curricula developed specifically, and respectively, for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, as well as access to ongoing instructional coaching and implementation supports, as both are foundational to high-quality programming.**

To help fill the gap with respect to the availability of high-quality, play-based curriculum for toddler-aged children, Neighborhood Villages partnered with the Lego Foundation to create *Learning Through Exploration*, a developmentally appropriate curriculum for children 15 to 33 months old that was created in partnership with Boston Public Schools (BPS) and informed by its evidenced-based *Focus* curricula and aligned with Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) standards.<sup>3</sup> Play-based, developmentally appropriate, and culturally competent, *Learning Through Exploration* offers a bank of developmentally appropriate approaches and tools that educators can choose from to match children’s interests. Neighborhood Villages’ *Learning Through Exploration* curriculum is designed to be accompanied by professional development training and a high-touch coaching model, to ensure fidelity of implementation of the curriculum and continued instructional growth. The curriculum, which is open source, is a resource designed by and for educators, with very young children’s best interests in mind.

**This profile describes in greater detail the development of the *Learning Through Exploration* curriculum and early data on its impact on ECE quality outcomes.**

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<sup>1</sup> While research on ECE curricula is sparse, the following belief represents a common line of thinking: “In light of uneven expectations for educators’ professional preparation and variability across the states in child care licensing standards, early childhood curriculum models can improve programmatic quality through the consistent implementation of well-articulated curriculum frameworks, thereby lifting the floor of program quality in early childhood education.” From: *The Role of Curriculum Models in Early Childhood Education*. ERIC Digest. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED443597.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *There is evidence that “Poor work conditions - such as long hours, low wages, and limited supports and resources to handle job stressors - are perhaps the key challenge in centers’ efforts to retain teachers.” Limited supports may include the absence of an effective leader and/or the provision of resources to create a high-quality environment.*

<sup>3</sup> *The guiding principles of Boston Public Schools’ Focus curricula are that children in Early Childhood Pre-K to Grade 2: construct meaningful knowledge through robust interaction and high engagement; aspire to be visible and valued; experience, process, and interact with the world in unique ways; and are experienced and capable agents of their own learning. For more information, see: <https://www.bpsearlylearning.org/our-curricula>*



## The Importance of Curricular Support in Early Childhood Settings

An optimal early education curriculum empowers educators and provides children with rich experiences. Its existence also underscores the idea that early education delivered in formal settings, such as in early childhood education centers or Family Child Care provider homes, is not simply custodial care – rather it is an environment that facilitates children’s growth and development. Early education curricula provide frameworks that equip educators to create the conditions that support children through key stages of development and learning. Moreover, high-quality curriculum unites educators, which, in turn, fosters a sense of community and a greater likelihood that they will share teaching and learning ideas and “exchange notes” regarding what is happening in their classrooms. Unfortunately, despite the instrumental value of early childhood curricula, few curriculum options designed specifically for infants and toddlers exist.<sup>4</sup>

## Meeting the Need

From a landscape assessment conducted with five Boston-based early childhood education organizations across 12 program sites,<sup>5</sup> Neighborhood Villages surfaced that providers desired stronger, evidenced-based curriculum options for toddler-aged children. Providers reported that the absence of satisfactory external curriculum options was compounded by the fact that, given significant staffing challenges, center leaders and senior educators had little time to devote to planning an internal curriculum.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the activities/lessons being used by toddler educators did not connect to preschool and pre-kindergarten programs being offered by providers with universal pre-K and preschool programs. The status quo was serving neither the children nor their educators well. In response to the curricular needs articulated by Neighborhood partners, Neighborhood Villages, in line with its mission to demonstrate systems solutions to help the ECE sector better promote excellence in instruction, determined that it would, in partnership with experts, practitioners, and educators, undertake the co-design of a toddler curriculum for younger children that was play-based, developmentally appropriate, anti-biased, and contiguous to evidenced-based curricula being implemented in multiple district elementary schools in Massachusetts for children ages 3-8.

## Prioritizing Co-Design and Collaboration in Curriculum Writing and Development

To initiate the design phase of the *Learning Through Exploration* toddler curriculum, Neighborhood Villages formed working groups composed of early childhood development experts, practitioners, educators, and parents to advise on best practices for play-based learning for toddler-aged children and to provide practical, firsthand input, based on teaching and classroom experience. Notably, educators were engaged in the design phase from the beginning, in recognition that curriculum is strongest when co-created with its implementers; indeed, one of the foundational goals of the curriculum writing process was to ensure that the final product reflected the expertise and demographics of ECE educators and administrators. Educators were encouraged to bring their experience to the table and to express, from their perspectives, what was needed in the curriculum to meet not only children’s needs but also their own. Moreover, inclusion of educator and family voices was recognized as foundational to ensuring that the final curriculum was grounded in anti-bias and anti-racism principles.

To assist with the writing of the curriculum, a working group was formed that included educators from each of the five ECE providers who participate in Neighborhood Villages’ Neighborhood program (see footnote 5) and an administrator. This working group of practitioners met every other week to develop a scope for the curriculum and to contribute to curriculum writing. A second working group was composed of experts in trauma-informed care, experts in play-based curricula, and experts in early childhood development met to advise the work in progress. Throughout the development of the curriculum, there was a volley from one group to the other, building upon and incorporating the other’s feedback.

Neighborhood Villages also closely collaborated with Boston Public Schools (BPS). (Neighborhood Villages had previously served as a partner to BPS in the development of the *Focus on Threes* curriculum, which extends BPS’ acclaimed *Focus curricula* to children as young as three years old.<sup>7</sup>)

<sup>4</sup> Pre-Kindergarten programs associated with public K-12 school districts benefit from the infrastructure in place to support the older grades. For example, Boston Public Schools (BPS) enrolls around 54,000 students and has central administration with an Office of Teaching and Learning, which staffs Executive Directors for each of the major subject-area disciplines taught in the schools, as well as Early Childhood. One of the primary supports that falls under each of those subject areas is one (or more) endorsed curricula. In the absence of an overarching administrative body providing or recommending instructional content to providers outside of public schools, early childhood providers are each left to develop plans on their own.

<sup>5</sup> NV approaches its work through localized, co-developed pilots to co-design, test, and evaluate ECE systems solutions in partnership with a network of 5 independent Boston-based ECE providers, a collective known as “The Neighborhood.” The Neighborhood collaborative serves as an ECE ecosystem that offers innovative solutions for how the ECE sector could be transformed into a true system. Neighborhood Villages operates the majority of its pilot programming with its Neighborhood partners, serving 3,000 people annually.

<sup>6</sup> Many centers are chronically short-staffed. 21% of providers surveyed by the MA Department of Early Education and Care in late fall of 2023 cited unfilled staff openings as the reason they were unable to serve full licensed capacity. See: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/january-board-meeting-slides/download>

<sup>7</sup> Development of the *Learning Through Exploration* toddler curriculum followed a partnership between Neighborhood Villages and Boston Public Schools (BPS) to adapt BPS’ Focus curriculum to be developmentally appropriate for three-year old children. Having worked with BPS on its adaptation of the Focus curricula (for 4 year-olds) – to be relevant for three year-olds who would be served under the expansion of UPK – Neighborhood Villages was able to continue the partnership in the development of a toddler curriculum.

Representatives from BPS participated in the advisory working group, attending every meeting and offering feedback at each stage of the writing process. The guiding principles of the toddler curriculum were based on the guiding principles of the BPS Department of Early Childhood (adapted slightly for younger learners and to reflect inspiration of the Reggio approach<sup>8</sup>) and informed by BPS' *Focus* curricula, including use of read-aloud books as a cornerstone.

### **Prioritizing Continuous Feedback and Iteration During Pilot Implementation Phase**

The curriculum was piloted in two phases across a total of 25 classrooms. (These 25 toddler classrooms were spread out across 8 program locations within the Neighborhood.) The first phase included 17 classrooms that began implementing the curriculum in February 2023. The second phase introduced an additional 8 classrooms, which began curriculum implementation in August 2023. Four of the five Neighborhood partner programs participate in BPS' Universal Pre-Kindergarten, which utilizes the *Focus* curricula, making them ideal sites for piloting a curriculum designed to provide an aligned experience for Boston children.

The pilot implementation phases provided the opportunity to experiment with curriculum design, receive continuous feedback from educators and families and use real-time input and feedback to iterate and improve the curriculum. Early education coaches played a crucial role in the pilot phase, providing modeling and serving as first-hand expert advisors. Educators participated in workshops (at their respective centers) every few weeks and had the ongoing support of a coach who trained educators in the curriculum and guided classroom implementation. Additionally, providers received materials that go with the curriculum, such as read-aloud books. (Of note, the curriculum is intentionally designed not to require a lot of *stuff*. Rather, it emphasizes guidance on setting up a classroom to encourage play-based exploration and on supporting educators on responding to children's curiosity and interests.) The curriculum took approximately 18 months to complete, including time to pilot implementation in the field. By piloting simultaneously with the writing process, the curriculum writers benefited from receiving ongoing feedback that could be applied to continuous iteration and quality improvement.

### **Initial Results of the Curriculum's Impact on Participating Classrooms**

Neighborhood Villages has engaged the Brazelton Touchpoints Center (BTC) at Boston Children's Hospital to evaluate its *Learning Through Exploration* curriculum project, using a data-informed approach to track impact on classroom quality indicators. In February and March 2023, Brazelton conducted a series of observations using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)<sup>9</sup> to (a) establish a baseline for toddler program quality across Neighborhood Villages' Neighborhood provider partners, (b) inform Neighborhood Villages' teaching and learning support activities including coaching, professional development offerings, and curricular activities, and (c) determine the efficacy of Neighborhood Villages' teaching and learning interventions across Neighborhood partner providers. All observations were conducted by certified outside observers to ensure an unbiased rating of quality. CLASS observations were conducted again in September and the beginning of October 2023 to track progress in classroom practice, related to Neighborhood Villages quality-building and coaching efforts.

BTC's analysis examined differences in overall averages between the baseline observation cycle (March 2023) and the second September/October cycle. Noteworthy is that Neighborhood providers demonstrated significant quality growth in CLASS' Engaged Support for Learning domain, specifically in Facilitation of Learning and Development and Quality of Feedback, two dimensions measured within the domain.<sup>10</sup> As such, early data suggests that Neighborhood Villages' teaching and learning supports, including the implementation of *Learning Through Exploration*, are helping to build quality. A third cycle of CLASS assessment will take place in Spring 2024.

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**For more information on the content of the curriculum, [see our blog series](#).**

**Learning Through Exploration was made possible by support from the LEGO Foundation and other philanthropic partners.**

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/>

<sup>9</sup> The CLASS system is used nationally by Early Head Start and Head Start as means of monitoring and tracking quality improvement over time.

<sup>10</sup> The Engaged Support for Learning domain and its associated dimensions are focused on the facilitation of learning beyond providing general information and words and the responsiveness of educators in relation to the communication initiated by children.