

Preschool Curriculum Use and Exposure to and Home Language and Culture: National Survey Results

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The NASEM report "A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum" has brought increased attention to two issues¹: the type of curriculum used and the extent to which curriculum (or practice generally) attends to linguistic and cultural diversity, including supports for dual-language learners. The report distinguishes two major types of curricula, comprehensive (or multi-domain) and domain-specific, concluding that domain-specific curricula are more effective in producing improved academic outcomes.² In this brief, we draw on a national survey of preschool teachers conducted by NIEER in 2010 to describe both the frequency with which different types of curricula were used and the attention to children's diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.³ As federal policies and professional organization recommendations regarding curriculum have not changed since 2010 we do not expect that much has changed since in curriculum adoption.⁴ We address the following questions with the survey's self-reported data on teachers' practices:

1. What are the most frequently used curricula, and how does this vary by auspice (private, state, and local public preschool (hereafter called "public school"), and Head Start)?
2. How frequently are the different types of curricula—comprehensive (multi-domain) and domain-specific—used in each auspice?
3. How frequently are young children in preschools exposed to their home language and culture in each auspice?
4. Does the frequency of exposure to home language and culture vary by the type of curriculum?

Curriculum Use

As can be seen in Table 1, curriculum use is more complex than a choice between commercial curricula that are either comprehensive (multi-domain) or domain-specific. Some teachers reported that they did not use a curriculum. A substantial percentage reported using a locally developed curriculum, in which case we do not know whether it is comprehensive or domain-specific. In the private sector, about half the teachers reported that they did not use a commercially available curriculum. The most frequently reported commercial curricula in private programs accounted for modest percentages of classrooms, with the Creative Curriculum at 16 percent and the Abeka Christian Curriculum at almost 6 percent. In public school preschools, less than 30 percent reported no curriculum or a locally developed approach. In Head Start, more than 85% of teachers reported

using a commercially available curriculum, with the Creative Curriculum reported by 60 percent and nine percent reporting the use of HighScope.

Table 1: Teacher Reported Curriculum Name and Type by Auspice

Name	Private %	Public %	Head Start %	Type
No Curriculum	11.9	10.2	2.6	
Locally Developed	41.1	17.6	10.7	
Don't Know	1.2	0.8	0.4	
Creative Curriculum	16.3	27	60.3	MD
HighScope	2.1	6.9	9.2	MD
Houghton Mifflin	0.9	5.8	2.7	MD
DLM Early Childhood Express	0.9	6.2	0.9	MD
Abeka Christian Preschool	5.6	0.2	0.1	MD
High Reach	2.5	0.6	1.2	MD
Scholastic	1.4	0.7	0.5	MD
Montessori	1.9	0.4	0.1	MD
Wee Learn	1.5	0.1		MD
Curiosity Corner		0.8	0.4	MD
Core Knowledge	0.2		1	MD
Tools of the Mind		0.8	0.2	MD
Blueprint for Early Learning	0.2	0.2	0.4	MD
Little Treasures	0.2	0.4	0.2	MD
Mother Goose Time	0.5	0.1	0.2	MD
Project Construct	0.3	0.4	0.1	MD
We Can Early Learning		0.4	0.2	MD
Pinnacle Curriculum	0.4	0.1	0.1	MD
Doors to Discovery	0.3	0.2	0.1	MD
Funshine Digital (online only)	0.5	0.1		MD
Frog Street PreK-3s	0.1	0.4		MD
Galileo Pre-K (online)			0.4	MD
Harcourt		0.2	0.2	MD
KinderCare	0.4			MD
The Investigator Club		0.2	0.2	MD
Kaplan	0.1	0.1		MD
Open Court	0.1	1.7	0.7	DS
Land of Letter People	0.5	1.2	0.5	DS
Opening the World of Learning	0.2	3.7	1	DS
Handwriting without Tears	0.5	0.8	0.1	DS
Everyday Mathematics		1.1	0.2	DS
Zoo-phonics	0.4	0.6		DS
Saxon	0.3	0.6		DS
Growing with Math		0.5	0.2	DS
Second Step Early Learning	0.2		0.4	DS
Journeys	0.3	0.2	0.1	DS
Scott Foresman		0.5		DS
Early Literacy and Learning	0.2	0.1	0.1	DS
Links to Literacy	0.2	0.1	0.1	DS
Imagine It		0.7	0.1	DS
Sunshine	0.4		0.1	
Other	5.8	5.4	2.7	

Notes.MD: Multi-Domain, DS: Domain-Specific

We followed the NASEM report’s classification of each curriculum to code it as either multi-domain (comprehensive) or domain-specific, though not all the curricula reported in our survey could be found in the NASEM report. As shown in Table 2, Head Start teachers overwhelmingly used a multi-domain curriculum. About half of public school preschool teachers reported using a multi-domain curriculum, while only 12 percent reported using a domain-specific curriculum alone or (rarely) in combination with another curriculum. Among private providers, only about a third used a commercial multi-domain curriculum but just 3 percent reported using a domain-specific curriculum. With more than 40 percent of teachers in the private sector and nearly 20 percent in public school programs reporting the use of a locally developed curriculum, an important question for future research is what locally developed curricula are like. Are they multi-domain or domain-specific, and how well do they support young children’s learning and development?

Table 2. Curriculum by Auspice—None, Locally Developed, Multi-domain, or Domain-Specific

	Private	Public	Head Start
No curriculum	11.20%	7.20%	1.70%
Locally developed curriculum	41.10%	17.60%	10.70%
Only multi-domain curriculum	34.50%	51.60%	75.30%
Multi-domain and undetermined curriculum	2.10%	1.70%	4.40%
Multi-domain and domain-specific curriculum	0.10%	0.20%	0.10%
Only a domain-specific curriculum	2.90%	11.60%	3.70%
Domain-specific and undetermined curriculum	--	0.70%	--
Only an “undetermined” curriculum	8.10%	9.30%	3.90%

These findings also have implications for the interpretation of past research on curriculum studies, as the control or comparison condition in many studies has been “business as usual.” Our survey indicates that the counterfactual varied considerably depending on auspice. For Head Start, it is reasonable to assume a multi-domain commercial curriculum most of the time, though that is not guaranteed. In public school programs, business as usual was much more mixed, and in the private sector, the use of a commercial multi-domain curriculum was the exception rather than the rule. Of course, our study provides no information on the fidelity of implementation even when a specific curriculum was reported, but it is helpful to know that large parts of the field were not even trying to implement one of the well-known multi-domain curricula in 2010. It follows that when interpreting studies comparing any specific curriculum to “business as usual,” one cannot simply assume that the comparison is to a comprehensive (multi-domain) curriculum.

Reported Exposure to Home Language and Culture

Figure 1 displays the frequencies with which teachers reported children were exposed to their home language and culture by auspice. More than two-thirds of teachers in each auspice reported that this was daily or almost daily, ranging from 68 percent in private programs to 71 percent in public schools and reaching 78 percent in Head Start. Although this indicates that this high level of exposure is widespread, it was far from universal. The percentage of teachers reporting children experienced their home language and culture rarely—no more than once per week—ranged from almost 20 percent in private programs to just under 10 percent in Head Start. Figure 2a displays the percentage of teachers who report daily or almost daily exposure to home language and culture by curriculum type for three of the larger categories (comprehensive, locally developed, and no

curriculum) within each auspice. There is no clear pattern across all auspices, but teachers using a locally developed curriculum were less likely to report providing daily exposure to home language and culture than those using comprehensive curricula in Head Start and public school programs.

Figure 1. Frequency of Cultural and Linguistic Exposure Among Students by Auspice (%)

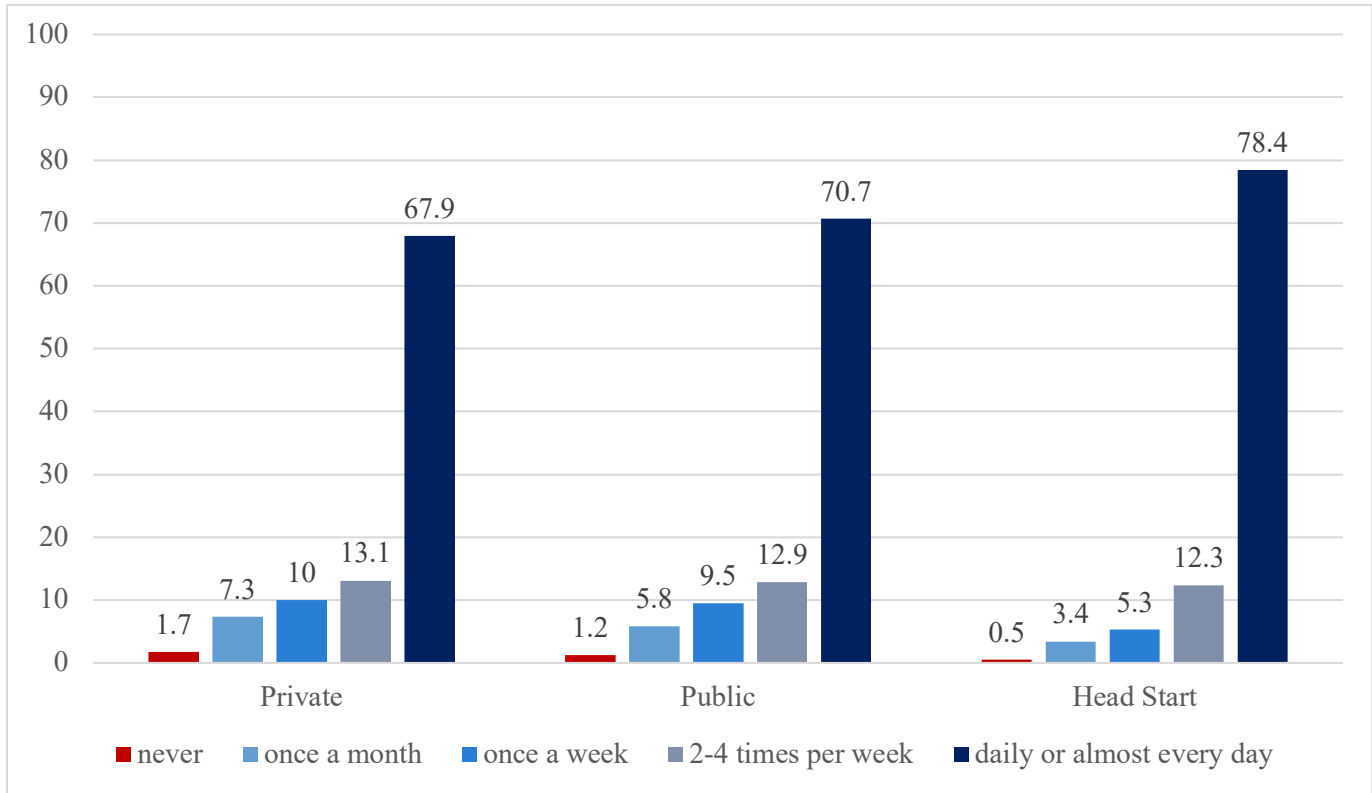


Figure 2a. Frequency of Cultural and Linguistic Exposure: Comprehensive Curriculum v. Locally Developed, No Curriculum, and Other within Auspice (Percent Daily or Almost Every Day)

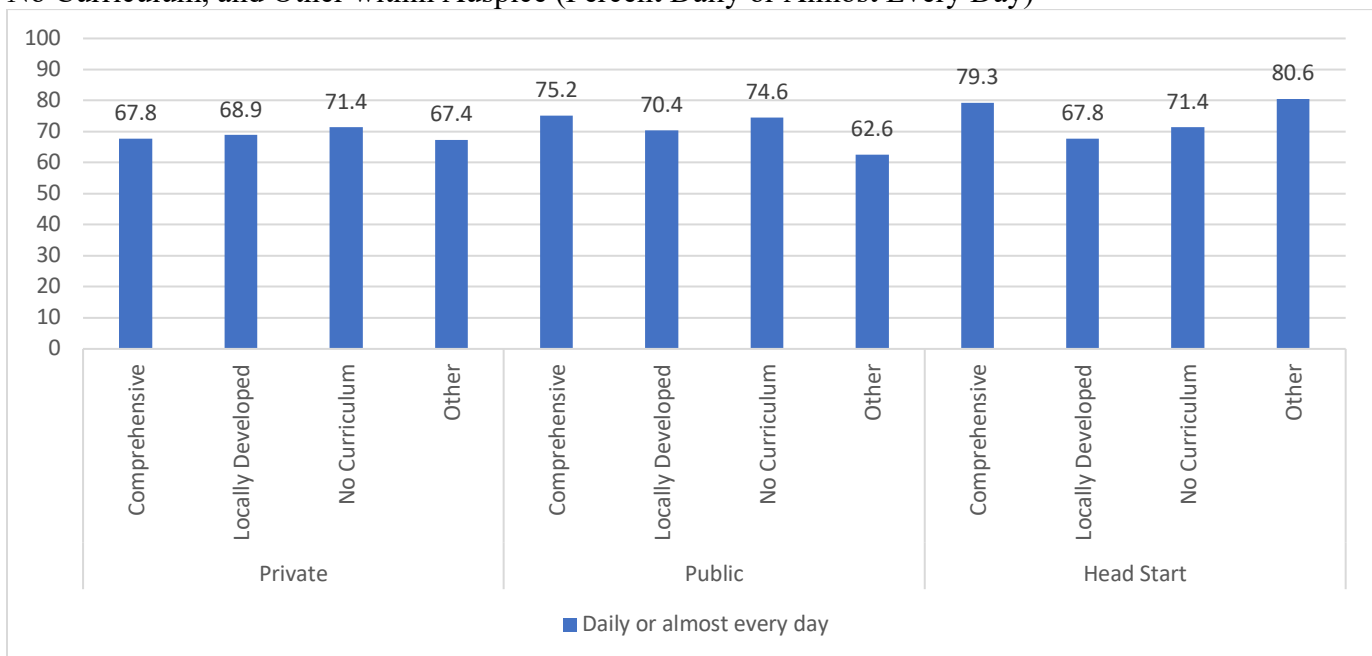
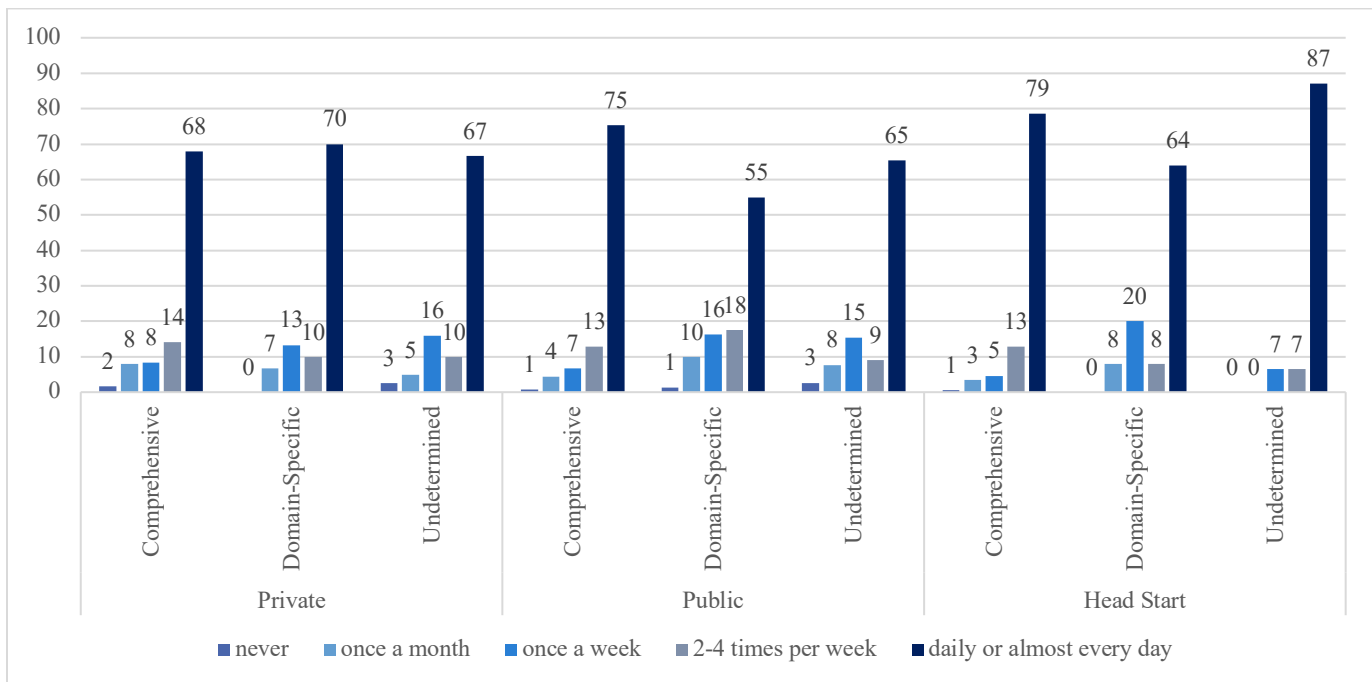


Figure 2b reports the frequency of exposure to home language and culture comparing teachers using a comprehensive curriculum to those using domain-specific and undetermined types of curricula. Again, there is little variation among private programs, but within public school and Head Start preschool programs, the use of a multi-domain curriculum was associated with more exposure to home language and culture compared to the use of a domain-specific curriculum.

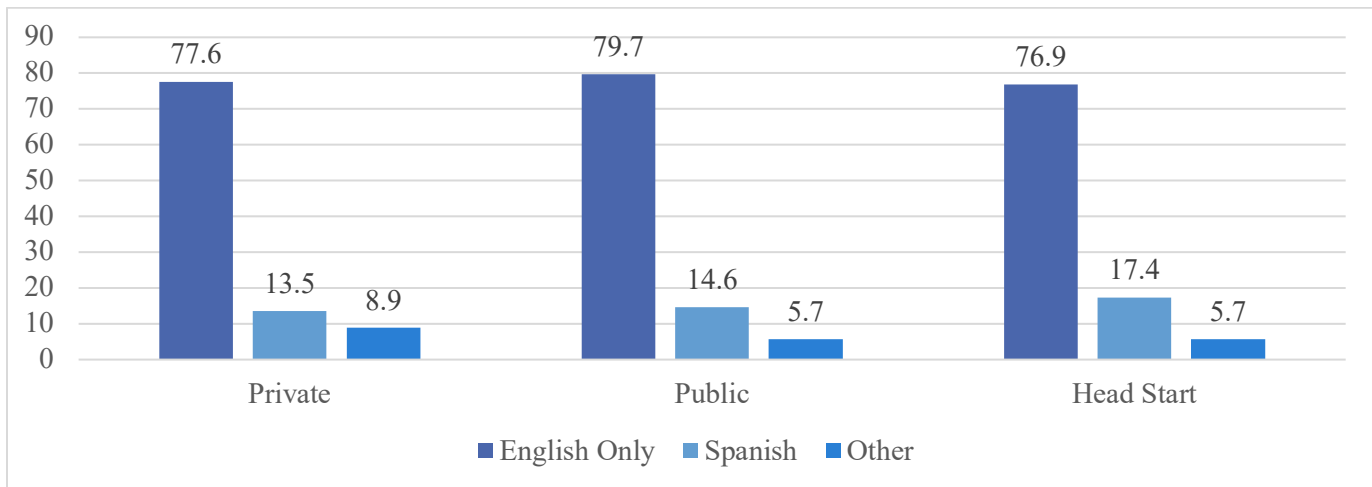
These graphical analyses of differences in exposure to home language and culture by curriculum type in public programs are confirmed by statistical analysis. Both analysis of variance of curriculum type and multi-level regression analysis of curriculum type nested within auspice find a significantly higher frequency of exposure associated with the use of a comprehensive curriculum.

Figure 2b. Frequency of Cultural and Linguistic Exposure: Comprehensive Curriculum v. Domain Specific and Undetermined Type within Auspice



As exposure to home language and culture might be influenced by teacher linguistic and cultural competence, we also examined teacher-reported language fluency. Figure 3 shows that there was little difference by auspice in the percentage of teachers fluent only in English at just under 80 percent. However, teachers who spoke Spanish reported that children in their classrooms experienced their home language and culture more frequently across all auspices. To examine the association of curriculum type with exposure to home language and culture controlling for teacher language proficiency, we estimated a mixed-effects model adjusting for teacher-reported language fluency. This model allowed us to assess the association of curriculum type with children's exposure to their home language and culture independent of the influence of teacher language skills. The results indicate that comprehensive curricula incorporating multiple domains are associated with increased frequency of exposure to home language and culture compared to domain-specific curricula and other approaches, controlling for teacher fluency in languages other than English.

Figure 3. Lead Teacher Language Fluency (percent) by Auspice



Summary and Conclusions

We investigated issues raised by the NASEM report’s call for a new vision for curriculum using teacher responses to a 2010 survey about their preschool program practices. The overall picture of curriculum use was complex with substantial differences by auspice. Teachers reported more than 40 different commercially available curricula, most of which have not been rigorously studied, but many teachers reported using a locally developed curriculum or no curriculum. The types of curricula used varied greatly by auspice. In Head Start, the Creative Curriculum was used by 60 percent of teachers, and most of the rest used another commercially available comprehensive (multi-domain) curriculum. By contrast, only about half of public school preschool teachers and a third of those in the private sector reported using any comprehensive (multi-domain) commercial curriculum. A surprising (to us) percentage of teachers reported using no curriculum. Teachers very rarely reported supplementing a comprehensive curriculum with a domain-specific curriculum.

Most, but not all, teachers reported that children were frequently exposed to their home language and culture. Some reported that this occurred rarely. Teachers with Spanish language proficiency reported that children more frequently experienced their home language and culture, indicating that exposure could be improved by increasing the percentage of teachers fluent in the home languages of their students generally and in Spanish specifically. Associations between the type of curriculum and frequency of exposure to home language and culture raise questions about the nature of these correlations. Perhaps domain-specific approaches tend to crowd out or ignore home language and culture because they are so focused on specific subject matter, though this need not be the case. Future curriculum research should examine how different curricula affect children’s exposure to home language and culture as well as what might be done to improve this exposure.

An important limitation of our analyses is that the data were self-reported by teachers. We don’t know how well the curricula were implemented nor what exposure to home language and culture meant in practical terms. Studies of curriculum find varying degrees of implementation fidelity—which seems likely to be related to the curriculum itself as well as to supports for implementation. We suspect a substantial gap between naming the curriculum used and actual practice, varying with the complexity of the curriculum and supports for implementation.⁵ The small percentage of teachers fluent in languages other than English and in Spanish, specifically, raises questions about how rich and extensive non-English interactions might be.

Informed by the NASEM report, policymakers should consider changes in curriculum policies to improve early education together with policies regarding preschool teacher recruitment, preparation, support, and development that also can contribute to better meeting the needs of a diverse population. This will not always be easy given the limited information available to guide such changes. For example, whether or not comprehensive curricula are less effective than domain-specific curricula for long-term academic achievement is not yet clear, also unclear is how effectiveness compares between the two types of curricula for such other important outcomes as creativity, motivation, and social and emotional development. Policymakers need more guidance from future research before mandating major changes in practice. Nevertheless, given the short-term academic advantages found for use of domain-specific curricula alone or in combination with a comprehensive curriculum policymakers should at least open the doors to broader use and systematic experimentation⁶. Our data suggest that at least some policies have discouraged the use of domain-specific curricula either alone or as add-ons to a comprehensive curriculum. Moreover, some directions for policy improvement are clear—preparing more teachers who are fluent in Spanish, for example, given the large percentage of the population with Spanish as a home language.

Researchers have much work to do to support policy development regarding curriculum and supports for our diverse population of young children. The NASEM report set out many questions that need to be addressed to support better policy regarding curriculum. This brief suggests that among the first questions to be addressed should be—what is happening today? What curricula are teachers using, and how well do they meet the needs of today’s diverse population? Other key questions include: what do children experience in classrooms with locally developed curricula or no curriculum, and what are the outcomes of those experiences for young children? Finally, additional research on the effects of various curricular approaches (including combining different approaches) under different auspices that affect teacher qualifications, compensation, class size, and other circumstances that might alter effectiveness is greatly needed. Such studies should distinguish between time devoted to specific subject matter and the curricular approach and move beyond examining short-term academic achievement outcomes.

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About NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

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Endnotes

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. *A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27429>.

² The Head Start Impact Study might be considered to provide a test of the effectiveness of comprehensive curricula—though not a comparison to domain-specific approaches—as nearly 90 percent of programs in that study used a curriculum and the Creative Curriculum and HighScope were most common at that time as in our 2010 survey.

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