Like many preschool classrooms, our room is broken up into centers, and our building center is the block rug.

It is one of the most popular centers - it's almost always full, and given the choice some children would never play anywhere else.

However, there are some children who never visit the block rug.

How do I engage those children?
I began my research asking:

"How do I get every child to the block rug?"

I thought about the children in my class, this year and in years past, who don’t spend time on the block rug.

I thought about the children who always choose blocks, and I thought about what the play on the block rug usually looks like...
My first realization:

I realized that for some the block rug itself might be the problem.

What if you didn't have to build on the floor?

Perhaps some children would be more inspired to build if the materials were on a table...
Or maybe...

Could it be that a large open space, shared by up to four children at a time... could be intimidating?

Playing on the block rug is different from playing in most of our other centers.

There are no defined work spaces. A child must carve out their own space in which to build. The prospect of having to fight for real estate, to negotiate with classmates might make choosing blocks unappealing. Even stressful.
Every child is different.

Just like some children are driven to play with blocks day after day, some children are driven to paint.

Some children want nothing more than to be elbow deep in the sensory table or squeezing and smooshing playdough.

Some children are socially driven and want to live in the dramatic play center, creating worlds and inventing scenarios with their classmates.
It's all good.

Every center in our classroom is valuable and children should explore what they are drawn to but if something about the block rug is preventing them from exploring building then we should change what we are doing.

A center is only worth having if you do the work to make sure children can access it.
Why I want to get each child building (at least a little bit):
From what I’ve learned so far, exposure (especially early in the year) is a key to what children will choose to do in the future.

In a sense, it’s perfectly fine to let a child who’s excited about pretend play explore that as much as they desire.

However, if a child is consistently choosing one area due to lack of exposure to other activities or a skill deficit that makes it difficult for them to engage in a particular activity, then I consider that a missed opportunity.
My First Assumptions:

First off, I assumed that there could be many reasons why a child would not chose blocks.

Based on the children in my class this year, it’s obvious that some children are intrinsically motivated to build stuff, while other children aren’t - either because they’re more interested in pretend play or visual arts, or because they just don’t feel interested, or excited, or (possibly) comfortable on the block rug.
Here’s how I approached this problem/question:

I started by identifying the children in my class who don’t dive right into building time. I also thought about children from past years who behaved similarly or fit the same kind of profile.

I believe there is probably a vast range of reasons why a child will be drawn to building, or drawn to other things, or specifically drawn away from building.
Then I started identifying our “non-builders”

I began developing a list of possible strategies for engaging my "non-builders" based on current and past observations.

I considered all the variables at play in the building center and identified which ones I could change. I could change the location, the number of children, the materials, how the material are presented. I could change whether children worked independently, or as buddies, or as a group.
Time to make some changes

I chose a few strategies to implement (keeping the available timeframe in mind), and then started implementing each, one at a time.

I collected data on who chose to build (and under what circumstances), as well as the amount of time spent building and the level of engagement.
Initial Observations

Prior to making any changes, I spent a few weeks observing who spent time on the block rug and who didn’t.

I found that 4 of my students always chose blocks, 5 sometimes did, and 7 very rarely or never did.
Initial Observations

We started the year with many different kinds of blocks and props available all the time.

While some of the loyal block rug children spent time building, others did not. Some spent the entire playblock negotiating for the coveted dumptruck or clutching prized vehicles. Children pulled out many different play accessories, leaving little room to build.
Change #1: Pairing Down

First I removed vehicles from the block area to shift the focus of the play area onto the actual blocks.

Then I scaled back even more by removing the large blocks, leaving only the small ones available.

I did also leave a basket of little people in the hopes that it would draw in children who are primarily interested in dramatic play.
Limiting the materials in the block area had an immediate impact on the quality of play occurring there.

Children began using the blocks right away! However, these changes did not have any effect on who came to the block area. The same children came and they had no interest in the little people available there.

**Change #1: Results**
My Conclusions:

Upon analyzing the seven weeks of data I collected, I can say that when I became very intentional about weaving building into our curriculum, we were able to successfully introduce multiple different ways of building to each child.

More importantly to me, I learned that not only *can* all of the children in my class build, they all *love* to build.

The catch is, many of them hadn’t been introduced to building in a way that was particularly effective before.
Some Simple, (And Even Obvious) Conclusions:

Some of what I’ve found so far is hardly a surprise:

1) children will be more engaged with building if you give them a minute or two of direct attention, and ask them questions about their creations.

2) children will engage with building materials if they’re new and interesting.

3) By adding more building into the curriculum, you create more ways to get children building, and then you can see more children will probably build.
More Interesting Conclusions:

1) Eliminating or restricting other toys from the building area can be a real game changer. Children will spend more time building, and seem to enjoy it more if the building materials are the primary focus.

2) Introducing story, characters, or tie-ins with other curriculum can make building a great way for children to explore the things they’re fascinated by.

3) Simple prompts that give a direction, a goal, or a challenge to young builders can really spark a lot of enthusiasm in children who wouldn’t normally choose building as a playtime activity.
Building Can Be a Great Jumping Off Point:

I’ve had children come up to me and show me their creations with excitement, and ask for the little people or vehicles so they can populate their creations and play with them in different ways.

It’s exciting to see children who used to avoid using blocks suddenly building extravagant “sets” for pretend-play.

I wasn’t initially expecting my inquiry to lead to this, but it’s exciting to see building as a catalyst for even more enjoyable pretend play.
An Even More Interesting Conclusion:

The longer-term results of all these changes have not been as fleeting as I may have suspected at first.

Weeks after some of these various changes - I’m seeing children who never built things in class before engaging in building voluntarily, and really enjoying it.

Building has become an exciting proposition to the non-building children, and even our initial core group of “builders” seem to be more engaged in imaginative, story or character based construction than they initially seemed to be.
What This Means About How I Engage My Class:

I’m finding that the last point - that there’s a longer-term effect of getting every child engaged with building - is going to be instrumental in how I think about and plan curricula for this age group.

I’m also more open-minded now about how I approach questions like the one I started with:

“How can we get every child to the block rug?”
A More Basic Question I’ve Been Asking Myself Is:

“Why is building so important to me anyway?”

What does it do for us?

Why is it fun?

What can we do with building that we can’t do with the stuff that’s right in front of us and already “built”?

What happens in a little brain when it starts making a thing out of smaller things?
Another basic question I've been exploring is:

*How can building help children do more of what they already want to do?*

In pretend play for instance: Can’t setting up your own space with boxes and sheets and other objects help make a more fun and fanciful space to play?

In terms of visual arts: Couldn’t setting up a quick and funky sculpture of *stuff* give you something neat to look at while you make your wonderful colors happen on this sheet of paper?

In terms of outside play: How can you build on the playground with branches and piles of snow to make your game even more fun?
The “Block Rug” Shouldn’t Just Be a Rug With Blocks.

Having a specific area just for building, without any curriculum or context can cut that area and mode of exploration off from the other areas of the classroom that typically end up tied into the curriculum much more.

In asking myself more and more questions, I’ve come to think that building can be just as integral to our core curriculum as teaching respectful communication, safety, and social play skills.

The flip side of that is that building can’t really be integral to anything if it’s considered to be it’s own activity in a vaccuum.
I Also Want to Honor The Fact That Not every child wants to be on the “Block Rug”.

It’s absolutely fine if a child, (or group of children) doesn’t feel drawn to the block rug. That shouldn’t keep them from enjoying the fun of building. As an assistant teacher, it’s well within my power to help inject some building and construction elements into our curriculum, and into any other area of the classroom that our children enjoy.

Building is important, and there’s no reason it can’t happen off of that one rug. Starting projects on tables, and in other areas of the room has proven to be a great way that I can help every child in my class this year to engage with and really enjoy building.
I hope that I’ve been able to help the children who initially stayed away from blocks, by giving them the experience of enjoying construction.

I hope that now that they’ve seen and experienced the reasons why other children love building with blocks, (and straws, and tiles, and sticks, and rocks, and train tracks) that they’ll enter kindergarten without feeling like they’re not the “kind of child” that plays with blocks.

I hope they’ll come away from this with a broader range of things to enjoy in school, and a set of skills that can help them have more fun and enjoy more things, with more children.
Where I go from here:

I hope to continue to incorporate building (in one form or another) into many of the various activities we do -

However I also hope to keep identifying my blind-spots, and discovering things like building that some of our students have difficulty engaging in for one reason or another.

I think that Action Research can be a valuable ongoing activity for my co-teacher and me, and I’m looking forward to the next set of questions we find ourselves asking.
A Final Thought for Fellow Preschool/Pre-K teachers:

Let’s rebrand our “Block centers” or “Block rugs”.

Building is a multi-faceted, immersive learning experience that has so much more to do with imagination and play than it has to do with the materials we use to build stuff.

Let’s call it “The Building Center” or “The Building Rug” instead.

Reducing a whole range of building activities to just “blocks” is reductive and might limit children’s ideas of what can happen in that play area.