Read Right
from the Start

in Alabama Early Care and Education Classrooms

Year 1 Evaluation Report

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This evaluation was conducted by faculty and staff from the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), including the UAB School of Public Health's Applied Evaluation and Assessment Center and the UAB School of Education

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Key Findings:

- Outcomes from Alabama's Read Right from the Start program's (AL RRFTS) first 18 months are positive, suggesting benefits for expansion of the model more broadly within early care and education settings in the state and to more of the childcare professional workforce. Small sample size impacts analyses and results, but trends are reassuring and provide important information to guide program implementation.
- Successes included:
  - Increased awareness of early language and literacy development
  - Growth of and confidence in professional skills to support these in classrooms
  - Quality of teacher-child interactions
  - Anecdotal observations of improved language and literacy skills among children (increased engagement with books and reading, increased communication and words)
- Challenges included:
  - Technology issues and lack of age-appropriate, engaging books and materials
  - Time management to balance classroom responsibilities and AL RRFTS activities
  - Coordination with other center and classroom schedules/programs
- Program Reach:
  - 4,355 Alabama early childhood stakeholders enrolled in online professional development courses through Cox Campus; 513 childcare teachers completed the required five hours of coursework
  - 24 childcare providers received weekly coaching (nine center-based classrooms and four family childcare homes throughout the state)
- Systems Development:
  - First state to replicate Read Right from the Start in a statewide distribution
  - Inclusion of family childcare homes – an innovative approach unique to AL RRFTS
  - Train-the-trainer model spread AL RRFTS across other early childhood care and education system partners in the state
  - First implementation of Infant and Toddler CLASS in Alabama childcare settings to measure the quality of teacher-child interactions
- Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions in Childcare Classrooms:
  - AL RRFTS CLASS scores for the pilot infant and toddler classrooms are similar to or exceed those of the best available comparisons
  - Quality of teacher-child interactions is mid to high across all dimensions and domains
  - Results of pre- to post-comparisons are mixed
  - Better performance observed in the infant classrooms and notable growth for the Early Language Support dimension
  - Measures provide a baseline for comparisons of growth over time and indicate opportunities for continued focus
- Teacher Knowledge and Skills Changes:
  - Childcare directors noted the spread of best practices across their centers and mentioned that teachers who were coached became mentors to their colleagues
  - Teachers reported moderate to significant growth in early language and literacy-related professional skills, with higher mean scores (though not statistically significant) for the online courses + coaching group
  - Both online courses only and courses + coaching groups had statistically significant changes in confidence in skills and abilities to support early language and literacy in their classroom from before to after participation in AL RRFTS
  - The online courses + coaching group had marginally statistically significantly higher levels of confidence after participation compared to the online courses only group

I.   Introduction and Overview

Alabama Partnership for Children (APC) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization created to develop, design, and implement a unified approach for improving outcomes of children from birth to age five in Alabama. It is a public-private partnership governed by a 28-member Board of Directors with the mission "to work in partnership with families and organizations to ensure that all Alabama children (birth to five) get everything they need to develop to their fullest potential."[1] Alabama Read Right from the Start (AL RRFTS) is an initiative of APC to improve the early language and literacy outcomes for infants and toddlers through professional development and coaching of teachers in childcare centers and family childcare homes. This first-year pilot project was supported by public and private funding provided by the Alabama Department of Human Resources, the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, the Alabama Department of Mental Health, the Daniel Foundation of Alabama, the Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation, the Protective Life Foundation, the PNC Foundation, the Alabama Civil Justice Foundation, and the Alabama School Readiness Alliance.[2]

The goals of AL RRFTS are:[2]
- To increase the education and effectiveness of early childhood professionals, childcare workers and parents to help develop the foundational language and literacy skills from the moment even before a baby is born
- To raise awareness of the value of the early childhood education profession, and the value to the community when all children have the best developmental start in life
- To enhance the quality of early learning settings throughout Alabama
- To promote professionalism and ongoing professional development
- To decrease the turnover rate in early learning settings

Read Right from the Start (RRFTS) is a program developed by the Rollins Center for Language & Literacy at the Atlanta Speech School. Through the online platform Cox Campus, the program offers free video courses and resources for early childhood educators, families, health care providers, leaders, and community members. These courses are part of a research-based professional development program focused on supporting language and literacy and are generally organized based on sector and age of child (infant and toddler, preschool and pre-K, and K3).[3-4] Evaluation of RRFTS is ongoing, including the e-learning opportunities and the provision of coaching in classrooms. Results to date indicate benefits to teachers from participating in the program, including increased knowledge and improved quality of language and literacy practices.[5]

II.   Alabama Read Right from the Start Description and Implementation

AL RRFTS is an ongoing project that continues to expand and add additional components. The focus of this report is to describe and evaluate the first 18 months of the project, including the Year 1 pilot cohort for two arms of the intervention: incentivized online professional development and onsite coaching.

APC worked together with Atlanta Speech School and Rollins Center for Language & Literacy to make the online professional development courses available to childcare teachers in Alabama. A registration method was established through the Cox Campus platform to identify AL RRFTS participants. APC engaged in extensive outreach to encourage participation among providers working with young

children ages birth to 5 in an Alabama early care and education center or family childcare home. Any participant working in a licensed childcare program who completed at least five hours of online training (any combination of courses in addition to one required "Power of Language" course) was eligible to receive a $100 incentive upon submission of certificates.

In addition to incentivized online professional development, AL RRFTS pilot Year 1 included the provision of onsite coaching in nine model center-based classrooms and four family childcare homes. The nine center-based classrooms are located in six childcare centers in three major cities within the state: Huntsville, Birmingham, and Mobile (in the north, central, and south geographic regions of the state). The four family childcare homes are located in four cities in three counties in the southeast region. Each location was identified through existing partnerships with APC and local childcare management agencies (CMA). Each site was provided with a designated coach who worked with childcare teachers onsite for 12 months, providing weekly technical assistance, training, and mentoring on the strategies of RRFTS. Teachers in these model classrooms were also required to complete the online professional development courses as described above.

A timeline of the planning and implementation of the AL RRFTS program is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Implementation Timeline for Alabama Read Right from the Start (AL RRFTS)

October 1, 2018	• Funding received from Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) • Planning and implementation began
October 15, 2018	• Initial visit to the Atlanta Speech School and Rollins Center for Language & Literacy to learn more about RRFTS implementation
October – December 2018	• Negotiations with Childcare Management Agencies (CMA) that provide quality enhancement to provide support for AL RRFTS
December 2018	• Subcontract agreements finalized with CMAs • Six AL RRFTS Facilitators hired • Model classrooms and family childcare homes selected
January 2019	• RRFTS facilitator training began • Early Language and Literacy Coordinator hired to coordinate AL RRFTS efforts • Weekly in-classroom coaching began for model classrooms
February 2019	• Early Language and Literacy Coordinator and AL RRFTS facilitators visited RRFTS model classrooms in Georgia
January – March 2019	• RRFTS Expected Child Outcomes in Language and Literacy aligned with Alabama Early Learning Guidelines and Teaching Strategies GOLD ® assessment • Cox Campus course credit aligned with DHR training standards
April 2019	• Recruitment began for childcare providers/administrators to complete online Cox Campus training ($100 incentive)
May 2019	• Online Cox Campus early language and literacy courses open
July 2019	• AL RRFTS leadership team and coaches attended Rollins Center for Language & Literacy's Coaching Institute
December 2019	• MOU signed with Georgia Department of Public Health for Talk With Me Baby license • Targeted Talk With Me Baby outreach campaign began: FeedMeWords.com
January 2020	• AL RRFTS work expanded to all Family Childcare Partnership (FCCP) mentors and to the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education's (DECE) coaches/mentors • Initial training for DECE, East Coast Migrant Head Start Project and FCCP; monthly in-person or virtual training and support and weekly Cox Campus coaching occurred • Initial model classrooms moved to less-intensive coaching following a full year of weekly sessions
February 2020	• RRFTS Expected Child Outcomes in Language and Literacy aligned with DECE school readiness goals • Early Language and Literacy Coordinator for Talk with Me Baby hired

III.   Evaluation Overview

APC partnered with the Applied Evaluation and Assessment Center (AEAC) in the UAB School of Public Health to provide program evaluation of the first 18 months of the AL RRFTS project, including the first year of incentivized professional development and the provision of intensive coaching in the pilot model classrooms and childcare homes. The AEAC is the primary external evaluator for numerous state and local initiatives that focus on improving the early childhood care and education system in Alabama, as well as supporting the health and educational outcomes for young children and families.

The evaluation plan was designed as a mixed methods approach to provide comprehensive analyses. Quantitative data included program implementation information and standardized assessment of quality of teacher-child interaction in model classrooms. Qualitative data included results from surveys of childcare teachers and thematic analyses of structured interviews with state leadership/program administrators, classroom coaches, and local childcare center directors. The evaluation focus was organized according to the following areas and results are presented accordingly:

   A. Program Reach: programmatic data
   B. Systems Development: structured interviews with state leadership, program administrators, and classroom coaches
   C. Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions in Childcare Classrooms: CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System, Infant and Toddler versions)
   D. Teacher Knowledge and Skills Changes: surveys with childcare teachers who completed professional development (with and without additional coaching) and structured interviews with local childcare center directors

   A. Program Reach

A total of 4,355 early childhood stakeholders (childcare providers, coaches, administrators, early childhood professionals, APC Board members, parents) enrolled in online professional development courses through Cox Campus between August 2018 and February 2020. This large number of stakeholder enrollees represents the important role the AL RRFTS project has served in expanding awareness of the availability of online professional development and early language and literacy skills throughout the state. Of those enrolled stakeholders, 513 childcare teachers completed the required five hours of coursework and received an incentive upon submission of certificates. In addition, seven AL RRFTS coaches were trained in RRFTS and provided weekly coaching to 24 childcare providers in nine center-based classrooms and four family childcare homes. External observers were trained and became reliable in administering the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), Infant and Toddler versions to evaluate the quality of teacher-child interactions. Though beyond the scope of this pilot year evaluation, project administrative staff noted that additional incentives were offered to support many more childcare providers in participating in the online professional development opportunities of AL RRFTS during the COVID-19 quarantine and subsequent temporary closure of childcare facilities. Figure 1 below presents AL RRFTS program reach at a glance.

Figure 1. Alabama Read Right from the Start: At a Glance

Professional Development: Online Courses

4,355

Early childhood stakeholders enrolled

513

Childcare teachers completed at least 5 hours of coursework

Pilot Sites: Coaching in Classrooms

NORTH	CENTRAL	SOUTH	SOUTH EAST
• **Huntsville** • 3 centers • 3 classrooms	• **Birmingham** • 1 center • 3 classrooms	• **Mobile** • 2 centers • 3 classrooms	• **3 Counties** • 4 cities • 4 family childcare homes
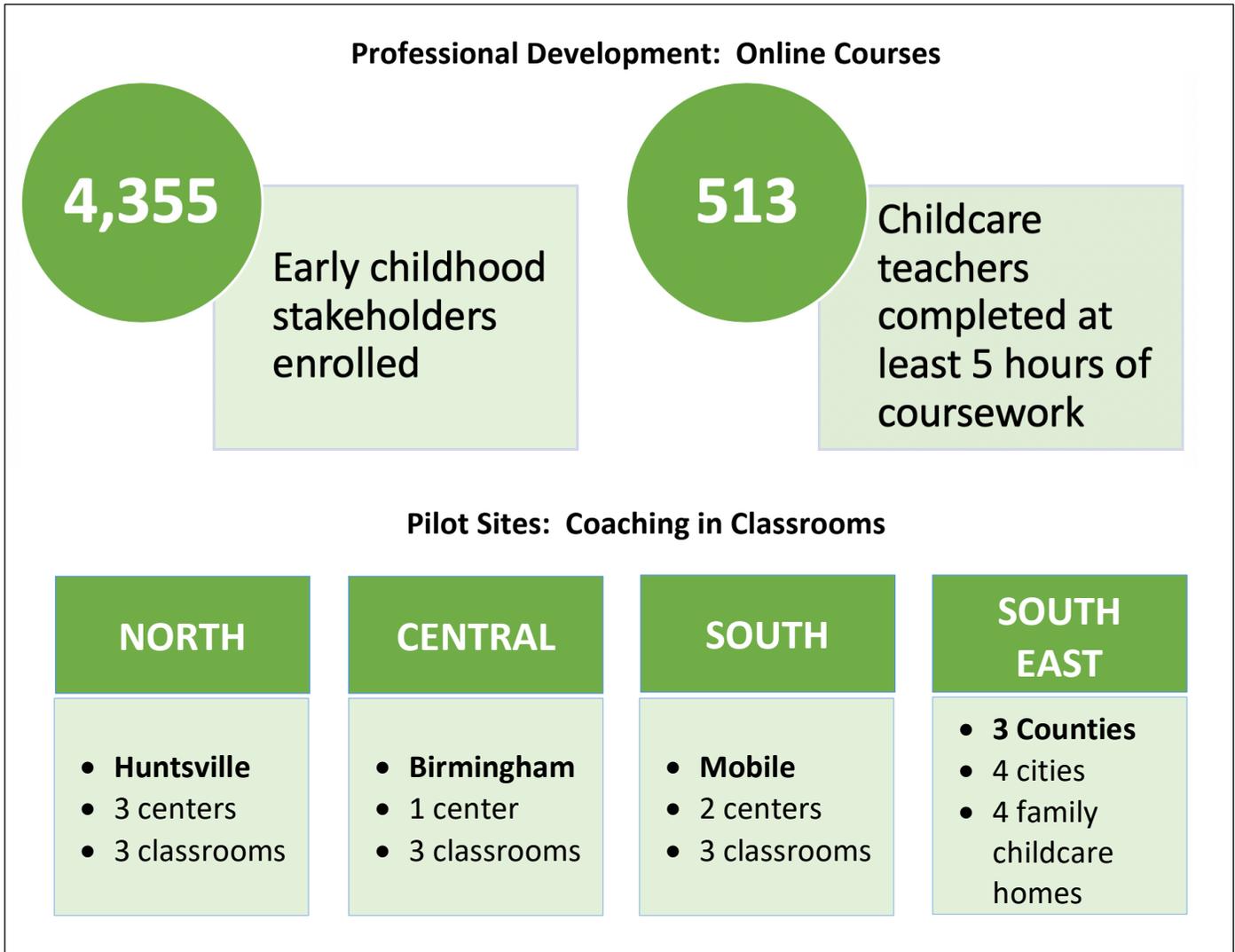
B. Systems Development

State Leadership Team's Perspective

Key informant interviews were conducted with members of AL RRFTS state leadership team to review the implementation of AL RRFTS, discuss successes and challenges, and identify opportunities for improvements when expanding the program. These were conducted in late March during the COVID-19 pandemic, so discussion also focused on modifications due to state orders to close childcare centers.

AL RRFTS state leadership interviewees reported that Alabama is the first state to replicate RRFTS in a statewide effort in childcare centers and family childcare homes. Though RRFTS has been adopted in many states, this has occurred more as local implementations. This created a need and opportunity to work with national RRFTS leadership to create innovations to the model to support Alabama's

statewide implementation. While the opportunity to create innovations for statewide implementation is a highlight of AL RRFTS, state leaders reported that at times, national RRFTS did not have certain needed resources available and that the need to develop them resulted in delays in Alabama's implementation timeline. Also, the newness of the partnership between Alabama and national RRFTS initially created challenges. However, as the relationship became more established throughout the first year of Alabama's implementation, improved communication and a better understanding of the vision of AL RRFTS led to better implementation of the model. The administrative efforts and coordination of national and state leadership and local partnerships also improved with time, resulting in the establishment of roles and expectations for each.

Additional challenges emerged according to the following themes:
- Defining roles and expectations with national, state, and local partners regarding the roll out of AL RRFTS
- Establishing friendly, effective working relationships with all partners
- Expanding and growing AL RRFTS – challenges related to a new initiative, scope of geographical footprint of implementation, overall design of initiative, administrative needs, hiring and training staff, recruitment of participants, and roll out of components with integrity to national model
- Implementation of a statewide initiative without local oversight
- Understanding influences of low literacy levels for some childcare professionals – opportunities to communicate how the benefits of AL RRFTS can extend to the workforce through encouraging the use of appropriate language, which can benefit both children and teachers
- Being able to pivot or modify implementation to address staff changes, the dynamic nature of the business of childcare, and in response to the public health crisis of COVID-19

AL RRFTS Coaches' Perspective

Key Informant interviews were also conducted with coaching staff for RRFTS to capture lessons learned, successes, challenges, and recommendations for program improvements for future implementation of AL RRFTS. The three coaches who agreed to be interviewed had a great deal of professional experience, with an average of 22 years in early care and education and higher education settings. Each coach provided technical assistance and coaching in infant-toddler classrooms or in mixed-age family childcare homes. Each coach interviewed had been employed with AL RRFTS for the entire first year of the initiative. Overall, the coaches were satisfied with their work with AL RRFTS. All interviewees reported feeling valued and supported by the directors of the childcare centers or family childcare homes.

Professional Growth of Childcare Providers

All coaches reported satisfaction with the professional growth of the childcare providers that they coached. Interviewees discussed the following reasons for their satisfaction and evidence of professional growth they observed:
- Observations of the RRFTS strategies being implemented by childcare providers
- Improvements in trust and willingness to receive coach's guidance on ways to hone skills and strategies in the classroom

- Engagement in better dialogues with children, resulting in improvements in teacher-child interactions
- Improvements in active listening and engagement of children in conversations
- Demonstration of increased pride and acceptance of coaches into the setting, leading to the inclusion of AL RRFTS coaches in programming in centers (for example, participation in center's holiday activities)

Successes in Improved Teacher-Child Interactions and Learning Environments

All interviewees stated that one of the most valuable aspects of their coaching was the observed improvements in teacher-child interactions in the childcare classrooms and family childcare homes. Other observations included changes in the classroom learning environment with a stimulating and purposeful focus on early literacy and language and a childcare provider willingness to continue to pursue professional growth through the online courses and coaching. One coach noted Improvements in the behavioral culture of the classroom environment and overall climate that led to positive behavioral outcomes for children, including better interactions among children and improvements in children's positive behaviors. The following quotes illustrate the coaches' perceived successes related to changes in the classroom environment and professional development:

"It was wonderful to see the outcomes with the teachers' progress and increased language and conversations happening in the classrooms and the increased vocabulary and child engagement in reciprocal conversations."
"I saw teachers really stretch to converse with the kids."
"Seeing how excited the teachers were about videos, language development, and their willingness to make a difference. Sheer passion."
"There was good buy-in and she loved the strategies and it was evident with the increase in words and vocabulary used."
"Bringing books alive with RRFTS strategies really made a huge difference in the classroom."
"Gosh, more songs and reading with increased focus on literacy versus in the beginning there were limited to no books in the classroom. There was a transformation with the classroom."

Successes in Early Literacy and Language Development of Children

Coaches discussed their observations of the early language and literacy development of children in AL RRFTS classrooms. Success stories included:
- Early Identification of Speech-Language Issues

One coach reported that the focus on early language and literacy contributed to improvements for a child identified as having speech-language concerns. The child was identified with concerns and benefited from the AL RRFTS focus on language and literacy while on a waiting list for a speech-language assessment and connection to services.
- Increased Enthusiasm for Reading and Literacy

In general, coaches stated that children demonstrated an increased love of reading. Examples of this included greeting the coach at the classroom door with a book, children using more literacy resources in the classroom, and older toddlers pretend reading with the books. One coach also reported children's increased enthusiasm and engagement with literacy resources in the classrooms.

The following quotes illustrate the coaches' perceived successes related to increased enthusiasm for reading and literacy:

> **"Kids were really engaged with the books and this was due to more intentional use of books in the classroom by teachers. Overall the children were just more interested in books and reading."**
>
> **"I think the happiest moment for me was when the teacher paused and allowed the child to communicate. It showed respect to the kids and what they have to say without interruptions, and they were able to relate back to a book from RRFTS."**

Challenges Experienced

Coaches described challenges they experienced during the pilot phase of AL RRFTS.   These were related to the intervention setting, overall implementation, and childcare providers.

- *Setting-related challenges*
  - Childcare setting in general and age composition of infant-toddler classrooms can create challenges to implementation.
    - The family childcare setting is someone's home, requiring a different approach than when going into a childcare center
    - Complexity in scheduling
    - Frequent interruptions
    - Management of young children and meeting their needs
    - Meeting staff:child ratios established by the Alabama Department of Human Resources
  - Need better coordination with the ongoing schedule in classrooms.

- *Implementation-related challenges*
  - Some childcare providers became disinterested due to the length of time of initial implementation of RRFTS strategies (for example, staying on the TALK strategy too long).
  - Sustaining momentum over time is increasingly difficult without incentives such as the online courses, books, and continuing education credits.
  - Additional books are needed for sustainability of gains in classrooms (new and/or replacement books).

- *Childcare provider-related challenges*
  - There were some challenges with provider attitudes toward and understanding of their roles and responsibilities with AL RRFTS.
  - There were some challenges in establishing a working rapport in classroom, especially in assuring providers that the coach was not there to assess them but to assist and model.
  - The project was new for both coaches and providers.

Additional Supports or Resources Needed to Support Improvement

Coaches reported the following needs for additional supports and resources and suggested recommendations for improvement of AL RRFTS:

- Conduct orientation sessions for parents/caregivers, childcare providers, and directors at participating centers, including a description of roles and responsibilities and the benefits of participation in AL RRFTS
- Orient coaches for better understanding of implementation timeline
- Improve communication flow between AL RRFTS coaches, directors, childcare providers, and families
- Engage in better coordination with the ongoing schedule in classroom
- Consider how best to meet the need for additional books, supplies, and technology resources to support sustainability of gains in classrooms (new and/or replacements)
- Explore technology options such as iPads to support ongoing professional development in lower-resourced childcare centers
- Provide additional libraries for coaches to support curriculum planning
- Provide lending library for families that include the same books used in classrooms to connect the curriculum to home

C. Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions in Childcare Classrooms

Overview of CLASS to Measure Teacher-Child Interaction

Research shows that young children experience the world through the context of relationships and that supportive, effective teacher-child interactions in classrooms and childcare settings can influence overall development, including social-emotional skills and school achievement.[6]

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)[7] is an evidence-based tool for defining and measuring effective teacher-child interactions in classrooms. The CLASS suite includes six tools that measure interactions in classrooms, including children from infancy through secondary education settings based on age-appropriate support for development. Trained external observers must become certified to score each specific tool, assuring that he or she is reliable in administration for each age level. The tools are aligned with one another to support continuity and provide a common language. Each age-specific tool organizes measures under dimensions that are aggregated into domains. Dimensions are scored based on direct classroom observation and, though the concepts may be similar, what is expected is based on developmentally appropriate interactions and children's unique needs at each age level. The number of dimensions and domains varies based on the age level of the tool, but all tools use a seven-point scale, from low to high. In general, higher scores indicate better teacher-child interactions for all dimensions. The one exception is the negative climate dimension (first measured within the toddler tool), for which lower scores are desirable.[7]

The CLASS tool was chosen as an evaluation method for AL RRFTS due to limited assessment options that effectively measure teacher-child interaction and early literacy and language for this age group. Further, the CLASS suite aligns with other initiatives in the state that use the Pre-K CLASS. This tool, which covers classrooms of children ages three to five years, is used by the state's voluntary four-year-

old preschool program, First Class Pre-K. Specifically for AL RRFTS, two CLASS tools were administered in classrooms where teachers received coaching in addition to participating in online courses. These are described below:[8-10]

- The Infant CLASS is for classrooms with infants ages birth to 18 months. It includes four dimensions that aggregate into a single domain to focus on interactions that are most important for babies in this age range, capturing how caregivers provide a secure base for exploration, are sensitive in responding to needs, and encourage early language development. This tool is more focused on verbal and physical interactions between infants and caregivers than on classroom management as is the case for older age-level tools in the CLASS suite.
    - Domain: Responsive Caregiving
        - Dimensions:
            - Relational Climate
            - Teacher Sensitivity
            - Facilitated Exploration
            - Early Language Support
- The Toddler CLASS is for classrooms with toddlers ages 15 to 36 months. This tool includes eight dimensions aggregated into two domains, capturing how caregivers support toddlers to establish autonomy, manage their behavior, and connect their learning.
    - Domain: Emotional and Behavioral Support
        - Dimensions:
            - Positive Climate
            - Negative Climate
            - Teacher Sensitivity
            - Regard for Child Perspective
            - Behavior Guidance
    - Domain: Engaged Support for Learning
        - Dimensions:
            - Facilitation of Learning and Development
            - Quality of Feedback
            - Language Modeling

As mentioned previously, all CLASS tools are aligned with one another. Figure 2 below demonstrates this alignment across the Infant, Toddler, and Pre-K CLASS domains and dimensions. Figure 3 below displays alignment of CLASS domains with expectations for infant, toddler, and pre-K classrooms.

Figure 2. Alignment of CLASS Domains and Dimensions; Infant, Toddler, and Pre-K CLASS

Retrieved from https://www.slideshare.net/Teachstone/the-class-measure-infants-toddlers-and-effective-interactions-51733485
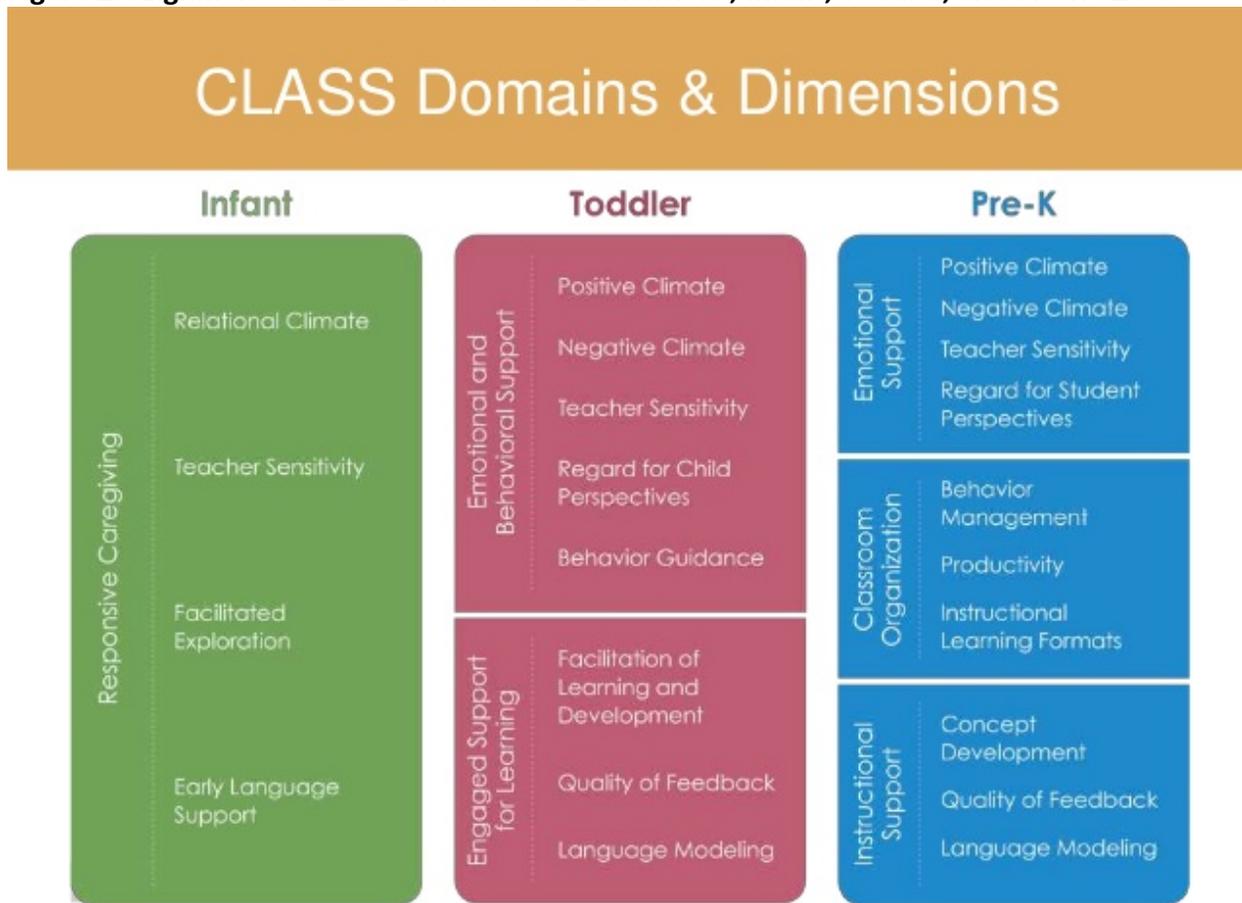
Figure 3. Alignment of CLASS Domains and Expectations for Infant, Toddler, and Pre-K Classrooms

Expectations for the Classroom:	PreK Domains	Toddler Domains	Infant Domains
Warm, positive environment with trusting relationships	Emotional Support	Emotional & Behavioral Support	Responsive Caregiving
Daily routines are organized and disruptions are minimal	Classroom Organization		
Children are supported to learn concepts, develop language, and connect ideas through dialogue and play	Instructional Support	Engaged Support for Learning	

Retrieved from https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/teacher-leader-summit/2019-teacher-leader-summit/e054---infant-class-slides.pdf?sfvrsn=1d0b9c1f_7

As the Infant and Toddler CLASS are newer tools, data on association between scores and subsequent child outcomes are fairly limited. One study of Early Head Start childcare classrooms found mixed results, with higher Toddler CLASS domain scores associated with language outcomes at age three.[11] There is more literature related to the Pre-K CLASS, with studies demonstrating association between

higher quality scores and achievement or gains in child cognitive, academic, language, pre-reading/reading/literacy, math and social-emotional skills and outcomes.[12-17]

Use of CLASS in the Alabama RRFTS Pilot

Childcare classrooms that received coaching in addition to participating in online courses were assessed using the CLASS tool appropriate for the age of children in the room. External observers were trained and certified to administer and score the assessment. The evaluation plan called for a pre-assessment (prior to course work and coaching; observations in February-March 2019) and post-assessment (following coursework and coaching; observations in November-December 2019). Final analyses only include classrooms that had both a pre- and post-assessment. Results represent three infant classrooms in two centers (assessed with Infant CLASS) and three toddler classrooms in two centers (assessed with Toddler CLASS). Results should be interpreted with caution due to these small sample sizes; small changes and results from even one classroom can significantly skew average scores overall and for pre and post comparisons.

1. *Infant Classrooms: Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions*

    a. *Overall Alabama Averages Compared to a Similar Program*

Figure 4. Average Infant CLASS scores, Alabama Read Right from the Start pilot Year 1 compared with Louisiana Believes pilot Year 2.
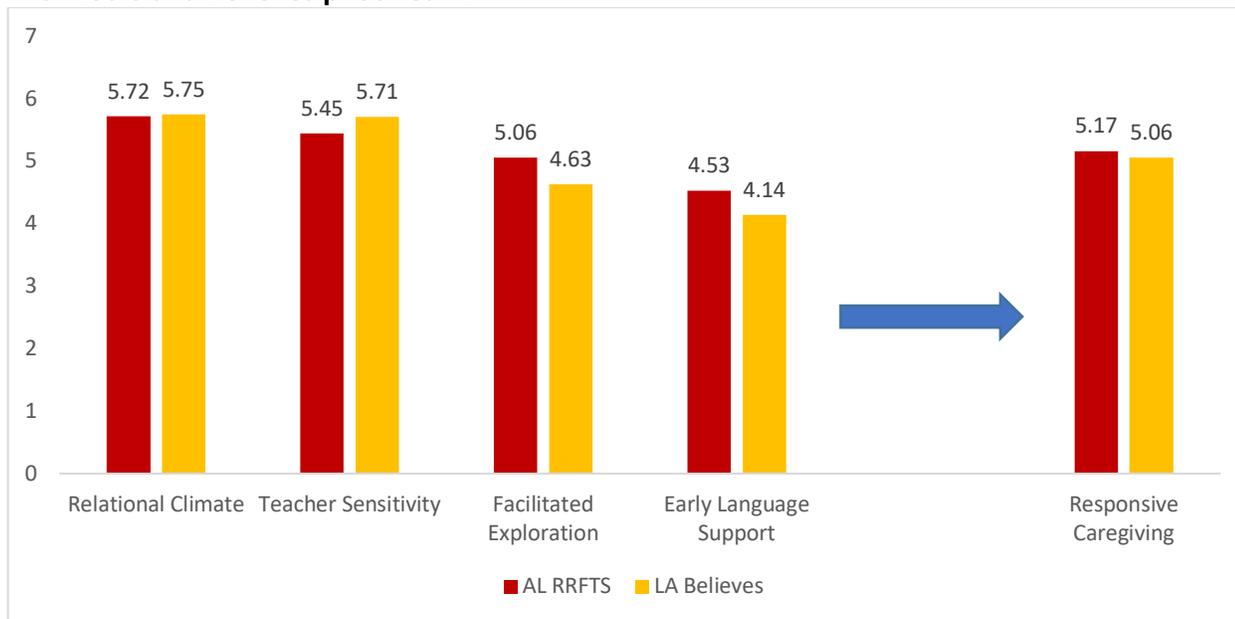
Figure 4 above presents average Infant CLASS scores by dimension and domain for AL RRFTS infant classrooms (pre- and post-assessments averaged for the three classrooms that had both measurements). Unlike Pre-K CLASS averages, which are typically compared to national averages for Head Start grantees,[18] there are no national comparisons for the Infant CLASS at this time. However, the state of Louisiana has recently completed a two-year pilot using this tool to support future expansion to statewide quality measurement as part of the Louisiana Believes initiative.[19] The Louisiana Believes 2018-2019 pilot year included observations in 264 classrooms at 204 sites statewide.

Though it is possible that the Louisiana and Alabama samples are different from one another based on demographics and other factors, this provides a best available comparison to understand teacher-child interaction in AL RRFTS infant classrooms against a similar context.

Overall, Alabama averages for the dimensions and domain were similar to Louisiana Believes. Alabama averages exceeded Louisiana Believes for two of the four dimensions (Facilitated Exploration and Early Language Support) and slightly exceeded in the aggregate Responsive Caregiving domain (indicating better or higher-quality teacher-child interactions). It is noteworthy that one of the dimensions with better performance is Early Language Support, a finding that might be expected given the RRFTS focus on early language and literacy skills. This dimension also represents the greatest opportunity for growth as it has the lowest average score among the four dimensions, a finding that is similar to the Louisiana Believes sample.

Overall, differences were modest, and Alabama's much smaller sample size must be considered when comparing averages. Further, there is limited research to suggest how the magnitude of differences in scores may impact overall quality or future child outcomes. However, these results are reassuring in that they indicate similar to slightly better performance against the best available context for comparison. They also provide a baseline for future comparisons in Alabama as the AL RRFTS program expands.

Figure 5. Average Infant CLASS scores, pre- vs. post-intervention; Alabama Read Right from the Start pilot Year 1.
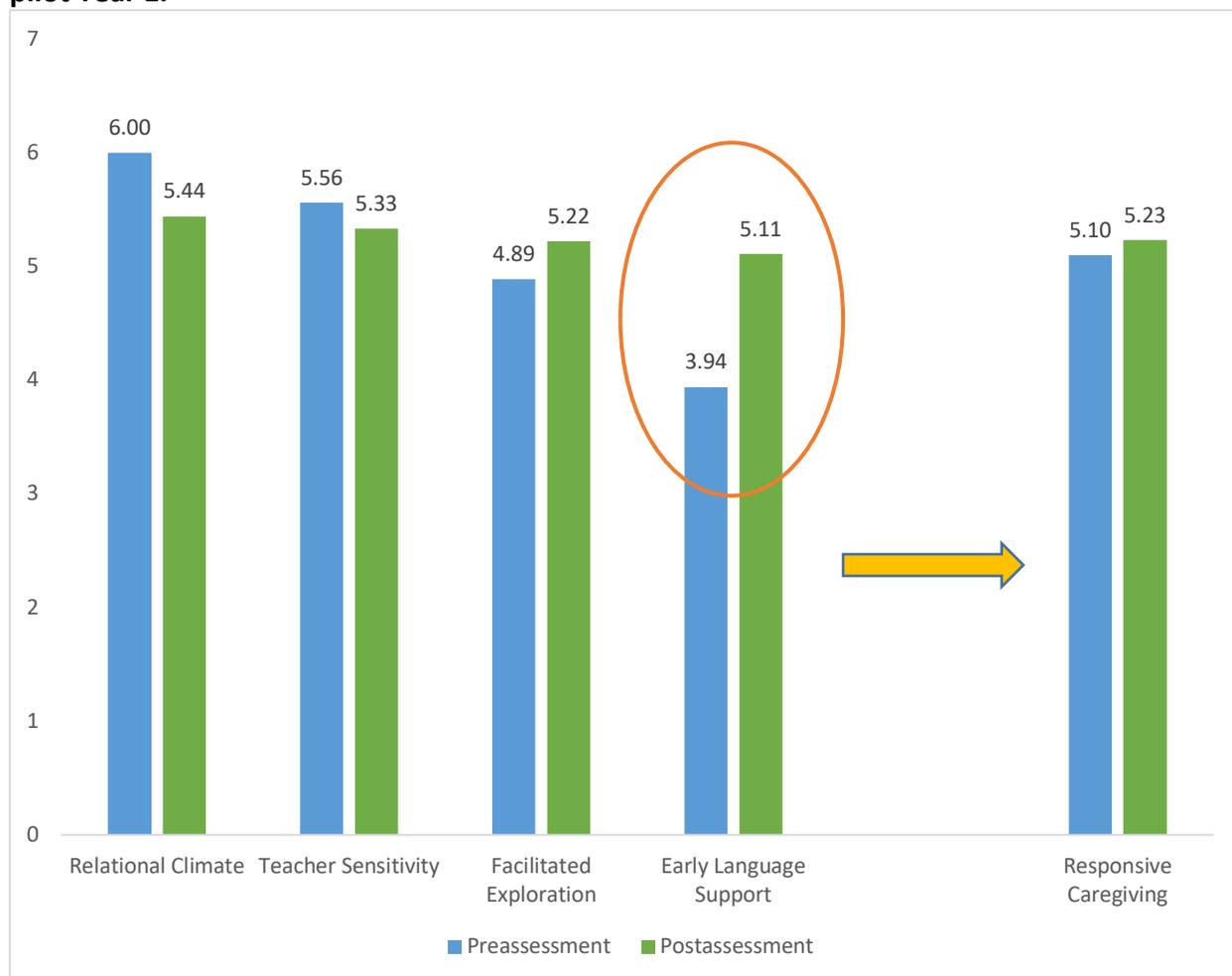
Figure 5 above displays changes in average Infant CLASS scores (by dimension and domain) between pre- (February-March 2019) and post- (November-December 2019) CLASS assessments in the AL RRFTS infant classrooms. It is anticipated that quality would improve through the online course professional development and coaching received during the year.

Increases from pre to post were noted for two of the four dimensions (Facilitated Exploration and Early Language Support) and for the aggregate Responsive Caregiving domain. It is noteworthy that the dimension with largest increase is Early Language Support (more than a one-point improvement), a finding that might be expected given the RRFTS focus on early language and literacy skills. This dimension also had lowest pre-assessment score among the four dimensions, but still was the lowest at post-assessment, suggesting an opportunity for continued focus and growth.

It is important to recognize the implications of the small sample size for the AL RRFTS pilot. With only three infant classrooms having both a pre- and post-assessment, averages can be widely skewed based on the experiences of one classroom. In fact, one classroom improved in all dimensions and for the aggregate domain, while another improved or stayed the same across these same indicators. The third

classroom dropped slightly in the aggregate domain and in all but one dimension. This illustrates how even small variations can impact comparisons of averages in small samples. Further, the timing of post-assessments could have potentially impacted results. These classroom observations occurred in late fall and early winter, near the Thanksgiving holidays. It is possible that these scores are not reflective of the typical classroom environment and teacher-child interactions.

Overall, differences were modest, and as discussed above, and there is limited research to suggest how the magnitude of differences in scores may impact overall quality or future child outcomes. However, these results are generally positive, showing gains in the quality of teacher-child interactions and providing a baseline for comparisons of growth over time and as the AL RRFTS program expands.

2. *Toddler Classrooms: Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions*

   a. *Overall Alabama Averages Compared to a Similar Program*

Figure 6. Average Toddler CLASS scores, Alabama Read Right from the Start pilot Year 1 compared with Baby FACES Early Head Start program study.
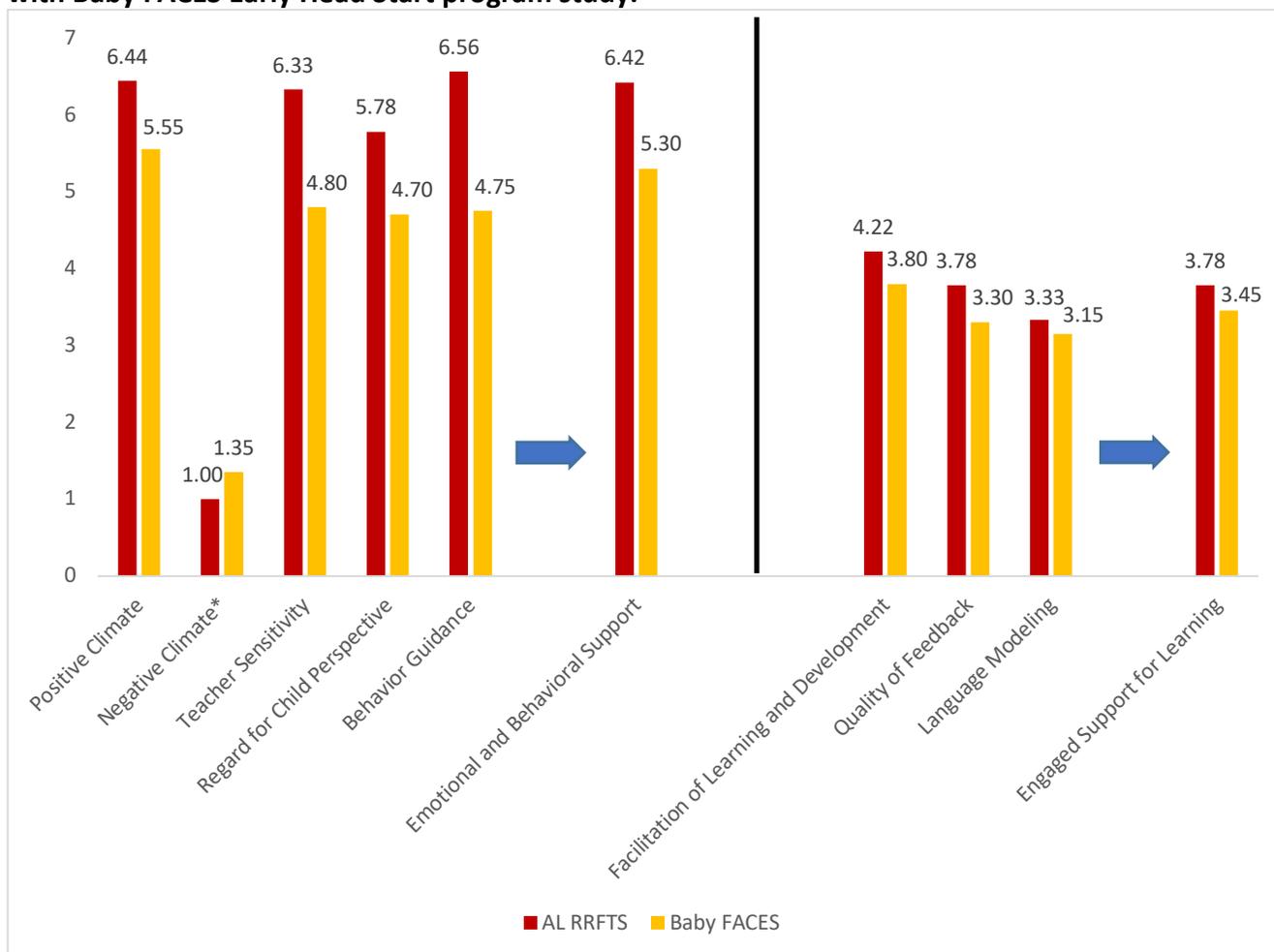
*Lower scores are more desirable for Negative Climate.

Figure 6 above presents average Toddler CLASS scores by dimension and domain for AL RRFTS toddler classrooms (pre- and post-assessments averaged for the three classrooms that had both measurements). Similar to discussion above for the Infant CLASS, there are no national comparisons for the Toddler CLASS at this time. However, the ongoing Baby FACES study included Toddler CLASS observations in Early Head Start (EHS) classrooms serving two- and three-year-old children (220 classrooms at age two and 235 classrooms at age three across 89 EHS programs).[11] Though it is possible that the Baby FACES EHS and Alabama samples are different from one another based on demographics and other factors, this provides a best available comparison to understand teacher-child interaction in AL RRFTS toddler classrooms against a similar context.

Alabama averages exceeded Baby FACES EHS for all eight dimensions and both aggregate domains (indicating better or higher-quality teacher-child interactions). Recall that lower scores are desired for the negative climate dimension, so Alabama's lower average score compared to Baby FACES EHS indicates higher performance.

Though the Alabama average score for the Language Modeling dimension exceeds the comparison group, it is important to note that it is the lowest-scoring dimension overall. Though this is similar to the Baby FACES EHS sample, the finding is somewhat unexpected given the RRFTS focus on early language and literacy skills. This represents an opportunity for growth and continued focus.

Based on the seven-point CLASS scale, measurements of quality are divided into low (1-2), moderate/mid (3-5), and high (6-7) for dimensions and aggregate domains.[11,20] AL RRFTS toddler classroom averages indicate high quality overall and for all dimensions within the Emotional and Behavioral Support domain and moderate/mid-quality overall and for all dimensions within the Engaged Support for Learning domain.

Overall, differences were substantial in some dimensions (especially within the Emotional and Behavioral Support domain) and more modest in others. As discussed previously, Alabama's much smaller sample size must be considered when comparing averages. Further, there is limited research to suggest how the magnitude of differences in scores may impact overall quality or future child outcomes. However, these results are reassuring in that they indicate better performance against the best available context for comparison. They also provide a baseline for future comparisons in Alabama as the AL RRFTS program expands.

b. Changes from Pre to Post Assessment

Figure 7. Average Toddler CLASS scores, pre vs. post intervention; Alabama Read Right from the Start pilot Year 1.
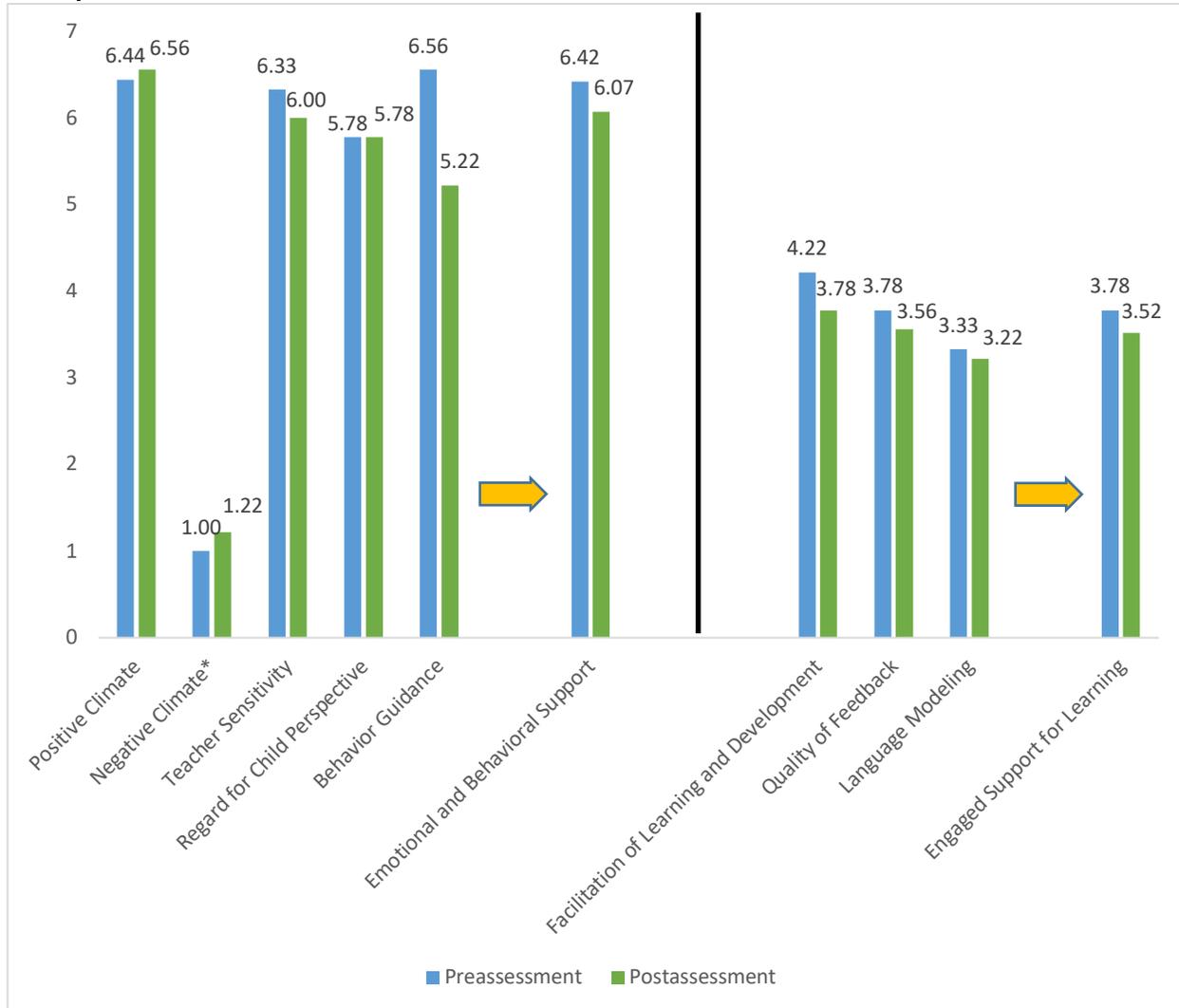
*Lower scores are more desirable for Negative Climate.

Figure 7 above displays changes in average Toddler CLASS scores (by dimension and domain) between pre- (February-March 2019) and post- (November-December 2019) CLASS assessments in the AL RRFTS toddler classrooms. It is anticipated that quality would improve through the online course professional development and coaching received during the year.

Increased or maintained scores from pre to post were noted for two of the eight dimensions (Positive Climate and Regard for Child Perspective; the score for Negative Climate also increased, but lower scores are desirable for this dimension, so this is not an indicator of improvement). Scores were lower for both aggregate domains. Pre and post scores for the Language Modeling dimension do not indicate improvement, though the average scores are fairly close to one another (a 0.11-point drop). This is an unanticipated finding given the RRFTS focus on early language and literacy skills and suggests an opportunity for continued focus and growth.

Here again, it is important to recognize the implications of the small sample size for the AL RRFTS pilot. With only three toddler classrooms having both a pre- and post-assessment, averages can be widely skewed based on the experiences of one classroom. One classroom improved or stayed the same in all dimensions and both aggregate domains, while another improved or stayed the same across most of these same indicators. Two of the three classrooms improved on the Language Modeling dimension. This again illustrates how even small variations can impact comparisons of averages in small samples. And as discussed previously, the timing of post-assessments could have potentially impacted results. These classroom observations occurred in late fall and early winter, near the Thanksgiving holidays. It is possible that these scores are not reflective of the typical classroom environment and teacher-child interactions.

Overall, differences were modest, and as discussed, there is limited research to suggest how the magnitude of differences in scores may impact overall quality or future child outcomes. However, these results provide a baseline of quality of teacher-child interactions in toddler classrooms and are important for comparisons of growth over time and as the AL RRFTS program expands.

There is limited research to suggest how performance on the Infant and Toddler CLASS dimensions and domains or the magnitude of differences in scores may impact overall quality or future child outcomes. Literature related to the Pre-K CLASS reveals the Concept Development dimension to be important – shown to be associated with later student success in vocabulary, language, and math.[21] This is not a dimension of either the Infant or Toddler CLASS; however, developers suggest that all tools in the CLASS suite are aligned. It would be an important contribution to the field of early childhood care and education to better understand how specific dimensions and domains of these younger-age tools potentially correlate with dimensions and domains in the older-age tools for which there is more research. Adding child-level outcomes assessment to the Alabama RRFTS program would be especially beneficial in this endeavor.

D. Teacher Knowledge and Skills Changes

Childcare Center/Family Childcare Home Directors' Perspectives

Key informant interviews were conducted with participating childcare center directors to capture experiences, lessons learned, successes, challenges, and recommendations for program improvements for future implementation and expansion of AL RRFTS. The five directors who were interviewed had a combined total of 65 years of experience in early childhood and an average of five years in their current positions (range = 2-21 years). Each director interviewed had been engaged with AL RRFTS for the entire first year of the initiative. All reported that their engagement with AL RRFTS was established through partners at their local childcare management agency or a person closely affiliated with state leadership for AL RRFTS.

Overall Experience with Read Right from the Start

Overall, the directors were satisfied with their center's work with AL RRFTS. All directors reported feeling AL RRFTS added value and quality programming to their childcare centers or family childcare homes, specifically for childcare providers and children and their families. The following quotes illustrate the directors' perspectives of their overall experiences:

"It has been great; the coach came every week and modeled to our classrooms best practices in early literacy and language."
"Very, very positive, and we are expanding it with our partnership with RRFTS in this year."
"It helped teachers look at things differently regarding early language and literacy and overall in their classrooms. This spread all over our center, and we required all our teachers to do Cox Campus online trainings."
"Win-win for kids and teachers."

Participation in Cox Campus Online Courses

Though all directors reported their childcare providers participated in the online courses, most reported that they did not review or know much about the courses themselves. Interviewees were asked about challenges and successes, as well as suggestions for improvement to the provision of online training for childcare teachers as a component of AL RRFTS.

- Successes and positive feedback
    - No-cost professional development
    - Convenient and easy to access online
    - Good quality training and videos with well-placed participant engagement to keep attention
    - Fun
    - Not intimidating

- Challenges
    - Problems with technology
    - Time management for balance of roles and responsibilities of classroom and professional development coursework

- Suggestions for Improvements
    - Set up designated training station for online course work at center

Coaching Supports

All directors reported that AL RRFTS coaches were in their centers on a weekly basis and also had ongoing communication with their childcare teachers by phone and text. Interviewees were asked

about valuable aspects, successes, challenges, and suggestions for improvement to the provision of coaching for childcare teachers as a component of AL RRFTS.

- Valuable Aspects and Successes
    - Expansion of AL RRFTS in family childcare homes
    - Collaboration with center administration
    - Flexibility of engagement with center and classrooms
    - Connection of strategies to classroom through hands-on experience and modeling of best practices in early language and literacy (e.g. marking up books for story time)
    - Spread of best practices across the center
    - Benefits not only for the teacher, but also for the children
    - AL RRFTS-coached teachers began mentoring colleagues and collaborating more
    - Appreciative of the hands-on materials provided for classrooms

- Challenges
    - Coordination with other center and classroom schedules and programs
    - Time management (AL RRFTS activities and regular classroom requirements)
    - Unclear expectations and communication from AL RRFTS

- Suggestions for Improvements for Coaching Component from Director's Perspective:
    - Conduct AL RRFTS orientation for staff regarding benefits and expectations
    - Provide child-level assessments for early language and literacy
    - Increase access to/frequency of coaching

Professional Growth of Childcare Providers

Directors were asked about any observations of professional growth of their AL RRFTS-affiliated childcare professionals. The following themes emerged from the interviewees' discussion of professional growth:
- Increased quality of teacher-child interactions
- Improvements in lesson planning and modeling in the classroom
- Increased use of books in the daily routines in the classroom
- Changes in the level of language used with the children
- Attitudes/knowledge shifts by providers to better understanding of their impacts on their children's developmental outcomes
- Shift to more uniform and consistent use of RRTFS strategies in classrooms
- Increased pride in their work
- Benefits of online learning spread to impact all center staff

Child-Level Successes in Early Language and Literacy Development

Directors were asked about successes they observed in children's early language and literacy development that they attributed to their childcare teachers' participation in AL RRFTS online courses and coaching. The following themes emerged from these discussions:
- Improvement in child-level engagement with books and other literacy materials
- Increased observations of child:child interactions

- Focus on early language and literacy beneficial for children on waitlists for assessments due to developmental concerns
- Improvement in understanding of developmentally appropriate practices for early language and literacy

The following quotes illustrate the directors' perceived successes related to increased early language and literacy development:

> **"These babies started talking before they were walking and repeating words like when I knocked on the door they would say 'open' and they were saying 'good morning' and 'hey!' Even parents were saying this."**
>
> **"I noticed in the infant-toddler classrooms that books were a prompt for the kids. They would go on their own and sit down for circle time."**

Additional Supports or Resources Needed to Support Improvement

Directors stated that they were not as involved in the project as their teachers were, but reported the following needs for additional supports and resources and suggested recommendations for improvement of AL RRFTS:
- Align AL RRFTS program with accreditation and childcare center licensing requirements
- "Connect the dots" for everyone engaged in AL RRFTS at the center
- Expand childcare provider financial incentives like those offered by AL RRFTS to other childcare initiatives in the state
- Increase access to hands-on materials for infant-toddler classrooms and family childcare homes; infant-toddler classrooms often are offered fewer programs so there are often fewer materials available (for example, books, markers, dry erase boards)
- Provide parent orientation about AL RRFTS and use this opportunity to teach about early language and literacy and child development
- Provide parent-oriented resources related to AL RRFTS and early language and literacy development
- Connect AL RRFTS lessons to home by sending activities home with child for family engagement

Childcare Provider Survey

All AL RRFTS participants who completed the Cox Campus professional development modules were sent a link to an online survey. Survey design logic allowed for additional questions specific to coaching to be provided to teachers in the model classrooms. The overall response rate for the survey was somewhat low, but fairly typical for modern online surveys at 19.3% (99 of the 513 participants who completed the required five-hours of coursework submitted a response). However, at 41.7% the response rate was higher among the 24 childcare providers who also received coaching (10 of 24 submitted a response). Results should be interpreted with caution and are not necessarily generalizable to all participants due to small sample sizes, yet findings represent general trends that are important for overall program evaluation and improvement.

Participant Demographics and Participation Reasons

- There were 99 participants who took online courses and responded to the survey.
    - Of those 99 respondents, 10 also received coaching in their classrooms.

- Nearly 2/3 of respondents were Black/African American (63.6%)
- Nearly 1/3 of respondents had a high school education or equivalent only (31.6%)
- The most common specialty credentials/certifications were Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and Early Childhood Education certification
- Length of time in current position was varied, but in general participants tended toward having more experience in the childcare or teaching profession

- Half of respondents (50.5%) taught in classrooms with mixed-age children. More children were in the older toddler age range vs. younger infants.

- The most commonly selected reasons given for participation were "I wanted to learn new techniques to use in my classroom" (78.4%), followed by "I wanted to receive the $100 incentive" (55.7%) and "I needed the professional development hours" (45.4%).

Table 2. Childcare Teacher Survey Participant Demographics

Characteristic	n	%
Race/Ethnicity*		
Black or African American	63	63.6
White	31	31.3
Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish	1	1.0
Other	1	1.0
Prefer not to answer	3	3.0
Education		
High school diploma or GED	31	31.6
Associate's degree (AS, AA)	27	27.5
Bachelor's degree (BS, BA)	31	31.6
Master's degree (MS, MA)	7	7.1
Education specialist (Ed.S.)	2	2.0
Doctoral degree (Ph.D., Ed.D.)	0	0
Specialty certification(s)/credentials*		
Child Development Associate (CDA)	44	45.8
Early Childhood Education	40	41.7
Elementary Education	8	8.3
Early Childhood Special Education	0	0
Special Education	0	0
Other	10	10.4
None	15	15.6
Length of time in current position		
This was my first year	15	15.5
2-5 years	38	39.2
6-10 years	8	8.2
More than 10 years	36	37.1
Length of time working in teaching or childcare		
This was my first year	2	2.0
2-5 years	20	20.2
6-10 years	11	11.1
More than 10 years	66	66.7
Age of children in childcare classroom*		
6 months or under only	3	3.1
7-12 months only	2	2.1
13-18 months only	0	0
19-24 months only	4	4.1
25-36 months only	13	13.4
37 months or over only	26	26.8
Mixed ages in above ranges	49	50.5
6 months or under	27	27.8
7-12 months	31	32.0
13-18 months	33	34.0
19-24 months	37	38.1
25-36 months	46	47.4
37 months or over	48	49.5

*Respondents could check all answers that applied for these questions.

Figure 8. Participation Reasons

Bar chart showing participation reasons:
- I was told by Director to take the courses: 21.6%
- I wanted to receive the $100 incentive: 55.7%
- I wanted to learn new techniques to use in my classroom: 78.4%
- I needed the professional development hours: 45.4%
- My coach asked me to participate in the courses: 3.4%
- Other: 3.4%
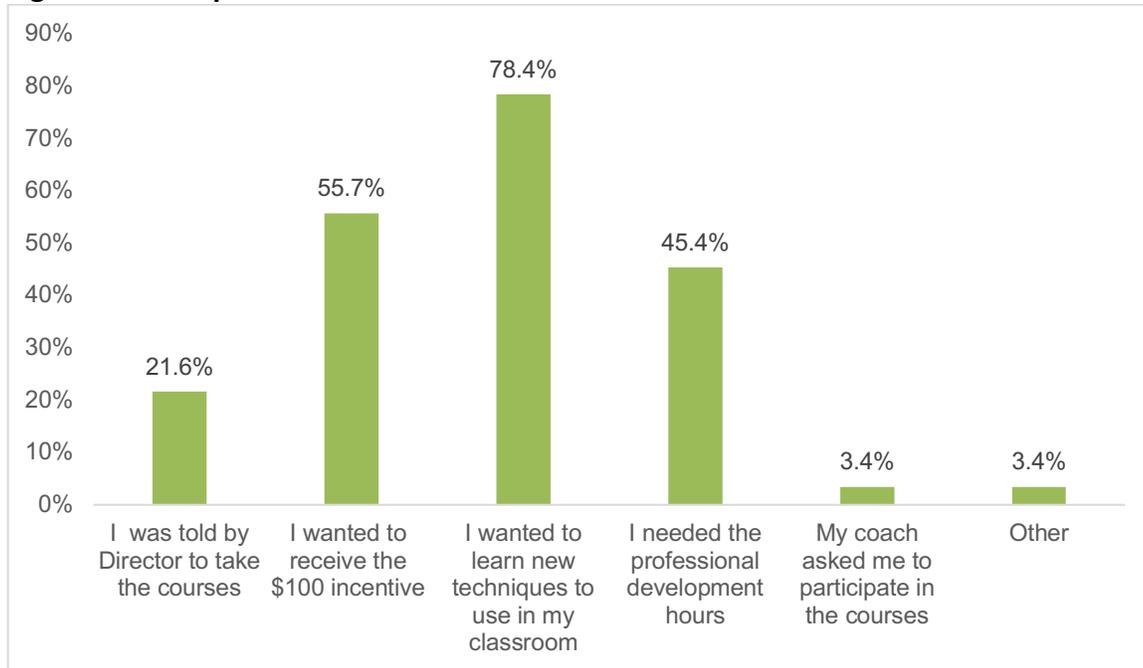
### *Satisfaction with the Online Courses*

Overall, participants were satisfied with the online courses, including structure and delivery methods, relevancy of materials to the classroom, and effectiveness in supporting learning about early language and literacy.

Figure 9. Satisfaction with the Online Courses

	Course structure and delivery methods	Relevancy of materials to the "real world" of the classroom	Effectiveness in supporting your learning about early language and literacy	Overall satisfaction with the online courses
Not at all satisfied	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%
Slightly satisfied	1.1%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%
Moderately satisfied	3.4%	12.5%	6.8%	9.0%
Very satisfied	46.6%	47.7%	48.9%	44.9%
Extremely satisfied	48.9%	39.8%	42.0%	46.1%

■ Not at all satisfied ■ Slightly satisfied ■ Moderately satisfied ■ Very satisfied ■ Extremely satisfied

Spanish Materials for Dual Language Learners (DLL)

RRFTS courses include resources for dual language learners (DLL). A limited number of participants used these materials.

- Roughly 1/3 (36.3%) of participants reported having DLL in their classrooms.
    - Of those, just under half (46.9%) used the Spanish resource materials.
        - 90% perceived the materials to be either extremely (6.7%) or very (73.3%) helpful.
- Interestingly, roughly 1/4 (25.3%) of participants used the Spanish materials regardless of whether they had DLL in their classrooms.
    - Of those, nearly 80% perceived the materials to be either extremely (13.0%) or very (65.2%) helpful.

Table 3. Use of Spanish Materials in Classroom

		n	%
Had DLL in classroom			
	No	58	63.7
	Yes	33	36.3
Used Spanish materials with DLL in classroom			
	No	17	53.1
	Yes	15	46.9
Perceived Helpfulness of Spanish materials if used with DLL in classroom			
	Extremely helpful	1	6.7
	Very helpful	11	73.3
	Moderately helpful	2	13.3
	Slightly helpful	1	6.7
	Not helpful at all	0	0

|		n	%
Used Spanish Material in classroom (regardless of having DLL)			
	No	68	74.7
	Yes	23	25.3
Perceived Helpfulness of Spanish materials if used in classroom at all			
	Extremely helpful	3	13.0
	Very helpful	15	65.2
	Moderately helpful	4	17.4
	Slightly helpful	1	4.3
	Not helpful at all	0	0

Coaching Supports in Classrooms

A subset of participants also received coaching in their childcare classrooms. Of these, 10 completed the survey.

All respondents noted **weekly** meetings or communications with someone from the AL RRFTS project (face-to-face, phone call, text, and/or email) to receive support (coaching or mentoring) to help them implement early language and literacy instruction in the classroom.

Participants in the coaching program were asked to rate the level of support they received from their supervisor/childcare director regarding participation in the project (ex. providing money/books/other resources to support classroom, allowing time to participate in online courses and coaching, encouraging participant to use the strategies learned, etc.). The majority of respondents said their directors were **very or extremely supportive** of their participation. One participant stated that she had been provided "books and new toys for play and development and strategies that are relevant to the use of the books."

Figure 10. Level of Support Received from Supervisor or Director
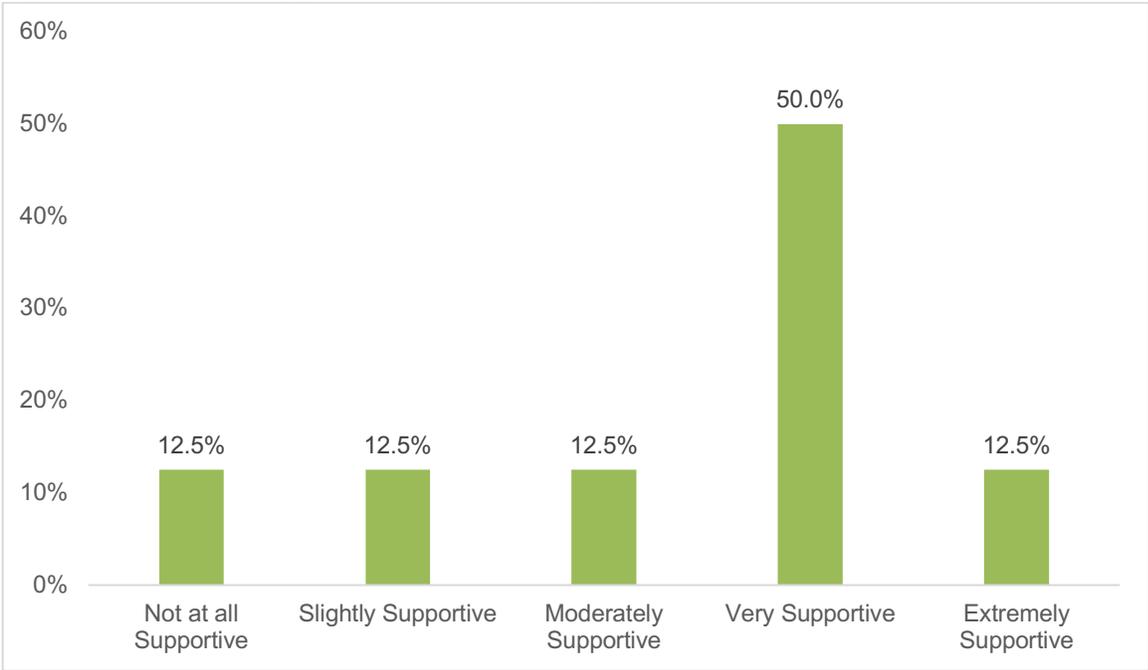
Satisfaction with Coaching

Participants who received coaching were asked to rate their satisfaction overall and across several aspects of coaching delivery, including structure and delivery methods; frequency, timing, and time allotted for visits; responsiveness and flexibility of coach to meet needs and schedules; relevancy of coaching to the classroom; and effectiveness in supporting implementation of early language and literacy development activities in the classroom. Overall, participants were satisfied with coaching, including each of these components.

Figure 11. Satisfaction with Coaching

	Coaching structure and delivery methods	Frequency of coaching visits	Timing of coaching visits with course learning materials	Time allotted for each coaching visit (planning, modeling, implement-ing)	Responsive-ness and flexibility of coach to meet needs and schedules	Relevancy of coaching to the "real world" of the classroom	Effective-ness in supporting your implement-ation of early language and literacy develop-ment activities in the classroom	Overall satisfaction with coaching
Not at all satisfied	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Slightly satisfied	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Moderately satisfied	33.3%	22.2%	22.2%	0.0%	11.1%	44.4%	11.1%	11.1%
Very satisfied	33.3%	44.4%	44.4%	66.7%	55.6%	22.2%	55.6%	55.6%
Extremely satisfied	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	22.2%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%

■ Not at all satisfied   ■ Slightly satisfied   ■ Moderately satisfied   ■ Very satisfied   ■ Extremely satisfied

> *"My entire experience was amazing! My Coach made herself available by any means necessary and very passionate about what she was teaching. If I could I would do it all over again. Her last visit was definitely a sad one. I hated to see her go."*
>
> **– childcare teacher**

Growth in professional skills because of participation in the project

For three specific skills, respondents were asked to rate the level of professional growth that they felt was "because of your participation in this project."

- Respondents reported growth across all three skills, with roughly 2/3 of participants reporting significant growth for "better implementation of early language and literacy practices in classroom" and the "TALK strategy" and more than half reporting significant growth in "changes in child's literacy outcomes."

- Though mean scores were higher for the courses + coaching group, differences were not statistically significant based on two-sample t-test analyses. This is likely due to the small sample size (only 10 respondents received coaching).
- Overall, the trends are positive both for the online courses and the combination of courses with classroom coaching and the higher mean scores for the courses + coaching group suggest this as a promising strategy to increase professional skills growth among childcare teachers.

Table 4. Professional Growth Related to Participation

	No Growth (0)		Slight Growth (1)		Moderate Growth (2)		Significant Growth (3)		Mean[*]	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	Courses only	Courses + Coaching
Better implementation of early language and literacy practices in classroom	1	1.2	1	1.2	28	33.3	54	64.3	2.6	2.8
Changes in child's literacy outcomes	0	0	2	2.4	38	45.8	43	51.8	2.5	2.7
TALK strategy: *T*uning in to child's interest, *A*sking questions, *L*ifting language, *K*eep it going	0	0	5	6.4	20	25.6	53	67.9	2.6	2.9

*Though mean scores were higher for the courses + coaching group, differences were not statistically significant based on two-sample t-test analyses.

Confidence in Skills and Abilities to Support Early Language and Literacy in Childcare Classroom

Respondents were asked to rate their level of confidence in their skills and abilities to support early language and literacy in their childcare classroom both before and after participation in the project using the following scale:

1 = Not at all confident
2 = Slightly confident
3 = Moderately confident
4 = Very confident
5 = Extremely confident

- There were statistically significant changes in confidence levels from before participation to after overall for all participants and for both the online courses only group and the online courses + coaching group individually.
- When comparing the two groups, there are differences observed in confidence levels both before and after participation in the project.
  - The online courses + coaching group started with higher levels of confidence compared to the online courses only group; however, these differences do not meet the cut points for statistically significant ($p<0.05$) or marginally statistically significant ($p<0.10$).
  - The online courses + coaching group had marginally statistically significantly higher levels of confidence after participation compared to the online courses only group. Small sample sizes impact these analyses; however, trends suggest statistically significant changes in confidence level for both groups, with higher levels of confidence

following participation. Findings are also suggestive of higher confidence among participants in the online course + coaching group.

Table 5. Changes in Confidence Level Before and After Program Participation, Overall and by Participant Type, t-test analyses of mean scores

5a. Overall (Includes Online Courses Only and Online Courses + Coaching Groups; n=83)

	Mean Overall		p-value
	Before	**After**	
Skills and abilities to support early language and literacy in childcare classroom	2.5	3.1	**>0.001**

- Differences in mean before and after scores are statistically significant at p<0.05 by t-test.

5b. Comparing Confidence Before and After for Courses Only Group (n=74)

	Mean Courses Only		p-value
	Before	**After**	
Skills and abilities to support early language and literacy in childcare classroom	2.4	3.0	**>0.001**

- Differences in mean before and after scores are statistically significant at p<0.05 by t-test.

5c. Comparing Confidence Before and After for Courses + Coaching Group (n=9)

	Mean Courses + Coaching		p-value
	Before	**After**	
Skills and abilities to support early language and literacy in childcare classroom	2.9	3.4	**0.051**

- Differences in mean before and after scores are marginally statistically significant at p<0.10 by t-test.

5d. Comparing confidence before and after for each group

	Mean Before		p-value	Mean After		p-value
	Courses only	**Courses + Coaching**		**Courses only**	**Courses + Coaching**	
Skills and abilities to support early language and literacy in childcare classroom	2.4	2.9	**0.103**	3.0	3.4	**0.097**

- Differences in mean before scores are not statistically or marginally significant.
- Differences in mean after scores are marginally statistically significant at p<0.10 by t-test.

Childcare Providers Perspective on AL RRFTS Project

Participants in the online courses and online courses + coaching groups were offered opportunities to provide general feedback and perceptions on the AL RRFTS Project. Specifically, they were asked to describe differences in their personal behaviors and child language and literacy skills that they believed resulted from their participation in the AL RRFTS project. Also, respondents could share successes, challenges, needs for additional supports, general thoughts, and interest in continued participation in courses and coaching. Open-ended questions allowed for write-in comments. These comments were analyzed for themes and are presented below. In general, themes are presented in order of most to least heard frequency. For some questions, example quotes from the write-in comments are presented to further illustrate the themes.

Continued Participation

Across the two groups, 91% of respondents reported they would continue or were likely to continue participation in courses and/or coaching. Examples of write-in comments include:

"I am always researching ways to improve. Cox campus makes it easy to participate and gives resources I can return to as needed."

"I love the resources Cox campus provides. I have been able to include what I have learned online and on the resources tab in the classroom."

"I really enjoyed the courses and talked to my director about all of our teachers taking the courses."

"I would love to continue to participate in the learning opportunity because it will help me become a better teacher/provider to give my kids the educational tools they will need to help them be successful in the future."

Differences in Teacher-Child Interactions in the Classroom to Support Early Language and Literacy

Differences noted in teacher-child interactions to support early language and literacy were organized around the following themes:
- Listening more to children; using more open-ended questions to encourage thought and pausing to allow them to respond
- Being more interactive and animated during reading activities, supporting children to engage
- Introducing more vocabulary words
- Being more intentional about supporting language in all activities throughout the day and week
- Being more interactive with children in general and encouraging responses
- Encouraging parent-child conversation

"I shared the information learned from the videos at workshops and meetings with other staff. As a result of sharing the information, I saw a significant increase in Teacher encouragement of Parental and Child conversations."

– childcare center director

> *"I am now more aware that children are doing language at all times."*
>
> **– childcare teacher**

> *"I use every opportunity I am with a child, a parent, or a teacher to set the stage for ongoing conversations with each and every child."*
>
> **– childcare center director**

> *"The classes have helped me to interact more with the children during reading time. Ask more questions. Listen to children's answer to questions. It has helped to increase the children vocabulary and their knowledge of words."*
>
> **– childcare teacher**

Differences in Children's Early Language and Literacy Skills

Differences noted in children's early language and literacy skills were organized around the following themes:

- Increased communication between children and with teachers; talking more and being more attentive
- Increased vocabulary; using new words
- Increased interest in reading and books, including interaction and engagement during reading
- Increased child engagement and interaction

> *"I have noticed that the children are more attentive to the things that I say to them because they are aware of words and sounds."*
>
> **– childcare teacher**

Biggest Successes in Incorporating RRFTS Learning Approaches in Classroom

Biggest successes reported were organized around the following themes:

- Increased communication between children and with teachers, including babbling and physical cues, learning new or more advanced vocabulary words, initiating conversations, and communicating wants and needs
- Increased interest and excitement about books and reading
- Increased child engagement and focus
- Improved teaching instruction, including structure approaches and new strategies or approaches
- Recognition of the importance of conversation with young children

> *"We are taking more visual and audiology approaches in learning new words. I have 9-month olds speaking sentences such as thank you and you're welcome."*
>
> **– childcare teacher**

> *"My biggest successes are seeing the teachers read, talk, and do finger plays with the children when I visit the classroom. Also seeing the children's responses to being spoken to and their love of sharing books have increased tremendously. Some conversation participation could be attributed to natural growth and development, but the window was open and we provided what they needed at the crucial time."*
>
> **– childcare center director**

Biggest Challenges in Incorporating RRFTS Learning Approaches in Classroom

Biggest challenges reported were organized around the following themes:
- Finding/having age-appropriate, interesting, and subject-relevant books and materials
- Time management, including incorporating with other approaches/curricula
- Maintaining children's interest; encouraging participation
- Managing behavior problems, including destroying books
- Remembering and consistently using skills learned
- Lack of structured plans for implementation of the program
- Changing the mindset related to talking to infants and toddlers before they can verbally communicate back

Additional Supports or Resources Needed to Assist in Incorporating RRFTS Learning Approaches in Classroom

Additional support/resource needs included:
- More books
- More incentives, including money and college credits
- Encouragement, especially when not yet seeing results in the classroom
- Printable cards with conversation starters for each center
- Strategies for keeping students' attention and for supporting them to think in real-life situations
- Parental assistance

> *"My children are so young it's hard to know what works in the moment. I think the benefits show up after they leave my room."*
>
> **– childcare teacher**

Additional Thoughts about Experiences as a Participant in the AL RRFTS Project.

Final thoughts included some of the following examples from write-in comments:

"I enjoyed the online resources. It is jam packed with a lot of good applicable information."
"I am happy that my center was chosen to participate."
"It was extremely helpful to be rewarded for professional development hours that I needed to have anyway."
"The videos were great! Excellent examples of what language/literacy in infants look like."
"I feel like this training is the best training I have ever done!"

E. Summary and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

Alabama's Read Right from the Start program's (AL RRFTS) first 18 months have resulted in successes, challenges, lessons learned, and considerations for improvement and expansion. Overall, trends and outcomes are positive, suggesting benefits for expansion of the model more broadly within early care and education settings in the state and to more of the childcare professional workforce. Increased awareness of early language and literacy development, growth of and confidence in professional skills to support these in classrooms, quality of teacher-child interactions, and anecdotal observations of improved language and literacy skills are all indicators of a successful pilot phase.

The mixed methods evaluation provided assessment of the first phase or pilot of AL RRFTS in four areas:

Program Reach: A total of 4,355 Alabama stakeholders (childcare providers, coaches, administrators, early childhood professionals, APC Board members, parents) enrolled in online professional development courses through Cox Campus. This large number of stakeholder enrollees represents the important role the AL RRFTS project has served in expanding awareness of the availability of online professional development and early language and literacy skills throughout the state. Of those enrolled stakeholders, 513 childcare teachers completed the required five hours of coursework and received an incentive upon submission of certificates. In addition, AL RRFTS coaches provided weekly coaching to 24 childcare providers in nine center-based classrooms and four family childcare homes. These were located in the north, central, south, and southeast geographic regions of the state.

Systems Development: Alabama is the first state to replicate Read Right from the Start (RRFTS) in a statewide distribution versus more local implementation. The inclusion of family childcare homes in addition to childcare centers is an innovative approach unique to Alabama's Read Right from the Start program (AL RRFTS). The intervention includes both incentivized online professional development specific to early language and literacy and the provision of individualized coaching in model classrooms to enhance learning and transfer of skills. Responsiveness to COVID-19 quarantine allowed continued and expanded virtual professional development to support the early childhood workforce. The creation of a train-the-trainer model has been used to spread AL RRFTS across other early childhood

care and education system partners in the state. AL RRFTS is also the first implementation of Infant and Toddler CLASS in Alabama childcare settings to measure the quality of teacher-child interactions. AL RRFTS coaches noted professional growth among childcare providers, as well as improvements in teacher-child interactions, learning environments, and early literacy and language development of children. Challenges were noted related to childcare settings in general, implementation issues, and building relationships with childcare providers.

Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions in Childcare Classrooms: The AL RRFTS CLASS scores for the pilot infant and toddler classrooms are similar to or exceed those of the best available comparisons. Overall, the quality of teacher-child interactions in these classrooms is in the mid to high ranges across all dimensions and domains. Results of pre to post comparisons from before and after the AL RRFTS interventions are mixed, with better performance observed in the infant classrooms and notable growth for the Early Language Support dimension. Small sample sizes and the timing of assessments must be considered when interpreting results. These measures provide a baseline for comparisons of growth over time and as the AL RRFTS program expands, indicating opportunities for continued focus. Findings suggest benefits to the quality of the infant and toddler classroom environment, likely related to professional development and coaching.

Teacher Knowledge and Skills Changes: Childcare center and family childcare home directors reported satisfaction with their participation with AL RRFTS and noted added value and quality to their program. They discussed positive feedback and successes with both the online Cox Campus course participation and in-classroom coaching. In particular, directors noted the spread of best practices across their centers and mentioned that teachers who were coached became mentors to their colleagues. Similar to AL RRFTS observations, directors noted professional growth among childcare providers and improvements in teacher-child and child-child interactions. They also reported their teachers developed increased understanding of developmentally appropriate practices for early language and literacy and noticed that children engaged more with books and other literacy materials. Challenges related to technology issues, time management to balance responsibilities of the classroom with time to participate in AL RRFTS activities, and coordination with other center and classroom schedules/programs.

Teachers who participated in a follow-up survey reported overall satisfaction with AL RRFTS, including relevancy of materials and coaching to the classroom and effectiveness in supporting learning about early language and literacy. Teachers also reported moderate to significant growth in early language and literacy-related professional skills, with higher mean scores (though not statistically significant) for the online courses + coaching group, suggesting this as a promising strategy to increase professional skills growth among childcare teachers. Both the online courses only and courses + coaching groups reported statistically significant changes in confidence in their skills and abilities to support early language and literacy in their childcare classroom from before to after participation in AL RRFTS. The online courses + coaching group started with higher levels of confidence compared to the online courses only group (not statistically significant). The online courses + coaching group had marginally statistically significantly higher levels of confidence after participation compared to the online courses only group. Small sample sizes impact these analyses; however, trends suggest statistically significant changes in confidence level for both groups following participation and suggest higher confidence among participants who received both online courses and coaching. Similar to both AL RRFTS coaches and childcare center/family childcare home directors, teachers recognized improvements in their

teacher-child interactions, including increased awareness of and support for early language and literacy. They reported being more intentional about supporting language in all activities and becoming more engaging during reading activities. Teachers also noted improvements in children's early language and literacy skills, including increased communication and interaction, using new words, and interest in reading and story time. Similar to coaches and directors, teachers discussed challenges with time management, as well as lack of age-appropriate and interesting books and materials, lack of structured implementation plans, managing behavior problems, and remembering and consistently using the skills they learned.

Recommendations for Improvement, Sustainability, and Expansion

Recommendations are based on suggestions from AL RRFTS leadership/administrators and coaches, participating childcare center/family childcare home directors and teachers, and analyses of all evaluation data.

- Develop and provide an orientation for coaches, directors, teachers, and families so that everyone understands expectations, roles, timeline, and benefits of the program
- Establish methods to improve communication overall, both within the AL RRFTS program and between AL RRFTS staff and participating centers/family childcare homes (directors and teachers)
- Encourage coordination for scheduling in centers and classrooms and alignment with other programing and activities
- Provide continued supports for classroom materials, supplies, books, and technology
- Provide continued no-cost professional development and financial incentives for participation
- Expand access to individualized coaching in more classrooms
- Develop lending libraries and parent resources to extend engagement into homes and to educate families on early language and literacy development
- Promote improvements to the implementation of the CLASS tools in the Alabama RRFTS model classrooms, as well as application of results
  - Add additional classrooms as is possible within funding limitations to increase sample sizes
  - Assure all classrooms have both pre- and post-assessments, including at least four cycles of observations per classroom per assessment
  - Consider timing for both pre- and post-assessments to assure best representation of the typical classroom environment
  - Continue individualized coaching and professional development based on individual classroom CLASS results, with a focus on early language and literacy
- Explore opportunities to add a standardized, objective child-level assessment of early literacy and language skill development, at least in classrooms that receive AL RRFTS coaching

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