



# Cultivating Quality Early Learning Environments:

An Evaluation of First 5 Monterey County's Child Signature Project

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**harder+company**  
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# Key Findings

## Introduction

First 5 Monterey County (F5MC) recognizes the importance of quality early learning opportunities for young children and supports development and capacity-building opportunities for early childhood educators and administrators. In demonstration of its ongoing commitment to increase access to quality, affordable early care and education, F5MC approved local augmentation of First 5 California (F5CA) Child Signature Program (CSP) 2 funding in 2012. Local enhancements of the F5CA CSP project included on-site coaching; classroom materials; supplemental pay for teaching staff and site directors/supervisors to participate in seminars and reflective meetings; and opportunities for agency administrators to engage in reflection on the impact of organizational systems and requirements on program quality.

For this report, F5MC commissioned Harder+Company Community Research to conduct an independent evaluation of the local enhancements for CSP in Monterey County, drawing on the experiences of participating administrators, coaches, observers, and teachers. Listed below are the most salient findings.

## Participation and Implementation

Participants described their experiences with coaching, reflective practice, and the trainings and seminars that were part of the F5MC CSP initiative.

*Coaching and Reflective Practice* • Teachers, coaches, center site supervisors, and agency administrators all participated in reflective meetings as part of the F5MC CSP initiative.

- **Reflective meetings with coaches were a new experience for many teachers.** It often took time for teachers to get used to having a coach in the classroom, to feel comfortable participating in reflective meetings, and to build a trusting relationship with the coach.
- **Coaches' reflective, strengths-based approach helped foster communication and trust.** Coaches were assigned to classrooms to support consistent relationships over the 3-year program. They used a reflective approach to build trust, help teachers gain confidence, and foster collaborative teamwork.
- **For teachers, participating in reflective meetings with their coach and fellow teachers provided regular opportunities to take a step back and reflect on their observations.** The reflective approach fostered teachers' appreciation of the value of observation and encouraged them to be more intentional about their work.
- **The support provided by Dr. Heffron and Beth Reeves-Fortney helped coaches implement reflective practice.** Dr. Heffron supported coaches by modeling reflective practice and bringing issues from their work in classrooms to reflective meetings. Ms. Reeves-Fortney honored coaches' views and provided them with support, guidance, and acceptance through regular calls and additional touchpoints as needed.
- **Few center administrators knew what the specific programmatic elements of CSP would be at the beginning of the project, and were involved with coach/teacher interactions to varying degrees.** While center administrators may not have had full information about the CSP when it began, most of them reported being satisfied with communication about the coaching and other activities once the initiative got going.

*Trainings and Seminars* · As part of the F5MC CSP, teachers and administrators were encouraged to participate in a series of trainings and seminars about materials in the classroom; using child observations and assessments; supporting self-regulation; supporting child curiosity and learning; and new ways to engage children and make them feel safe and secure.

- **Overall, teachers reported high levels of satisfaction with the trainings and seminars.** Many said the trainings gave them ideas and taught them skills, and that they benefitted from coaches' and administrators' support in integrating the learning into their daily work.
- **Teachers appreciated being compensated for attending the trainings, and noted that it was important for all teachers to attend and for all trainings to be offered in Spanish as well as English.** A number of teachers mentioned that having all teachers and assistants in a classroom attend the trainings helped them apply the new activities or methods they learned about.
- **Center administrators reported being engaged with the trainings to varying degrees.** Some agency administrators and center site supervisors attended the trainings while others did not. Those who did attend reported feeling better-positioned to reinforce the content with teachers and provide them with additional support.

## Impact on the Classroom Environment

As a result of participating in the CSP initiative, teachers and center administrators were able to make a number of enhancements to their curriculum, classroom operations, and physical environment.

*Curriculum and Classroom Operation* · CSP efforts were designed to support early learning environments in becoming more responsive to children's interests and developmental abilities, and providing children with independent access to engaging materials.

- **As a result of CSP participation, teachers adapted their curricula and classroom operations to be more responsive to children's interests and needs.** Participation in CSP enabled teachers to incorporate more free time, create opportunities for open exploration, and plan a curriculum based on children's needs and interests. Teachers noted the importance of having easy access to expressive materials that allow children to explore in deep and meaningful ways.
- **Teachers enhanced the flow of the day, making use of indoor, outdoor, and small group activities based on children's needs.** Some teachers who tried to adhere to a strict schedule prior to CSP noted the benefits of adjusting the flow of the day, and reported that they experienced less difficulty managing their classroom. Respondents also reported that CSP helped teachers split classes into small groups; for example, some children would read together while others played outside.

*Physical Environment* · Participation in CSP also built awareness about how the physical environment can support positive interactions and learning.

- **Changes to the classroom environment included strategies to support children’s identity and connection, the intentional use of new materials to support children’s focus, and independent access to materials and open exploration.** The trainings and coaching increased teachers’ awareness of and reflection about how the classroom’s physical environment affects children’s sense of identity, behavior, and development. Teachers noted the importance of finding ways for the physical environment to help children feel a sense of connection and belonging with their classroom.
- **The provision of new materials and furniture, coupled with guidance from trainings and coaches, allowed teachers to feel more confident using them and to implement new activities.** Teachers appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the value of expressive materials and noted the role that coaches and seminars played in changing their perspectives. Over a three-year period, coaches witnessed substantial progress in teachers’ understanding and use of materials. In many instances, the provision of, and reflection about, new materials and furniture was an important first step that led teachers to begin to understand how environments influence child behavior.

## Impact on Teachers and Site Level Outcomes

Teachers, coaches, and program administrators reported that CSP resulted in teachers seeing themselves as educators and having improved interactions with children, parents, and colleagues both in their centers and beyond.

- **Participating in CSP enabled many teachers to see themselves as professional educators and gain confidence in their skills.** Teachers, coaches, and center administrators reported that the reflective sessions, coaching, and trainings and seminars helped teachers feel more confident about their interactions with both students and parents.
- **This initiative improved teachers’ understanding of children’s interests and needs, and marked a shift from teacher-directed to child-initiated work.** Teachers learned to recognize each child as a unique individual, to understand the ways in which children’s actions and behaviors are driven by their interests and emotional needs, and to allow children’s interests to lead.
- **Many participants improved the quality of interactions and relationships with parents.** In some centers that had little to no parent engagement prior to participating in CSP, teachers began to recognize the importance of communicating and building relationships with parents.
- **CSP activities created a sense of community and teamwork among teachers at participating sites.** Teachers had consistent coaches who brought them together for reflection sessions. They also often attended trainings and seminars together. Fostering a sense of community meant increased and more effective communication.
- **CSP also contributed to the development of a broader learning community.** Teachers, center supervisors, and administrators from across Monterey County had the opportunity to meet each other at seminars and to visit each other’s centers. Teachers re-connected with old coworkers and made connections with teachers they had not met before.

## Moving Forward

As F5MC reflects on this work and continues supporting workforce development efforts and access to quality childcare in the future, we offer the following considerations.

- ✦ **To enhance evaluation of quality early learning environments, F5MC should work to address factors that may prevent aggregation of assessment data across sites.**
- ✦ **Support the growing connections and relationships formed by the scale of the work of the CSP project.**
- ✦ **Expand current F5MC professional development efforts to accommodate CSP participants interested in continued exploration of the practices that teachers and center administrators reported wanting to continue.**
- ✦ **Allocate sufficient time and funding for future professional development efforts.**
- ✦ **Support policies and strategies that address the diverse levels as well as scale of program quality supports needed in Monterey County.**
- ✦ **Explore options for measuring CSP's impact on children in participating classrooms.**

# Introduction

## Child Signature Project Background

**First 5 Monterey County tailored local implementation of First 5 California's Child Signature Program 2 to align with F5MC's philosophy and approach to enhancing the quality of early learning environments.**

The Child Signature Program 2 (CSP2), Readiness Assessment and Quality Improvement Project, was the second in a series of three Request For Applications (RFAs) issued by First 5 California (F5CA) for funding to implement the CSP over a three-year funding period (FY 2012-13 through 2014-15). Counties selected center-based classrooms funded by the California Department of Education, Head Start/Early Head Start and Migrant Education to participate in the project to conduct readiness assessments and to develop and implement improvement plans. The project was designed to support sites in becoming eligible for RFA #3, which was intended to provide additional funding and technical assistance. A learning and improvement academy referred to as the Early Education Effectiveness Exchange (E4) developed trainings available through virtual learning supports/mediums (i.e., GoToMeetings, webinars, etc.) on identified topics. Each county hired an Early Learning Systems Specialist (ELSS) to coordinate and/or implement the assessments as well as support coordination of the development and implementation of the improvement plans. When CSP2 launched in July 2012, the program details were still in development (see timeline below).

First 5 Monterey County (F5MC) applied for and received an award from F5CA to participate in CSP2. An RFQ process resulted in 30 classrooms (five agencies) participating in the project (see Appendix for details). Eileen McCourt from Praxis Consulting Group was selected as the ELSS through an RFQ process. Local funds were also provided in order to align the project with on-going F5MC Vision 2 Technical Assistance (TA). Six coaches were selected through an RFQ process and were assigned to classrooms to provide consistent, on-site, relationship-based classroom support. The project also offered supplemental pay for teaching staff and site directors/supervisors to participate in professional development activities; materials to support quality enhancement; seminars and trainings; and reflective supervision sessions for coaches as well as center site supervisors and agency administrators. In addition, F5MC secured an independent assessor to support the evaluation of classroom quality by utilizing the tools defined in the Readiness Assessment: CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) and ECERS (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale) or ITERS (Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale). The F5MC Senior Program Officer and ELSS met with each program administrator to reflect on the assessment results and also used the scores to inform the development of improvement goals reported in the state database.

F5MC began implementing Technical Assistance (TA) to Centers projects in 2009. The projects are grounded in best practice research and relationship-based, collaborative work. TA Projects engage program participants (including administrators, college instructors, educators/teachers, families and children) in developing/enhancing program quality. The F5MC Commission approved local augmentation of F5CA CSP funding in order to align the work with the following best practice approaches and values that are incorporated into the design of each F5MC Vision 2 TA project:

- Project goals are co-developed by participants and consultant.
- Project goals relate to the practical and daily experiences of the program.

- The project includes on-site work with a consultant grounded in early childhood education best practices and committed to relationship-based learning.
- Professional development activities incorporate a variety of learning methods (including individual work as well as small and large group discussion and activities).
- Professional development activities support collective/collaborative learning that incorporates the diverse experiences and knowledge of the project participants.
- All levels of an organization (including administration and staff) support the project and participate in appropriate ways.
- Projects are responsive to cultural and socioeconomic diversity and in alignment with F5MC's Essential Program Characteristics.
- Projects incorporate “unanticipated learnings” as the technical assistance project unfolds.

F5MC Technical Assistance projects and CSP are designed to address the following goals:

- Improved program quality
- Improved infrastructure and operations that support program quality
- Increased professional development of staff/providers
- Increased collaboration and networking among early educators

The range of services supported by F5MC align with best practices known to benefit young children. For example, early learning providers who take part in regular education, coaching, training, and assessment activities tend to have greater knowledge and ability to put in place effective pedagogical approaches and curricula<sup>1 2</sup>. Furthermore, these quality measures help early learning providers understand a child's interests for learning and match those with broad curriculum goals known to improve academic and social outcomes<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Elliot, A. (2006). “Early Childhood Education: Pathways to quality and equity for all children.” Australian Education Review, Vol. 50, Australian Council for Educational Research

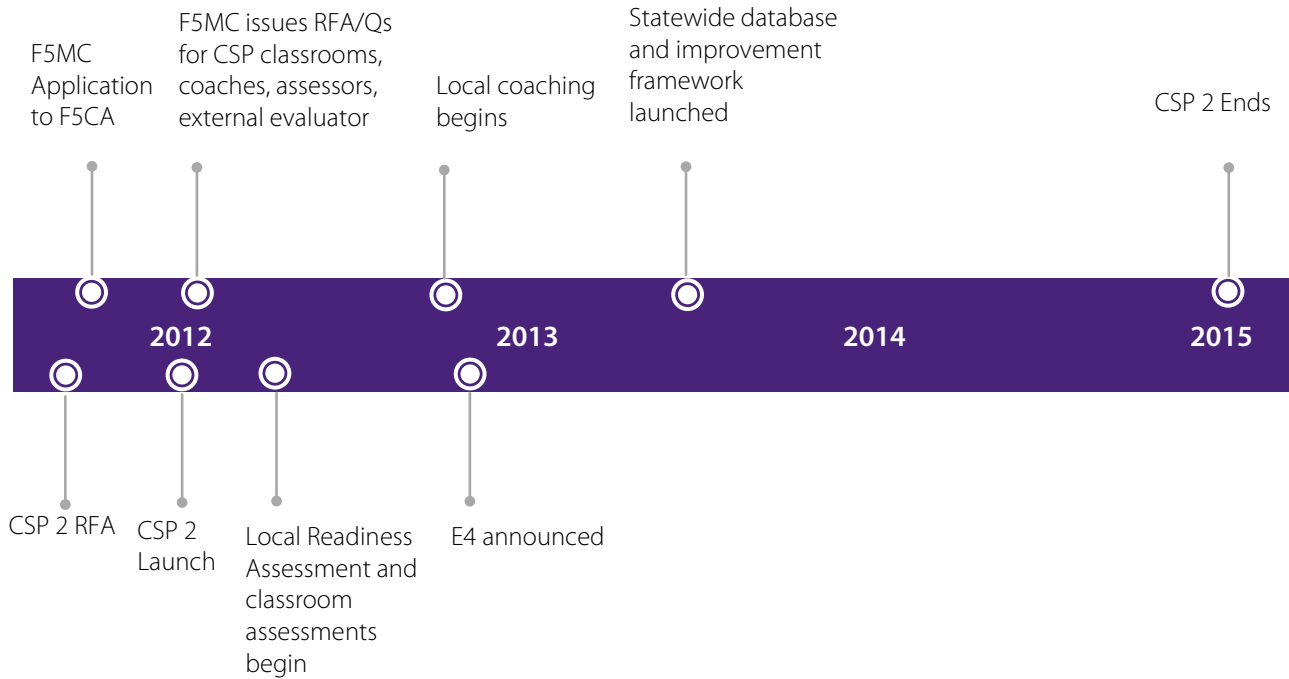
2 Kagan, S. and K. Kaurez (2006), “Preschool Programs: Effective Curricula”, Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development, Montreal, available at: [www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Kagan-KauerzANGxp.pdf](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Kagan-KauerzANGxp.pdf)

3 Sheridan, S., P. Williams, A. Sandberg et al. (eds.) (2009), Children’s early learning: A cross-sectional study of preschool as an environment for children’s learning, Göteborg Studies in Educational Sciences, 284, Göteborg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.



## Key Events Timeline

Following is an overview of the timeline of the three-year project:



## Evaluation of F5MC CSP

Given F5MC’s commitment to improving the quality of child care and learning from the support it provides, the Commission sought to explore the experiences and outcomes of participants in the CSP. **The purpose of the evaluation is to document the successes and challenges of the local enhancements for CSP in Monterey County, drawing on the experiences of participating administrators, coaches, observers, and teachers.**

Evaluation questions were organized into three domain areas of interest: participation and implementation; impact on the classroom environment; and impact on teachers and site-level outcomes.

| Domain                                     | Evaluation Questions   |
|--|--|
| Participation and Implementation           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Which CSP seminars/ trainings did you participate in (e.g., Circle of Security, materials series, Journey of Identity, I Saw You)? Which one stood out to you/how was it helpful?</li> <li>- What was the experience of working with a coach/teacher like?</li> <li>- What was your experience with the reflective meetings?</li> <li>- What was the impact of the learning group with Dr. Moore? This is specific to site supervisor/administrator</li> <li>- What would coaches recommend for TA (particularly related to time commitment and intensity)?</li> <li>- How did the readiness assessment help you?</li> <li>- How did you use the ECERS and CLASS independent assessment information for your program?</li> <li>- How did phone calls with Beth and meetings with Dr. Heffron support the growth and work of the coaches?</li> <li>- Were administrators satisfied with the overall level of communication about CSP activities and coaching?</li> </ul> |
| Impact on the Classroom Environment        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Did participation in the CSP program support any changes in teachers’ curriculum or the way they operate their classroom (such as flow of the day or small group work)?</li> <li>- If your classroom received new furniture or materials, what stands out to you about the new things you received? How did they support or change your work?</li> </ul>  |
| Impact on Teachers and Site Level Outcomes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What have you discovered about yourselves as teachers as a result of CSP? [PROBE: How has CSP changed you as a teacher?]</li> <li>- How did the CSP Project affect participants’ (administrators, site supervisors, and teachers) work with: Children in the classroom; Parents; Co-workers; Other teachers and classrooms in Monterey County?</li> <li>- What new learnings/approaches do teachers/administrators plan to continue after CSP?</li> <li>- What is one significant change that has occurred at your site that stands out to you as a result from CSP?</li> <li>- What was anything unexpected or challenging that came up at your site while implementing the CSP program?</li> </ul>  |

## Approach

The evaluation was conducted in three sequential phases – instrument development, data collection, and analysis and results. Phase 1 (instrument development) involved working in tandem with F5MC staff to develop qualitative data collection tools for three stakeholder groups: teachers, center administrators, and coaches. Phase 2 (data collection) included holding focus groups, conducting interviews, and gathering program documents. In all, three focus groups were held with teachers (two in Spanish, one in English), and 14 interviews were conducted with center administrators, coaches, and CSP program administrators. The evaluation team in consultation with F5MC staff decided to not use CLASS and ECERS due to classroom and assessor turnover and subsequent reliability concerns. Phase 3 (analysis and reporting) included systematic content analysis of qualitative data using Atlas.ti software to identify, code, and quantify themes that emerged from discussions and interviews. Preliminary findings were shared with F5MC staff in the form of a quotebook.

## Structure of this Report

This report is organized into the following sections:

- **Participation and Implementation** describes participants’ experiences with reflective practice and coaching, as well as their experiences with the trainings and seminars;
- **Impact on the Classroom Environment** describes changes in curriculum, classroom operations, and physical environment;
- **Impact on Teachers and Site-Level Outcomes** describes impacts of CSP on teacher development and changes in interactions teachers have with children, parents and colleagues;
- **Moving Forward** offers overarching observations regarding the success and challenges of CSP and offers recommendations; and
- the **Appendix** contains data collection instruments.

# Participation and Implementation

This section describes participants’ experiences with coaching and reflective practice, as well as their experiences with the trainings and seminars that were part of the F5MC CSP initiative.

## Coaching and Reflective Practice

Teachers, coaches, center site supervisors and agency administrators (administrators) all participated in reflective meetings as part of the F5MC CSP initiative. For teachers, these reflective meetings occurred on a regular basis and typically included all teachers from a given classroom and were facilitated by a coach. The coaches had an opportunity to engage in reflective practice during reflective meetings with Dr. Heffron, Clinical Director at Children’s Hospital and Research Center Oakland, and regular phone calls with Beth Reeves-Fortney, F5MC Senior Program Officer. Dr. Moore, Infant-Family Mental Health Specialist, also supported center site supervisors in monthly reflective supervision meetings. An additional group was formed to connect agency administrators in a reflective group that met several times during the last two years of the project.

### Reflective meetings with coaches were a new experience for many teachers, and it often took time for them to feel comfortable developing and sharing their opinions.

Working with a coach was new for many teachers and it took time for them to get used to having a coach in the classroom, feel comfortable participating in reflective meetings, and ultimately build a trusting relationship with the coach. A number of teachers pointed out that it took time to get used to reflecting and sharing. One teacher recalled, “For me it was difficult to do the reflections at first...It was very difficult for me to express myself, but later I began getting comfortable and expressing and reflecting more about the work that we were doing with the children and how we served the community.” Another teacher explained that her coach’s use of open-ended questions, as opposed to providing advice or instructions, gave teachers more confidence to express themselves.

“It was challenging because I don’t think teachers chose to have people come in, and all of their experiences up to that time had been people coming in and assessing what was wrong. They were intimidated by the coaches at first, so it took a while to develop trust.”  
- Coach

Coaches recognized that they would need to build trust with teachers in order for reflective meetings to be successful. One coach characterized the reflective practice approach as a “huge cultural shift” for teachers who

“It took time to get to a place to have good reflective meetings because [the teachers] were not used to it. They never had meetings as staff and were not used to reflection; they were used to being told about their roles and what they weren’t doing right. They weren’t used to asking questions. I asked what they thought about things...Now I can ask a question and they can think and let their feelings and thoughts out.”  
- Coach

had not experienced it before. She described how, during the first few meetings, “they were quiet and looked for me to tell them what to do and to control the meeting.” This same coach found that, by listening to the teachers, they started to feel more comfortable sharing. Another coach who also felt a need to focus on relationship-building in the beginning noted that, over time, “the reflective practices became more embedded in the structure of our work, the teachers were able to think more, discuss more, reflect more, and were able to make reflective practice more of a

habit.” Similarly, another coach observed that, while the teachers were initially “nervous and anxious” about her role, “as the process unfolded and we built relationships, they were more able to listen to each other and become comfortable.” These experiences underscore the importance of making time to build a trusting relationship in order to engage in open and authentic reflection.

**Coaches’ reflective, strengths-based approach demonstrated that they were there to support teachers and not to judge or criticize them, which helped foster communication and trust.**

Coaches were assigned to classrooms to support consistent relationships over the 3-year program. The coaches used a reflective approach to build trust, help teachers gain confidence, and foster a sense of collaborative teamwork. Through using reflective practice, they cultivated an environment in which teachers felt comfortable communicating openly with each other, often for the first time. One teacher noted that she particularly appreciated the “confidential” nature of these meetings and the fact that “whatever we said was respected.” Another teacher added, “When the coach came we all began to speak up and tried to get to understand each other better. The reflections really helped us with that a lot, we were all able to arrive to the same point.” For some teachers, the reflective meetings were the only time they had to discuss what had happened in the classroom with each other.

One coach observed that, initially, there was a “hierarchy” in the classroom in which the lead teachers did all of the planning and there was no collaboration among teachers. Similarly, another coach noticed that a group of teachers who had been working together for a couple of years had not established much of a relationship.

This coach began by asking each person to share something they were comfortable with and described how, over the course of the CSP initiative, these teachers built a strong relationship with each other, largely due to the reflective meetings. Coaches used a number of strategies to gain teachers’ trust and allow

“I liked gaining their trust, and I liked when they made their discoveries and grew with the project. Like in the coaching sessions when someone figured something out and said ‘I got it!’ and watching them gain self-confidence.”  
- Coach

them to feel comfortable speaking openly during these meetings. Common strategies included asking open questions that “honor that [teachers] know the children more than [the coaches] do and that you want to hear what they think,” prompting teachers to share their opinions so “they felt like they had a voice and like what they said mattered,” and using “I saw you…” in meetings to introduce coaches’ observations of teachers and get them talking about classroom activities.

Coaches stressed that, once teachers began engaging in reflective practice, these meetings were a primary vehicle for teachers to communicate to coaches about “where they were, what they were thinking, and where they needed more support.” At least one coach used video recordings of the teachers as a tool to support reflection. She explained how she used a reflective approach when reviewing the recording with teachers, and recalled, “When I observed them watching the children struggle to write, I videotaped it and then we observed

the children’s fine motor and we talked about…how can we help them be ready… We didn’t say ‘you’re wrong.’” One teacher described how this process helped her come up with her own ideas for strengthening her practice: “[The coach] would record us in the classroom and later we would meet and watch it together to see what we did. She would never criticize us; she would let us watch the video and allow us to come up with our

In terms of **preferred frequency** of reflective meeting sessions, most coaches indicated a preference for one session per week with teachers, depending on the site’s needs; teachers generally indicated a preference for more frequent interactions with coaches.

own opinions about how we could improve.” These comments demonstrate how, in this case, the video recordings were effectively used as a means to foster and facilitate reflection and discussion.

One center administrator also pointed out the benefit of these reflective meetings for participating teachers, and explained, “Going through CSP and meeting with the coach and meeting as a group has helped them bond...The meetings let them know they are valued and that...everyone could contribute their ideas. I see that they have come together and the staff sees the value of it, I’m hoping we can continue that.” Through a forum in which they were encouraged to share and listen to each other’s perspectives, teachers began to recognize that they were valued and respected, and to come together as a team.

**For teachers, participating in reflective meetings with their coach and fellow teachers provided regular opportunities to take a step back and reflect on their observations.**

Teachers, coaches, and site administrators described how the reflective approach fostered teachers’ appreciation of the value of observation and encouraged them to be more intentional about their work in the classroom. One teacher described how the reflective sessions helped her understand the impact of her own actions, and recalled, “[The coach] helped to open up our conscience. She would ask us questions like, ‘How did the child react when you showed him that?’ or ‘What more can you do to help that child?’” Another teacher noted that these meetings gave her a greater awareness of classroom dynamics: “[The reflective meetings] don’t just focus on one child; they focus on the group, the teachers.” One center administrator also recognized the importance of carving out “reflective time” for the teachers “to think about what they are doing and why they are doing it, and to be more intentional.”

Coaches described how they were able to use reflective practice to support teachers’ learning. In many cases, this meant carrying a common thread over the course of several meetings. For example, one coach would check in on the implementation of new strategies by asking teachers, “Last time we talked about X, how is that going?” and then, depending on their responses, would engage with them in a discussions about “what would be a better time, or how they could do it different, or scaffold it.” In this case, the reflective approach supported an iterative and participatory learning process for teachers.

“There was one child not focusing during group time and who couldn’t connect with the other children, and the teacher would call him out on it in front of other kids. So we reflected on it and realized that maybe, if she also recognized the positive things the child did, the child would feel more positive. So she started doing that and by the end of the year the child had changed 180 degrees.”

- Coach



“[It was] definitely challenging trying to have meetings with them, try to do it during naptime and it was hard to find coverage to have a relaxed meeting. Usually we were in a hurry and ...we worried we were waking up the children or the teachers were using lunch breaks.”  
- Coach

**The most common challenges associated with the reflective meetings were related to scheduling logistics and the movement of teachers into and out of classrooms.**

Even though the project offered extra pay for meeting times outside of work hours or pay for substitutes it was still challenging for many CSP classrooms to identify a time when all of the teachers could meet with the coach. Classrooms that were able to overcome

those challenges tended to have teachers who were willing to engage in developing solutions, site supervisors who were supportive of making these meetings happen, and/or coaches who were flexible about meeting times. Even so, there were times when the reflective meetings were shortened or did not happen at all due to scheduling difficulties. One coach recalled challenges associated with what was supposed to be an hour-long meeting with teachers: “We would only get about 50 minutes because if the meeting started at 3pm, they were let out at 3pm and they would have to be back in the room by 4pm, so it was always cut short. We had a couple of times when we only met for 15 minutes.” Similarly, another coach explained that meetings dropped from one hour to 30 or 45 minutes due to issues related to classroom coverage. Coaches also pointed out broader administrative and systems-level challenges. One coach explained, “The administrative staff has to have good logistical skills to move one teacher from one room and cover breaks, and you need to have another teacher that’s just as qualified as the one that is being taken out of the classroom.”

Throughout the course of the CSP initiative, a number of teachers transitioned in and out of classrooms due to staffing turnover, movement of teachers across classrooms/sites, and the use of longer-term substitutes. Whenever these transitions occurred, incoming teachers needed to establish new relationships with children, parents, fellow teachers and the coach. One coach at a center serving parents in migrant child care observed, “[teachers] were constantly changing rooms, from full-time classrooms to half day classrooms, depending on the [the funding stream qualifications for] migrant work and the parents’ ability to find work.” Another coach elaborated on some of the challenges associated with having substitute teachers in the classroom as part of these transitions, and explained, “Changes in teachers mean the loss of those relationships for the children. Teachers get moved around a lot and substitute teachers can be ok but they need more training and support in their role as substitute.” Coaches noted that, when new teachers came into the classroom, they had to make time to build that new relationship and gain the teacher’s trust before being able to continue with the CSP work.

Other challenges identified included one coach who did not speak Spanish and the misalignment between the coach’s teaching philosophy and the philosophies of the agency’s other technical assistance providers. One center administrator noted that one of the coaches did not speak Spanish and was therefore unable to communicate directly with many of the teachers who were monolingual Spanish speakers. Although she reported that F5MC provided an interpreter for meetings with teachers, she did characterize this language issue as a barrier.

“One of the more challenging things was the staff changes, because you had to rebuild the relationship with the new person and incorporate them into the group. There were several classrooms where this happened. It was like starting over, and some teachers had never been part of the CSP project.”  
- Coach

During CSP initiative it was also important to develop an understanding of each agency’s curriculum approach, assessment strategies, agency-level program support initiatives, and educational coordinators. Classroom teachers work with multiple agency or funding-level advisors and assessment requirements. The center administrator at one site explained some of the challenges that arose related to their quality assurance initiative, and noted the importance of all players being aware of each other’s work and backgrounds: “The challenge is when you have all these different layers—the managers, center directors, and quality assurance and monitoring people focusing on education curriculum for preschool or toddlers who come with vast experience. Some might have more Montessori philosophy or another curriculum they’ve been working with, others have been exposed to Resources for Infant Educare© (RIE), so it’s all over the place. A question would be their comfort level when you bring a person who is new to the environment and not aware of some of the history.” The coach at this site also described how the “philosophical difference” between the CSP approach and that of other support personnel who were doing work at that center was problematic. She recalled, “The work can be frustrating...Some of the things we were addressing would be inconsistent with other people who had authority over the program. For example, one of the concepts I was working on with the toddlers was their need to be more open in their exploration and discovery but the quality assurance person told them another way to handle things. That was confusing for staff. They believed what I was trying to share was working well but they were afraid to do it.”

**The reflective approach was new for some coaches, and all of the coaches reported that the support provided by Dr. Heffron and Beth Reeves-Fortney, helped them implement reflective practice.**

Some coaches acknowledged that CSP was their first experience with reflective practice and, just as with the teachers, it took time and support for them to get used to it. One coach explained that, initially, “it was challenging to figure out how to engage teachers with a *reflective* approach rather than a *teaching* approach—how to help them figure out where they need help and how to make that change rather than making suggestions about making change for them.” Similarly, another coach reported that it was hard at first “not to give the answer and advice” but that it became easier over time, with the support provided through coaches’ meetings, “to be curious and open, to not give them all the answers.” This coach went on to describe what she learned about the value of a reflective approach: “It’s better if they can come to it on their own, and it may be a better idea than I would have given as advice.” Overall, participants recognized that the coaches’ meetings were a key component of the CSP; one coach described them as “invaluable” and “priceless,” and added, “I don’t think the project would have been as successful without those meetings.”

“Reflective practice is a valuable tool for professional development and one of the only ones I know that can get to professional development that’s sustainable. I want it to get done everywhere in the world.”  
- Coach



“The coach meetings I loved so much. I learned about the process, I learned a lot about myself and how to work with a varying group of people. When challenges came up, we had brainstorming with the rest of the coaches and Dr. Heffron. She was thoughtful and reflective thinking about the work; it was very supportive.”

- Coach

**Dr. Heffron provided support to coaches during reflective meetings by modeling reflective practice and bringing issues from the coaches’ work in classrooms back to the meetings for discussion.**

Coaches were highly appreciative of the meetings they had with Dr. Heffron and many of them highlighted her ability to model reflective practice as especially valuable. One participant came in with

over ten years of previous coaching experience explained, “Dr. Heffron modeled reflective practice like no one I’ve ever met and I have honed in my skills tremendously under her guidance....The meetings helped me to learn to ask more reflective questions... and listen more for what was the level of importance of what the teacher was saying.” Another coach described how Dr. Heffron’s modeling of reflective practice enabled coaches to “experience the effect of someone being reflective with us,” which included creating an “open atmosphere,” bonding with each other, and building a sense of teamwork. Coaches noted that the reflective questions helped them focus their direction, understand “what was happening” in the classroom, and think about new and different strategies for supporting teachers. They also appreciated the opportunity to brainstorm about specific challenges with each other under the guidance of Dr. Heffron, and explained that “sometimes [the work] was hard, so having that time to share and get feedback was invaluable.” One coach mentioned that the brainstorming sessions helped her be more intentional in her work with teachers and create and maintain a sense of community with them.

**Beth honored coaches’ views and provided them with support, guidance, and acceptance through regular calls and additional touchpoints as needed.**

Overall, coaches valued Beth’s ability to foster reflection and discussion; one explained, “Beth was good about asking questions that made me think.” They characterized conversations with Beth as “supportive” and “inspirational,” and noted that she was “very responsive” and “very interested” in her work with them. Some coaches added that these discussions helped them support the teachers more effectively. One person mentioned an instance in which teachers from two classes had a conflict and Beth provided support that went above and beyond these regular phone calls; she recalled, “I let Beth know about this, and... she supported a coaching session that involved both classes....this made me have a lot of faith and trust in her because she was able to see other options. That’s a tremendous skill.”

**Few center administrators knew what the specific programmatic elements of CSP would be at the beginning of the project, and were involved with coach/teacher interactions to varying degrees.**

While center administrators may not have had full information about the CSP when it began, most of them reported being satisfied with communication about the coaching and other activities once the initiative got going. In particular, center administrators appreciated being informed about coaches’ work with teachers and being given the opportunity to share their opinions and to receive feedback about

“I was very satisfied [with the overall level of communication about coaching and other activities] because I had really good communication with First 5 and one of the coaches. They were really good about keeping me informed about upcoming workshops, or if they needed me to go help set up the classroom at the beginning of the year, if I had a question they would get back to me on time.”

- Center Administrator

opportunities for improvement. One center administrator noted, “I liked that [the coach] would always email me and give me a brief report of her observations or send me video clips or photos. She was always checking in with me whether I was here or not and she would always follow up. She would always stay in contact.” It appears that not all coaches engaged in this level of communication; one center administrator shared, “Our communication [with coaches] can be improved. I had to go ask the supervisors or teachers, so maybe every time they’re going to the center they could let me know when they would be at the center, a consistent e-mail of their whereabouts.” In general, however, most center administrators had positive things to say about coaches’ communication with them.

Coaches reported that center administrators’ active engagement and belief in coaching helped support the initiative’s success. One coach described the key role that site supervisors can play in setting the stage for coaches to build relationships with teachers: “It’s essential that [the site supervisor] does some groundwork with the staff before they even meet [the coaches] and help them understand that the purpose of the program is to improve...It should be talked about beforehand...because it took weeks to gain that trust.” Another coach noted that center administrators “should have a clearer understanding of the coaches’ role” as part of the program. She explained, “The site supervisors at both sites needed more buy in...One was not committed to the type of work I was going to do with [the teachers]. She wanted me to come in and tell the teachers how to do their job differently rather than do the reflective work...The other site supervisor was just incredibly busy and they were going through changes in their administration and it made it difficult to have regular reflective meetings with the teachers.” These comments illustrate the importance of center administrators’ support of and engagement with an initiative such as the CSP.

### **Center administrators appreciated the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with their peers during the learning groups with Dr. Moore.**

Center administrators expressed their gratitude for being provided a forum in which to meet with their counterparts and solicit and provide feedback and support confidentially. One person described those meetings as “a time where I’m able to go and spend time with other supervisors who are in my position, and we have the opportunity to express special circumstances we’re going through or conflicts we’re having... It has helped me with my stress.” Another center administrator reported that the meetings were especially helpful during those times when s/he was feeling “stuck.” This person went on to say, “Dr. Moore’s knowledge really helped me to understand that I wasn’t alone and I could still do it.... She gave us guidance and...another point of view and made me feel that I could do it.” These meetings, under Dr. Moore’s guidance, appear to have been an important source of support for center administrators throughout the CSP initiative.



## Trainings and Seminars

As part of the F5MC Child Signature Project, teachers, and administrators were encouraged to participate in a series of trainings and seminars about topics aligned with the most significant areas of growth common across all centers including: materials in the classroom; using child observations and assessments; supporting self-regulation; supporting child curiosity and learning; and using new ways to engage children and make them feel safe and secure. The seminars offered over the three years of the project are as follows:

- CLASS Overview training
- Circle of Security©
- Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) hands-on support sessions
- DRDP 2015
- ECERS 3, What's New?
- F5MC Spring Seminars
  - *Reflection and Inquiry Based Learning;*
  - *Ready to Play: Supporting Exploration and curiosity in our youngest learners;*
  - *The Journey of Identity Parts 1 and 2*
  - *Transforming Teaching through Explorations with Children and Parents*
  - *Wondering With Children; Exploring New Possibilities*
- Exploring Clay with Young Children
- Exploring Painting with Young Children
- Finding Sanity in Sanitation: How to Use ERS resources to provide a healthy environment for children and teachers
- From Making Marks to Drawing
- From Tearing to Collage
- I Saw You
- Series of three seminars related to self-regulation and Vygotsky with Jessica Peters, Research Coordinator and Trainer for Tools of the Mind©

Overall, teachers reported high levels of satisfaction with the trainings and seminars, and benefitted from coaches' and administrators' support in the integration of the learning into their daily work.



**Many teachers said the trainings gave them ideas and taught them skills, and ultimately they were able to make meaningful changes in their classrooms.**

Teachers provided examples of lessons they learned in the trainings and applied in their classrooms. One teacher reported that the seminars gave her strategies for “giving the children their space and being more sensitive with them... [and] helped us see the children as individuals.” One teacher commented that participating in the CSP helped her appreciate the benefit of professional development, saying “before [this program] I did not see the benefit [of professional development] but after participating in the program I feel that it is very important, and that it helped me grow very much.” A coach expressed a similar sentiment, saying that the trainings helped the teachers gain new perspectives, and explained, “People don’t have time for

professional development, so... [they] cannot figure out why things are not working. And then they see ‘Wow there is this new material’ or ‘I never thought about this strategy or support.’” This same coach added that the CSP offered a “really good balance of trainings and seminars about relationships and identity.”

Teachers made changes in their classrooms using techniques from the trainings. One strategy, referred to as “I Saw You”, helps teachers connect with children through sharing important observations of each individual child in a small group setting. A number of teachers also introduced pictures of children’s families in the classrooms, which was an idea they took from the *Journey of Identity* seminar. Given the many ways in which the lessons learned in trainings and seminars benefitted their classrooms, both teachers and coaches agreed that they were a crucial component of the CSP initiative.

- **Teachers reported learning a new approach for connecting with children from the *I Saw You* seminar.** *I Saw You* was the seminar mentioned most frequently by the focus group participants and interviewees; it was also the one they had attended most recently at the time of the evaluation. Many teachers described how, before the training, they would engage with children by complementing their work and, after the training, they were able to use the tools that they learned to have more engaging conversations with their students. As one teacher said, “when they are playing outside or inside during free time, we would tell them ‘I saw you playing in the sand’ and the children would elaborate on what they were doing and socialize more.”

Additionally, coaches modeled this approach in reflective meetings with teachers, using the phrase “I saw you...” to engage in reflective conversations. One coach explained, “[I would] start the meeting with something I saw them doing that was positive ... I would point out specific things like how ‘you really helped that child when that thing happened’ or ‘you were so empathetic when the child was struggling.’” Coaches were able to reinforce the lessons from the *I Saw You* workshop by modeling the strategy they wanted to help teachers use.

“There are two children whose parents do not have a home, so I tried to apply the *Circle of Security* to make them feel safe... At first, [one child] did not speak, did not [show many] emotions, and I started implementing some of the techniques and he has opened up more, and speaks with other children. Before, he would say that he did not know how to play or did not want to, but it was because he did not feel safe.”  
- Teacher

- **Teachers developed deeper understanding each child’s need for attachment and security as a basis for exploration and learning from the *Circle of Security*® training.** Coaches and teachers emphasized the concept of a sense of security or belonging as a central component of this training. One coach described the training as “about understanding where that child’s security comes from, the base of their security.” One of the teachers said that the *Circle of Security*® training was helpful because it emphasized the “importance of the security of children so that they feel free to explore with games and activities.”

The training also helped teachers see their role in the classroom in establishing security for their students. A teacher described this role as being like a “second parent,” and described one of her experiences applying the concepts she learned in the *Circle of Security*® training. Teachers and coaches said that the *Circle of Security*® was particularly beneficial for teachers’ interactions with children with

behavioral challenges. For example, a coach described how she and the teacher observed a child with behavioral issues to try to identify the child's triggers and then reflected on ways to make that child feel safer in the classroom. They were then able to alleviate the triggers and

"I asked for pictures of their parents and they were able to draw their families. So we had the family pictures and, under it, the drawing their child made. The parents loved that, because they were wowed by what their child was able to draw. That idea was given to us by the paper workshop, and in self-portrait."

- Teacher

ultimately helped the child feel more secure. By directly applying the lessons they learned in the *Circle of Security*® training, teachers were able to have more intentional and productive interactions with children.

- **In the *Materials Exploration* series, teachers learned how to introduce and use a variety of materials in the classroom, including paper, drawing, clay, and paint.** Teachers reported that they enjoyed the materials workshops, particularly the workshops on clay and on different kinds of paper. In some cases, teachers did not have the materials (i.e., clay, paper, paint) before the launch of CSP and were excited by the introduction of these materials in their classrooms. One teacher described how the clay was received in her classroom, saying, "Many of [our students] have some kind of anxiety, so we used the clay and they get really happy... They love texture, and especially if it's something new it calls their attention a lot." In other cases, teachers already had the materials but had not been using them. As one teacher recalled, "Before the seminars we did not do those activities [with paper], but now we can do them and keep [the students] interested. We had the paper before... but we did not know how to use it." These seminars introduced many teachers to new materials and showed them how to use those materials in an engaging way with their students.



- Teachers connected with the importance of learning about children’s families and having positive interactions with parents from the *Journey of Identity* training.** Coaches reported that the *Journey of Identity* training provided useful ideas for engaging parents in the classroom. As one coach noted, “Some teachers connected with the *Journey of Identity*; it seemed to be very meaningful to many of my classrooms and [they] implemented those ideas, such as bringing family photos and doing family orientation at the beginning of the school year.” Additionally, many teachers reported putting up photos of children and their families in the classroom as a result of this training. The training also reportedly helped teachers feel more confident in their engagement with parents and one coach noted that it made “more comfortable sharing information with parents.” Another coach recalled, “At first, nobody addressed parents when they came in or left and I was shocked. After they went to first seminar on identity, they saw parents in a different way... and it’s amazing how much more connected the classroom felt.”

“[As a result of] the *Journey of Identity* workshop, the whole school created this system of portraits of each child and they had a big magnetic board where the children placed [their pictures]. Some classrooms put pictures in their cubbies and we got family albums that children could put out... It went from being a teacher-centered classroom to being more focused on children.”  
 - Teacher

**Teachers appreciated being compensated for attending the trainings, and noted that it was important for all teachers to attend and for all trainings to be offered in Spanish as well as English.**

Supplemental pay was provided for teaching staff and center administrators to participate in professional development activities. Two center administrators noted that teachers appreciated being compensated for their time attending the workshops and trainings, noting that the supplemental pay was “a real incentive” and that the additional pay made teachers feel “able to spend extra time and able to learn other things.”

A number of teachers mentioned that having all teachers and assistants in a classroom attend the trainings helped them apply the new activities or methods they learned about. One teacher commented that, because all of the teachers at her center attended the seminars, they were collectively “able to implement what we learned directly with the children.” However, not all teachers or assistants attended all—or any—of the trainings. One teacher noted that the assistants at her school did not attend any of the professional development activities offered through CSP because the programs were optional. She commented that she would prefer that it be a “requirement to attend the workshops and seminars, because if someone is in this type of work it’s important for them to attend [trainings] and do a lot of learning.” Some coaches produced shortened versions of the trainings for teachers or assistants who did not attend, and several teachers reported sharing what they had learned with those who did not attend. One teacher said she “would go [to the seminars] and come back and teach [my co-workers] in the classroom what I learned at the seminars” and would also “try to motivate them to go [to the seminars].”

One teacher expressed a desire for the trainings to be offered in Spanish as well as English to accommodate monolingual Spanish-speaking teachers and assistants. The teacher commented that even though there was a translator at one of the workshops it was difficult to follow along and that, if the workshops were offered in Spanish, “they would expand the number of people who are able to attend, that way we can also benefit.” In general, teachers and coaches were satisfied with the trainings; their feedback was limited to logistical issues such as the compensation they received, who should attend, and language accessibility.

### **Teachers benefitted from coaches' and administrators' support in connecting the learning from trainings with their everyday classroom experiences.**

Coaches typically attended all trainings and seminars with the teachers. One noted that doing so allowed her time for “reflecting about [the topic] and being on the same page as [the teachers].” Another coach explained that she was able to reinforce and promote the sustainability of information learned in the trainings, saying, “During the coaching sessions I would try to bring the conversation back to the information from the last seminar, and I helped them move it along and keep it on their minds.” Given that coaches spent time in the classroom and with the teachers on a regular basis, they were able to remind teachers about what was covered in the seminars and help them identify ways to apply those learnings.

### **Center administrators reported being engaged with the trainings to varying degrees.**

Some agency administrators and center site supervisors attended the trainings while others did not. Among those who did attend, several reported that the trainings were beneficial to their role as center administrators. One explained, “[the trainings] really enriched me as a person and as a director because I could relate more to what my teachers are doing and also be a resource for them. Whatever I learned from those seminars I tried to go over it at a monthly meeting...” When center administrators attended the trainings, they were better-positioned to reinforce the content with teachers and provide them with additional support.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL RATING SCORES AND TEACHER-CHILD OBSERVATIONS**

### **+ There were a number of factors in the administration of environmental rating scores and teacher-child observations that precluded use of the information in this report.**

As has been the case in past evaluation reports examining the effectiveness of technical assistance efforts, this evaluation had planned to incorporate Environmental Rating Scores (ERS) reports for each participating classroom and Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) results for each participating teachers. Nearly all participating sites and classrooms had this information available for at least two points in time (e.g., 2014 and 2015), which would typically facilitate a basic trend analysis. However, from an evaluative standpoint, it was challenging to meaningfully understand the progress of sites in the aggregate because of concerns about the consistency of the ratings across classrooms and over time. These challenges were related to a number of factors, including assessor turnover, lack of ongoing training to ensure inter-rater reliability, and staff and program changes in the classroom. While the ERS and CLASS scores are not presented in this report, the assessment data was an important input for teachers, site administrators, and coaches to understand the strengths and weaknesses of particular measures for an individual site. The information was especially useful for site administrators to reflect on systems and practices that may impact the ERS scores, as well as for informing the development of trainings.

# Impact on the Classroom Environment

This section describes the enhancements teachers and center administrators were able to make to their classroom environment, including curriculum, classroom operations, and physical environment, as a result of participating in the CSP initiative.

## Curriculum and Classroom Operation

CSP efforts were designed to support early learning environments in becoming more responsive to children's interests and developmental abilities, and providing children with increased independent access to engaging materials. Supporting programs in adjusting scheduling or flow of the day to increase children's independent access to materials and time for open exploration were also important for meeting quality criteria. All aspects of support in the environment and classroom operations have a substantial impact on learning and behavior, and provide opportunities for children to express their interests and curiosities that inform child-initiated curricula.

**As a result of CSP participation, teachers adapted their curricula and classroom operations to be more responsive to children's interests and needs.**

Participation in CSP enabled teachers to incorporate more free time and opportunities for open exploration. Many teachers felt that the coaching and seminars gave them the tools to plan a curriculum based on children's needs and interests. As one teacher explained, "our coach noted that most of us had the same themes...but it's better to follow the child's interest, so now we ask them [about] what they want to learn and talk about... We left the old routine topics [behind]." Center administrators also noted the fundamental shifts teachers had made—not just moving to a child-centered approach, but working collaboratively to ensure activities align with what children want to explore.

"The curriculum is more intentional ...CSP has improved interactions teachers have [with children] and the activities are based on child needs and interests. I walked in and children were measuring an insect and a child started asking questions about why it had so many legs, prompting other children [to] observe that other animals had this many legs ...Teachers were able to take the child's interest and use it to [promote] math, measuring, and drawing, and it kept the conversation going. The teacher asked a lot of opened-ended questions."  
- Center Administrator

The adjustments teachers made to curricula also benefitted children by having them transition more easily between activities. "It used to be so controlled... [They were] told to go wash their hands and sit down to eat. Now transitions are so much smoother, children are following routines better because of more intentionality," stated one coach.

Evaluation respondents noted that CSP increased access to materials throughout the day and more engaging materials and activities for children. Teachers noted the importance of having easy access to expressive materials that allow children to explore in deep and meaningful ways. As an example, one teacher noted, "Now it is easier to introduce materials that children have available to them all day. If they want to play with clay or make a collage, they have their material at their reach all day. Outside they also have more options—sand, water, big blocks—and it has made the environment easier to manage and children are communicating more openly [with each other] now." Another teacher noted the benefits of using natural materials as a way for



“Children are playing a lot more than they used to. Before, the teacher was directing the children in groups. Now they have large blocks of free choice and play with materials. They are more intentional about their time, [there are] more open-ended questions instead of teaching everything. Now they are asking questions. They explore more with materials. They reflect back to children. Instead of ‘what color is this?’ they say ‘you used this color and what happened?’”  
- Coach

children to explore together: “This past week...I thought, ‘I’m going to take [material] to the class and see what they do with it.’ It was rustic and smooth wood that been cut and shaped [and] recycled material. The children decided to use it to build their own cars. I didn’t give them the idea; they did it on their own...A day before, I had read them a book about old and modern cars, and when I gave them the material they decided to make old and modern cars.” Other teachers noted the benefits of having materials available for children who exhibited challenging behaviors. In one instance, discussions at a CSP seminar led one teacher to use expressive

material strategically: “I have a child that has a difficult time socializing with others and would hit other children. We told him he should not hit other kids but the clay is something he can hit. That has helped a lot.”

Center administrators also reported the benefits of having more materials and teachers who were equipped with the skills to encourage their use. According to one administrator, “Classroom quality is better...the way they display materials and the material itself is better. How materials are accessible to children, everything is more meaningful, the children seem more engaged.” Another observed that participation in seminars, like the paint workshop, gave teachers confidence to implement materials effectively: “Teachers were at the workshop and later I saw techniques implemented in the classroom, how to explore colors and mix them. It was beneficial because the children learned how to use the material in a different way.”

“The way in which we use material has changed. [Children] have more access to everything all day and we have more new material in the classroom.”  
- Teacher

**Teachers enhanced the flow of the day, making use of indoor, outdoor, and small group activities based on children’s needs.**

For some, prior to CSP, daily activities were pre-defined and teachers tried to adhere to a strict schedule. Teachers noted the benefits of adjusting the flow of the day for children, and they themselves experienced less difficulty managing their classroom. “Give [children] the time they need to do their activity, if we don’t have time to [finish] it’s okay. What’s more important is that they get time to do something that interests them. Today, they wanted to dance all morning. That’s what they chose, so we let them,” remarked one teacher. One center administrator noted that changes to the flow of the day were a direct result of interactions with the coach: “She gave us good recommendations. Our children this year were very active. She suggested taking them outside first. Before, we would always do an hour inside and take them out afterwards. We tried it and it did wonders.” Others also noted the benefits of aligning the flow of the day to the interests of children. In one example, a teacher discussed how different



cohorts of children influenced how teachers facilitated activities and stated, “children from last year liked the arts, and the ones this year love to be outside...therefore, I try to incorporate activities outside, like the clay, I brought it outside for them to play with.”

Respondents also noted how CSP helped teachers split classes into small groups. For example, some children would sit in small groups and read together while others were encouraged to play outside. One coach described working closely with teachers to reflect upon, and modify, the schedule. She stated, “At one point there were two large groups together, and [teachers] took turns leading the whole group and it wasn’t effective, so we broke it down. [Teachers] scheduled the children’s outside time separately. It took a while for them to believe that would work, but when they tried it they said it was successful.” A center administrator also noted observing “less conflicts” and a calmer environment resulting in more positive interactions for both children and teachers. Participation in CSP also encouraged teachers to align the flow of the day to meet the needs of individual children. One teacher recounted how one of the seminars had given her ideas about how to be in tune with children and offer them their own space. “The seminar helped us see children as individuals...so if a child is hyperactive, we need to give him an activity that will hold his interest for a good amount of time,” she remarked.

“We always did the same routine because we thought it had to stay that way. [Our coach] told us we could adapt our routine to the children’s interest and level of activity, and we did it and it went smoothly.”  
- Center Administrator

## Physical Environment

Participation in CSP was designed not only to enhance the interactions teachers had with children, but to build awareness about how the physical environment, through the intentional use of materials and furniture, can support positive interactions and learning. This section describes how teachers and center administrators were supported to create spaces that meet the needs of children.

**Changes to the classroom environment included strategies to support children’s identity and connection and the intentional use of new materials and/or furniture to support children’s focus, independent access to materials and open exploration.**

The trainings and coaching increased teachers’ awareness of and reflection about how the classroom’s physical environment affects children’s sense of identity, behavior and development. Teachers noted the importance of finding ways for the physical environment to help children feel a sense of connection and belonging with their classroom. One way of helping children “feel important” was through visual displays of their artwork and family photos. Teachers also identified cubbies with each child’s photo.



Teachers designated materials that children could use independently and “set up shelves that were accessible to children” at their level. A coach observed the importance of these changes noting, “It made a huge difference in the way the children used toys. [They] became confident and competent in getting them and putting them back.”

Not only did the environment become more accessible to children, but the provision of new materials and furniture created opportunities for children to express their curiosities and ideas. As one center administrator noted, “children had more activities and so much material out. ...Because of the shelving and books we were able to do more reading; there was so much enrichment for children inside and outside of the classroom.” Teachers were able to work with coaches to make their spaces dynamic and flexible, as well as comfortable and engaging. One teacher noted, “I loved my coach because she would give us suggestions. She’d say to move the furniture a certain way and see how children respond. When [children] see something new, they want to be

there.” Some teachers noted how coaches encouraged them to rearrange spaces as a way to facilitate positive interactions among children. One remarked, “There was too much conflict, so the coach gave us the idea to expand the space so children had more room to play.”

“It’s so different as you walk in the classroom. The whole environment feels brighter, more cheerful, and children’s work is everywhere. Children are more engaged; it feels like a happier place.”

- Coach



**The provision of new materials and furniture, coupled with guidance from trainings and coaches about how to use them, allowed teachers to feel more confident with using them and to implement new activities.**

Teachers expressed that they appreciated the opportunity to reassess their own perceptions of the value of expressive materials and noted the role coaches and seminars played in changing their perspectives. As one teacher shared, “Before the training we didn’t see the value of putting paper on the tables but after they explained the importance of the materials and letting children have access to the materials, we began doing activities that were different.” Others noted how there were many times when teachers didn’t have the experience or ideas about how to use the material, but participating in seminars gave them the confidence and skill to implement changes in their classroom. One teacher recalled how the materials brought back good memories of her own exploration as a child: “The clay was what I liked most. It was a return to my childhood, that’s what we used to play with in Mexico, we would make little pots. They told us in the seminars that if we feel happy and enjoy ourselves doing activities with children, they also feel good, comfortable, and safe.”

Over a three-year period of time, coaches witnessed substantial progress in teachers' understanding and use of materials. At the start of CSP, many noted that teachers were not comfortable with introducing and supporting open exploration with materials. In many instances, the provision of materials and furniture, and reflecting on their importance, was an important first step that led teachers to begin to understand how environment influenced child behavior. One coach remarked, "many teachers [created] open classrooms where they put materials to be accessed by children when they were interested...that affected the flow of the day because children were allowed to choose rather than teachers directing them and choosing activities for them."



"CSP provided materials that we had not been able to provide. We got new couches for the children. We replaced broken toys. The materials are important because that is part of the child's development and without them we're behind."  
- Center Administrator

# Impact on Teachers and Site Level Outcomes

One of the CSP initiative's primary goals was to improve program quality by working with teachers in ways that would support sustainable growth, confidence and knowledge. Teachers, coaches, and program administrators reported that CSP resulted in teachers seeing themselves as educators and having improved interactions with children, parents, and colleagues in their own centers and beyond.

## **Participating in CSP enabled many teachers to see themselves as professional educators and gain confidence in their skills.**

Teachers, coaches, and center administrators all noted the positive changes in teachers' self-perceptions and practices that are a direct result of CSP. One coach described seeing "changes in the way teachers saw their role *as teachers*" and another coach said "the role of the teacher changed; [now they] see themselves more as a support for the child as a whole being, their interests, teaching the child to communicate and express themselves." A coach highlighted the transformation in teachers, saying, "It was overall very positive, it was hard work, [I saw] changes in the attitude, internal changes in the way teachers saw their roles as teachers." Many remarked that teachers increasingly saw themselves as educators with an important role in their students' development.

Teachers, coaches, and center administrators reported that the reflective sessions, coaching, and trainings and seminars, helped teachers feel more confident in their classrooms. A coach described teachers' improvements in better understanding children as individuals, attributing this change to the teachers having "grown more as teachers" and "being more confident." A center administrator noted that the teachers' increased confidence also resulted in positive outcomes with parents, saying, "teachers are more confident talking to parents, and parents are more involved now." The trainings and seminars and coaching provided teachers with the skills they needed to feel confident about their interactions with both students and parents.

## **For many teachers, this initiative improved their understandings of children's interests and needs and a shift from teacher-directed to child-initiated work.**

Teachers learned to recognize each child as a unique individual and to understand the ways in which children's actions and behaviors are driven by their interests and emotional needs. Through on-site coaching with reflective sessions and seminars, teachers learned techniques that helped them improve their interactions with students. A center administrator described one coach's role in helping teachers understand the importance of letting children's interests lead, saying, "the coach really helped us to listen to the children and focus on what they were working on—not things that we thought they needed to learn, but things that they were showing us they wanted to learn—and we were incorporating all of that in our curriculum activities." The administrator reflected on the positive results she saw as a result of the teachers' focus on the children's interests, saying "I saw more participation from the children, they enjoyed that we were really listening to them and we were meeting their needs because we were following their interests."

A coach described a similar shift, saying, “Many classrooms changed from teacher-directed work to child-initiated work” and that “teachers provided materials that were more open-ended. It was about valuing the work of the children and their importance in the classroom.” Allowing children’s interests to lead was a key lesson from coaches and the seminars, and teachers saw the benefit of this in their classrooms.

**Many participants improved the quality of interactions and relationships with parents.**

While some centers described having positive relationships with parents prior to CSP, others had little to no parent engagement before this initiative. In some of the classrooms that started off with little to no parent engagement, teachers began to recognize the importance of communicating and building relationships with parents. Teachers and coaches described the change in communication and the strategies they used to improve the relationship between parents and teachers. For



example, coaches worked with teachers to encourage them to greet all parents at the beginning and end of the day. Coaches cited several examples of teachers becoming more engaged and comfortable with parents, largely due to the *Journey of Identity* seminar (see section on that seminar above for more detail). One teacher described the benefit of sharing children’s work with parents and helping parents understand how to better communicate with their children about their work, a process which she described as “educating the parents so that they would appreciate the work of their child.” Teachers used techniques they learned in coaching sessions and in seminars to create more of a community with families.

**CSP activities created a sense of community and teamwork among teachers at participating sites.**

Teachers participated in reflective sessions together, were coached together, and attended workshops together. By working and learning together, teachers communicated more and became more of a community. One

“We had a child...who wanted to take his work home. The next day he came back to the classroom saying that he didn’t want to do anything because his father had thrown his drawing in the garbage. So we had a meeting with the parents and we told them that the children take home their work and it should be appreciated. The coach gave us those ideas.”  
- Center Administrator

teacher described the change in communication, saying “Before there was not much communication and after having the coach we are able to speak more comfortably.” Another teacher explained, “The meetings we have really do help because that is where we get to communicate most with our colleagues. We can talk about everything that happens in the classrooms that we cannot discuss in another moment, you feel more comfortable if there is open communication.” A center administrator expressed a similar idea saying that the coach “helped us get to know each other” and “we learned each other’s talents.” Fostering a sense of community among teachers and administrators through CSP activities meant increased and more effective communication for all involved.

The CSP also contributed to the development of a broader learning community among teachers and center administrators.

Teachers, center supervisors, and administrators from across Monterey County had the opportunity to meet each other at seminars and by making visits to each other's centers. Teachers made connections with teachers they had not met before and re-connected with old coworkers who had moved to other centers. One teacher remarked, "Through the First 5 program I have been able to meet many teachers because I always go to the seminars ... The program gave us the opportunity to meet more people and be more of a community." Similarly, a center administrator reflected on how the program enabled her to connect with other staff and teachers, expanding her network and making her feel like part of a community. The CSP program created new opportunities for teachers and center administrators to connect with each other as part of their professional development and fostered a collaborative learning community.

"I got to know a lot of staff and a lot of teachers. When we got to the workshops we felt like a family. We all know each other, we are in the same field, we share ideas and things that happen at work. I really enjoyed that, it was amazing, and it was nice seeing them out in the community and now we have those connections. Before the connections were just within my community... but now it's throughout all Monterey County."





# Moving Forward

First 5 Monterey County recognizes that, especially for working families, young children spend much of their day in preschool and other early learning environments. Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of quality early learning opportunities, thereby underscoring the importance of development and capacity-building opportunities for early childhood educators and their administrators. In demonstration of the on-going Vision 2 commitment to increase access to quality, affordable early care and education, F5MC approved local augmentation of the F5CA CSP funding. Local enhancement of the F5CA CSP project included: on-site coaching; classroom materials; supplemental pay for teaching staff and site directors/supervisors to participate in seminars and reflective meetings; and opportunities for agency administrators to engage in reflection on the impact of organizational systems and requirements on program quality.

This evaluation has shown that CSP had a positive impact on early care providers, many of whom lack access to professional development and coaching, and on center-based programs throughout Monterey County. In many instances, CSP altered the perceptions teachers had of themselves, and the critical role they play nurturing the optimal development of children. CSP has not only enhanced the interactions teachers have with children, parents, and colleagues, but it has led to notable improvements in classroom environments and operations that support the provision of higher quality care. It is unclear if the successes will lead to long-term sustainable improvements, but teachers, administrators and coaches expressed optimism about their achievements, while remaining realistic about the hard work that lies ahead to sustain and expand on the success of this work.

As F5MC reflects on this work and continues supporting workforce development efforts and access to quality childcare in the future, we offer the following considerations.

**To enhance evaluation of quality early learning environments, F5MC should work to address factors that may prevent aggregation of assessment data across sites.** Many funders across the state are interested in improving and measuring the success of quality early learning initiatives. California's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) offers a promising framework to inform F5MC's work in this area. A variety of tools have been developed to measure quality, and focus on children, teachers, and/or classroom environment. Early learning centers participating in F5MC-funded technical assistance are already aligning assessment tools within this framework. However, a number of factors in the current administration of teacher and environmental rating scores preclude the use of assessment data in program evaluation. These challenges include assessor turnover, ongoing training to ensure consistency across assessors, and staff and program changes that make it difficult to make sound comparisons over time. While staff and program changes may be beyond F5MC's influence, F5MC should review its procedures for procuring, training, and retaining a pool of qualified, culturally-based assessors. That review should include the extent to which inter-rater reliability procedures need to be modified to ensure there is consensus about how to score children, teachers, and/or classrooms.

**Support the growing connections and relationships formed by the scale of the work of the CSP project.** CSP involved approximately 30 classrooms and 110 educators. Additionally, there were approximately 21 classrooms and 62 educators participating in F5MC V2 TA projects to Centers during the same period as the

CSP work. Many connections and relationships were developed through participation in the joint seminars as well as through cross-site visits and reflective meetings with Dr. Moore. F5MC should encourage site supervisors and agency administrators to continue to cultivate the relationships they have developed through participation in the on-going reflective meetings with Dr. Martha Moore. F5MC should also be sure to include all participants on the invitations to local professional development opportunities available to educators and networking events designed to build and strengthen connections between individual providers and the large early childhood education community.

**Expand current F5MC professional development efforts to accommodate CSP participants interested in continued exploration of the practices that teachers and center administrators reported wanting to continue.** Several teachers indicated that they would like to continue implementing what they learned through CSP, including what they learned about the classroom environment and specific activities. Coaches and center administrators pointed out that teachers would likely need continued support (professional development as well as financial/material resources), and some center administrators have already begun to apply for additional F5MC technical assistance.

**Allocate sufficient time and funding for future professional development efforts.** In any effort that strives to support quality improvements, it is necessary to provide time and resources for teachers to come together to reflect on and discuss their experiences. Those conversations are necessary for ensuring that new principles are fully integrated into systems and processes, and are unlikely to occur without the provision of dedicated time and resources.

**Support policies and strategies that address the diverse levels as well as scale of program quality supports needed in Monterey County.** Participants agreed that CSP helped enhance teacher-child interactions and led to improvements in classroom quality, but some were cautious not to overstate the magnitude of change that occurred, noting that benefits largely applied to direct participants and classrooms. Despite the successes associated with CSP strategies (coaching, seminars, and materials), some wondered about the extent to which these benefits could be scaled or sustained. Some noted that many programs needed support with foundational elements of quality (e.g., creating clean and healthy environments) and more work on advanced skills had yet to be attained. Others noted that teachers would sometimes be moved to classrooms that had not participated in CSP, leading to a possible dilution of effects. In the longer term, there may be a greater need to scale and sustain the work through greater capacity building, relationship building, and policy creation.

**Explore options for measuring CSP's impact on children in participating classrooms.** While it is unclear what impact, if any, this type of technical assistance program may have on children, it is possible that improvements to classroom environments teacher interactions may bolster socio-emotional and/or cognitive development. Observational assessments that are already conducted (e.g., the DRDP, which is required by both state preschool and Head Start centers) may be one way to identify whether the development of children in classrooms that receive technical assistance like that provided by CSP differs from the development of children in similar classrooms that do not. This approach would require the securing of appropriate data-sharing and/or consent agreements. F5MC may also wish to collect identifying information from children in participating classrooms so they can be flagged in future evaluation activities such as the countywide Kindergarten Readiness Assessment and/or parent interviews. While this type of information would shed light on the developmental competencies of participating children, it should not be used to evaluate any technical assistance program's ability to increase the capacity of early learning providers.

# Appendix

## Participating Centers

Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo (CAPSLO) La Paz Center: 2 classrooms

CAPSLO San Jerardo Center: 4 classrooms

CAPSLO Alegria Center: 3 classrooms

CAPSLO Valle Verde Center: 5 classrooms

Mexican American Opportunity Foundation (MAOF) Mountain Valley: 7 classrooms

Gonzales Unified School District: 1 classroom

Greenfield Unified School District: 3 classrooms

North Monterey County Unified School District: 5 classrooms



# Teacher Focus Group Protocol

## Introduction

Hello, my name is XXXXX and this is XXXXX and XXXXX, and we work with Harder+Company Community Research. We do the evaluation for First 5 Monterey County. We are working with F5MC to learn more about the impact of the Child Signature Project (CSP)—the program that provided coaching, materials, and professional development opportunities with the goal of improving the quality of programs. This focus group is designed to gather in-depth information from CSP program participants about their experiences.

This discussion will last about 90 minutes and we welcome and invite everyone to participate. Everything we discuss today is completely confidential. That means that we will not reveal your names in any materials developed from today's focus group. Are there any questions before we go on?

Before we begin, I'd like to go over a few ground rules:

- All of you here are considered experts on the topic at hand. There are no wrong or right answers. Everyone's ideas and comments are valid.
- We want to hear from everyone in the group. Everyone should have an equal chance to speak, and no one should dominate the conversation.
- Please be sure to speak one at a time and not interrupt anyone else. Please speak slowly and clearly so that XXXX can take notes accurately.
- Please respect everyone's confidentiality and do not share information from the group outside of this group.
- I'm going to ask a few questions, but mainly we want to hear from you. My role is to guide the discussion. It might happen that we'll really get going on one question, and I'll have to move on to the next one so that we cover everything. Please don't take that personally. We just need to hear from you about several topics.
- XXXX will take notes during the discussion. We would also like to tape record the conversation, just in case we miss something. Is that okay with everyone? Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

## Icebreaker

Let's start by going around the room and introducing ourselves. Please tell us your name, what school you work at, and how long you have been with your school.

## Participation in CSP

First, we would like to spend some time understanding what it was like to participate in the CSP program.

1. On the wall you can see a list of the various seminars provided by F5MC CSP Project (*Circle of Security, Identity seminar, I saw you, Materials series*). Thinking about the ones that you participated in, which stand out to you the most?
  - a. Which were the most helpful, and why?
  - b. Can you think of anything you did differently in your work based on one of those seminars or trainings?

2. What was it like working with a coach?
  - a. What did you like best about working with a coach?
  - b. What was most challenging about work with a coach?
  - c. What was your experience like with the reflective meetings you had with the coach?
  - d. If you could have a coach again, how frequently would you recommend that the coach come to your classroom?

### Classroom Environment

Now, we would like to learn how participating in CSP might have changed the way your classroom functions.

3. How did your participation in CSP change your curriculum or the way you operate your classroom?  
*[PROBES: flow of the day, activities, small group work]*
4. As part of the CSP program, some classrooms received new furniture or materials purchased by F5MC. If your classroom received new furniture or materials, what stands out to you about the new things you received?
  - a. How did they support or change your work?

### Working with Others

Now I'd like to hear about how CSP influenced the way you work with children, families, and colleagues.

5. How did your participation in CSP affect the way you interact and communicate with the children in your classroom?
6. How did it affect the way you interact and communicate with parents?
7. How did CSP affect the way you work with your co-workers? *[PROBES: interaction/ communication with other teachers, administrators, and supervisors]*
8. How your participation in the program increase your connections with other teachers and classrooms in Monterey County, if at all? *{PROBES: visiting other classrooms}*

### Impact on Teachers

Please think about how participating in CSP may have changed you as a teacher.

9. What have you discovered about yourself as a teacher as a result of participation in CSP? *[PROBE: How has CSP changed you as a teacher?]*

### Moving Forward

My last question asks you to think about your work into the future.

10. What new learnings or approaches from CSP do you plan to continue to use after the program is over?

### Closing

11. Are there any other ways the program impacted you that you would like to share, or anything else you'd like to add about your experience with CSP that we haven't talked about today?

# Coach Interview Protocol

## Introduction

Hi \_\_\_\_\_ *[interviewee name]*, thank you for making the time to speak with me today about the Child Signature Project, or CSP. We are working with First 5 Monterey County to learn more about the experiences of people who participated in the CSP – that includes coaches like yourself, as well as teachers and administrators. Based on what we learn through these conversations, we will create a report that summarizes the big takeaways and lessons learned for First 5 later on this year.

Our conversation today will last up to an hour. Everything you say is confidential, meaning that it will not be linked to your name, so please feel free to be open and honest.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

## Background

1. How long did you work as a coach with the Child Signature Project?

## Participation in CSP

Let's talk about your participation in the CSP.

2. Overall, what was it like working with teachers as a coach?
  - a. What did you like best about working with teachers?
  - b. Can you think of anything that could be improved to strengthen the working relationship between coaches and teachers?
3. What was your experience with the reflective meetings you had with teachers? *[PROBES: what worked well, what could be improved]*
4. For technical assistance like the kind provided through the CSP, what do you think is the ideal level of intensity and time commitment for coaches and teachers?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Was the intensity and time commitment for CSP about right, too little, or too much?
5. How did the seminars and trainings seem to impact teachers' work in the classroom?
  - a. Which trainings stand out as the most helpful, and why?
  - b. How did you use the seminars and training opportunities in your work as a coach?
6. I understand that the coaches had phone calls with Beth from F5MC and meetings with Dr. Heffron. Based on your experience, how did those phone calls and meetings support your growth and work as a coach? *[PROBE: Any examples?]*

## Classroom Environment

Next, I'd like you to think about how the CSP might have changed the way that participating classrooms function.

7. How do you think participation in CSP contributed to changes in curriculum or the way classrooms operate? *[PROBES: flow of the day, activities, small group work]*

## Working with Others

Now I'd like to hear about how the CSP influenced the way that participants work with children, families, and colleagues.

8. Based on your observations, how do you think participation in CSP affected interactions and communications with children?
9. How do you think participating in CSP affected the way participants communicate with parents?
10. How do you think CSP affected the way that participants relate to their co-workers? [*PROBES: interaction/communication with administrators and supervisors*]
11. And how do you think participating in CSP affected the way they interact with other teachers and classrooms in Monterey County, if at all? [*PROBES: visiting other classrooms*]

## Site Level Outcomes

These last couple questions are about larger changes at the site level.

12. What is one significant change that stands out to you at one of your sites as a result from CSP?
13. Can you think of anything unexpected or challenging that came up at one of your sites while implementing the CSP program?

## Closing

14. Those are all of the questions I have. Is there anything else you would like to share?

# Center Administrator Interview Protocol

## Introduction

Hi \_\_\_\_\_ [interviewee name], thank you for making the time to speak with me today about the Child Signature Project, or CSP. We are working with First 5 Monterey County to learn more about the experiences of people who participated in the CSP – that includes administrators like yourself, as well as teachers and coaches. Based on what we learn through these conversations, we will create a report that summarizes the big takeaways and lessons learned for First 5 later on this year.

Our conversation today will last up to an hour. Everything you say is confidential, meaning that it will not be linked to your name, so please feel free to be open and honest.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

## Background

1. In a few sentences, please tell me a bit about yourself – how long have you been a center administrator, and what other ways have you worked in the field of early childhood development?

## Participation in CSP

Now let's talk about your experiences with the CSP.

2. There were several seminars provided by F5MC CSP Project: Circle of Security, Journey of Identity seminar, I saw you, DRDP support, materials series and the F5MC Spring Seminars (with the choice of small group sessions), Thinking about the ones that you participated in, which stand out to you the most?
  - a. Which were helpful, and why?
  - b. Can you think of anything you did differently in your work based on one of those seminars or trainings?
3. Overall, what was it like working with a coach?
  - a. What did you like best about working a coach?
  - b. Can you think of anything that could be improved to strengthen your working relationship with the coach?
4. How did the learning group with Dr. Moore contribute to your work?
5. F5MC implemented independent assessments used as part of the CSP, including the ECERS and the CLASS. How did you use that information for your program?
6. Throughout your participation in the CSP, how satisfied were you with the overall level of communication about coaching and other activities?

## Classroom Environment

Next, I'd like you to think about how the CSP might have changed the way that participating classrooms function.

7. How do you think participation in CSP contributed to changes in curriculum or the way classrooms operate? [*PROBES: flow of the day, activities, small group work*]

## Working with Others



Now I'd like to hear about how the CSP influenced the way that participants work with children, families, and colleagues.

8. Based on your observations, how do you think participation in CSP affected interactions and communications with children?
9. How do you think participating in CSP affected communication with parents?
10. How do you think CSP affected the way participants relate to their co-workers? [*PROBES: interaction/communication with administrators and supervisors*]
11. And how do you think participating in CSP affected the way that you and the teachers interact with other teachers, administrators and classrooms in Monterey County, if at all? [*PROBES: visiting other classrooms*]

### Site Level Outcomes

These last few questions are about larger changes at the site level.

12. What is one significant change that stands out to you at your site as a result from CSP?
13. Can you think of anything unexpected or challenging that came up at your site while implementing the CSP program?
14. What new learnings/approaches do you and/or the teachers plan to continue after CSP?

### Closing

15. Those are all of the questions I have. Is there anything else you would like to share?