Trauma-Informed Practices in Transitional Kindergarten:

A Multiple Case Study Exploring Teachers' Perspectives and Implementation Challenges

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Longitudinal Experiences of Teachers as Early Implementers of Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) Policy

2022

Trauma-informed Practices

Social and Emotional Learning

Home-school Engagement
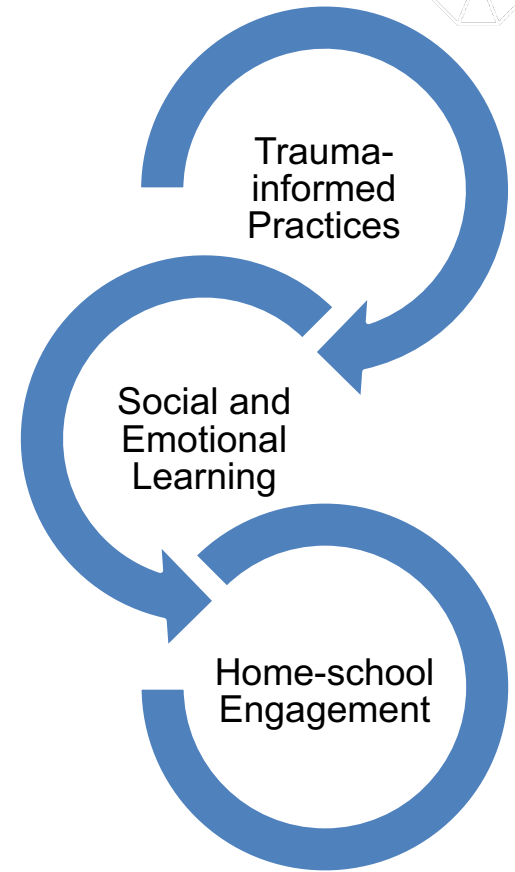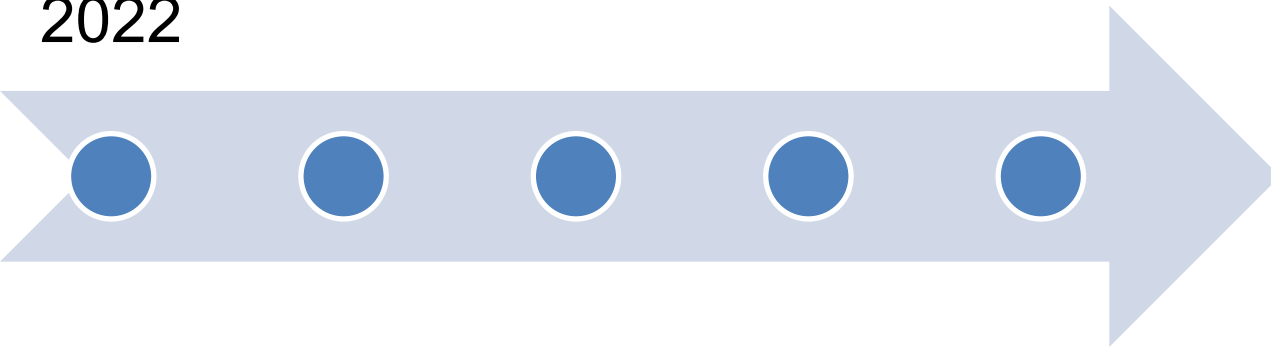
Background

Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) policy in CA

➢ The significance of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) (e.g., Bakken et al., 2017) and expanded ECE access (e.g., Duncan & Sojourner, 2013; Karoly, 2016)

➢ In 2019–2020, more than 45% of 4-year-olds were enrolled in public preschool programs in 10 states (Friedmn-Krauss et al., 2022)

- Pressing needs for addressing persistent issues related to **child trauma and adversity**, as well as **teacher workforce.**

Background

- Chronic and unique traumatic risks among young children
  - Higher risk of being exposed to traumatic events (Lieberman and Van Horn, 2009), with approximately 52% of maltreatment victims being younger than 7 years of age (U.S. Department of Health and Services,2022).
  - **COVID-19 related traumatic stressors**: death of family members, loss of childcare support, food and housing insecurity, separation from caregivers, increased caregiver distress, domestic and interpersonal violence, and neglect (Meherali et al., 2021; Slomski, 2021), magnified racial and social inequalities (Fortuna et al., 2020).

- Job demands among ECE teachers
  - Students' diverse needs, including dual-language learners, those who suffer from traumas, and those with special educational needs (Sakai et al., 2014)
  - Evolving roles and extended focuses
  - Limited access to workforce resources and persistent staffing difficulties (Farewell et al., 2022)
  - Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

Background
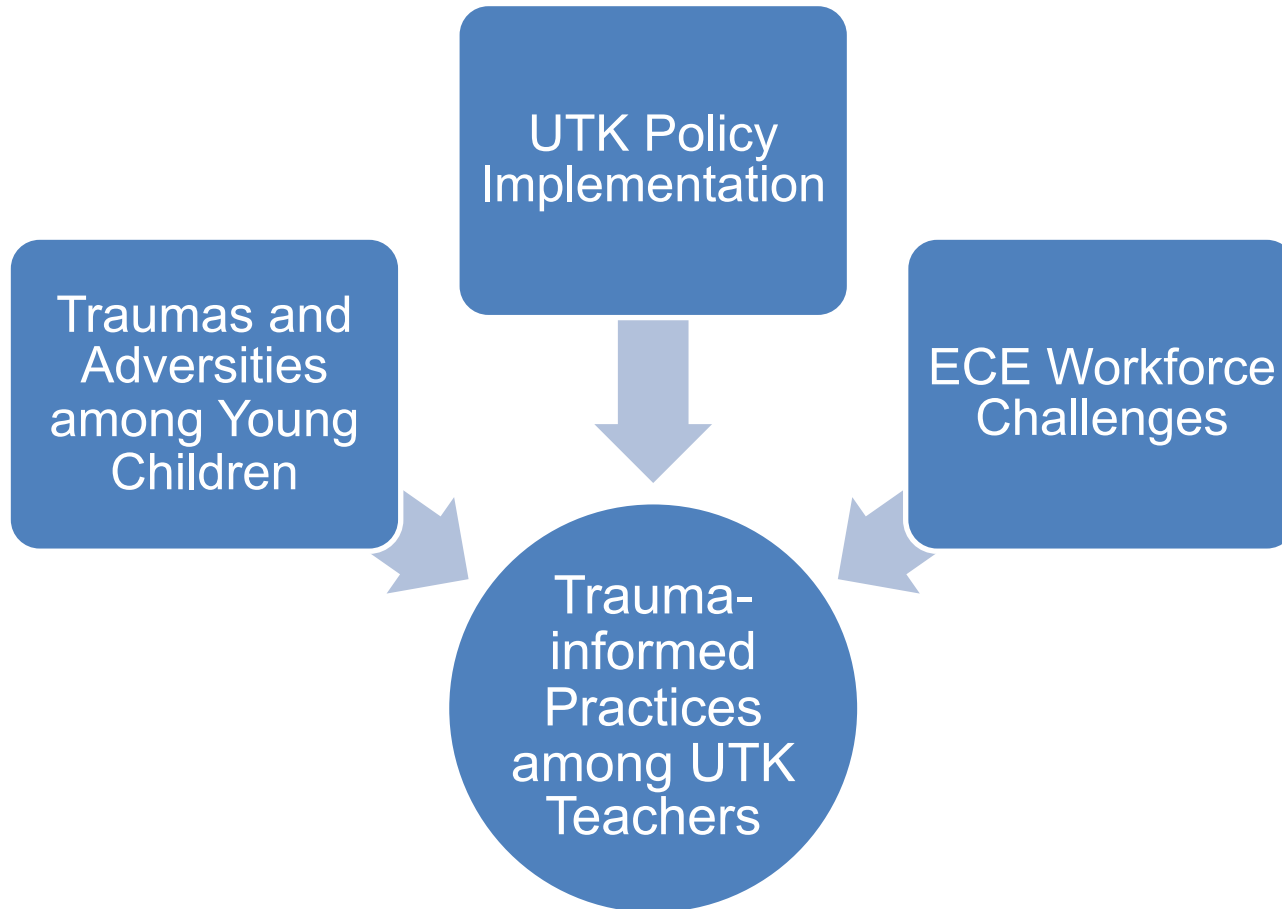
Key principles for Trauma-informed Practices
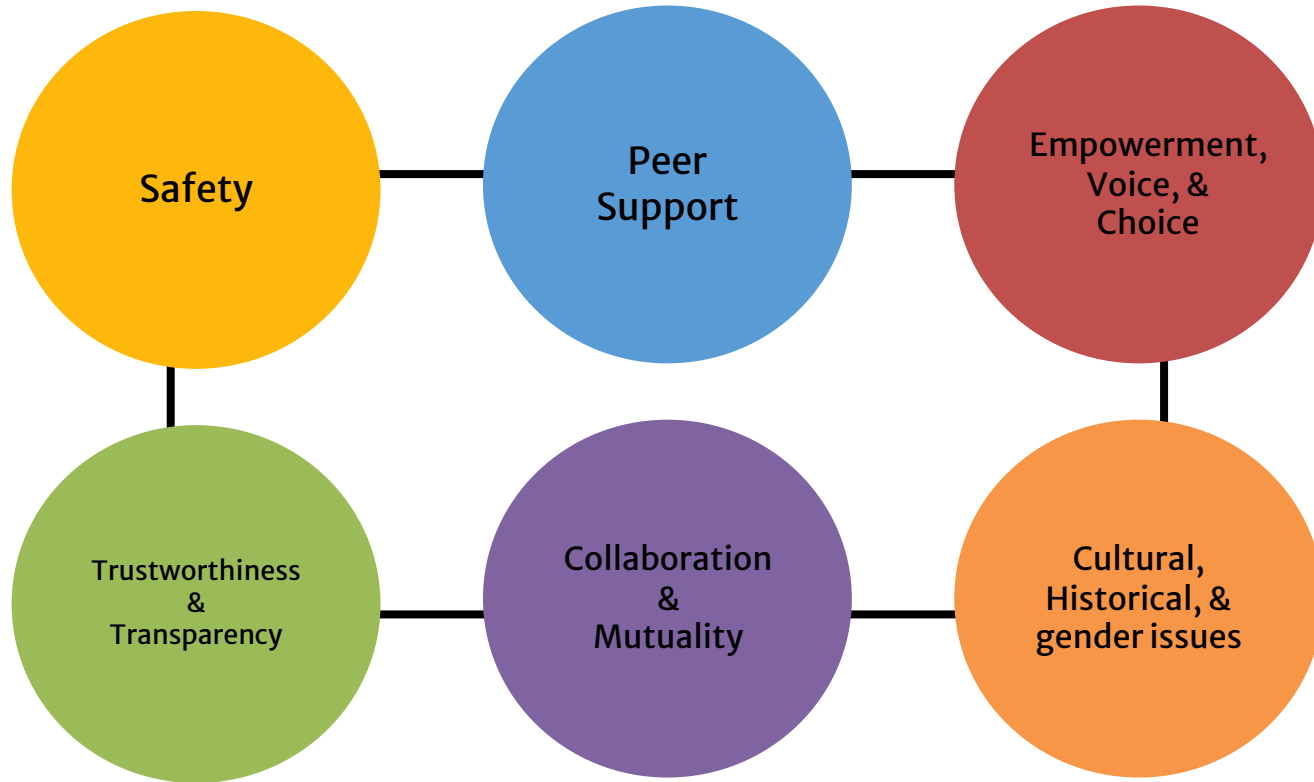
(Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014)

Research Questions

RQ1: What are UTK teachers' **understandings of trauma-informed practices** in the UTK context?

RQ2: What are **facilitators to trauma-informed practices** in the UTK context?

RQ3: What are **barriers to trauma-informed practices** in the UTK context?

Methods

Qualitative Methods

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with UTK teachers between Spring-Summer 2023
- Interview questions
  - Open-ended questions regarding their understandings and experiences with trauma-informed practices.
    - *(Understanding)* What is your view of trauma-informed practices in TK context?
    - *(Understanding)* What's your experiences working with students experiencing adverse childhood experiences?
    - *(Facilitators/barriers)* What are the main facilitators and/or barriers for implementing trauma-informed practices?

Qualitative Data Analysis

- Thematic coding
- Inter-rater reliability: 91%

Interview Participant Demographic

- n=5
- Mean years of experience: 6
- Mean age: 48
- Gender identity: all female

Participant Pseudonyms	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Location	Years UTK Experience
Katie	Female	Caucasian/White	49	Southern CA	-
Melissa	Female	Hispanic/Latino/a/ Mexican	41	Southern CA	4
Catherine	Female	Caucasian/ White	44	Southern CA	3
Susan	Female	Caucasian/ White	53	Southern CA	7
Kassandra	Female	Caucasian/ White	53	Northern CA	10

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Understandings of Trauma-informed Practices

Trauma-informed Practices

Empathy and sensitivity

"I'm absolutely more sensitive to a lot of things. I think that, I have two students who are foster students. They're foster kids in the foster system. And I think that I'm not sure exactly what they've gone through, but I can put myself in a situation and say, at four years old, all I wanted was my mom, all I wanted was comfort for me. And I couldn't imagine kids who don't have that or who are sleeping in a home that they've never been in before…"

Understanding and individualized support

"…we have a lot of, you know, homeless situations. Kids being raised by grandparents, parents who were in the system or you know, different things like that. So we have a lot of trauma in you know, our students. And pretty much what, like I said, it varies all the time. It depends, and we have to just like I said, give them their time. Give them what they need…"

Continuous learning

"We just need some, like healing and a different perspective, like a shift, I think….I'm active in my union, and they're very progressive in restorative justice and trauma informed practices…"

Safety

Empowerment

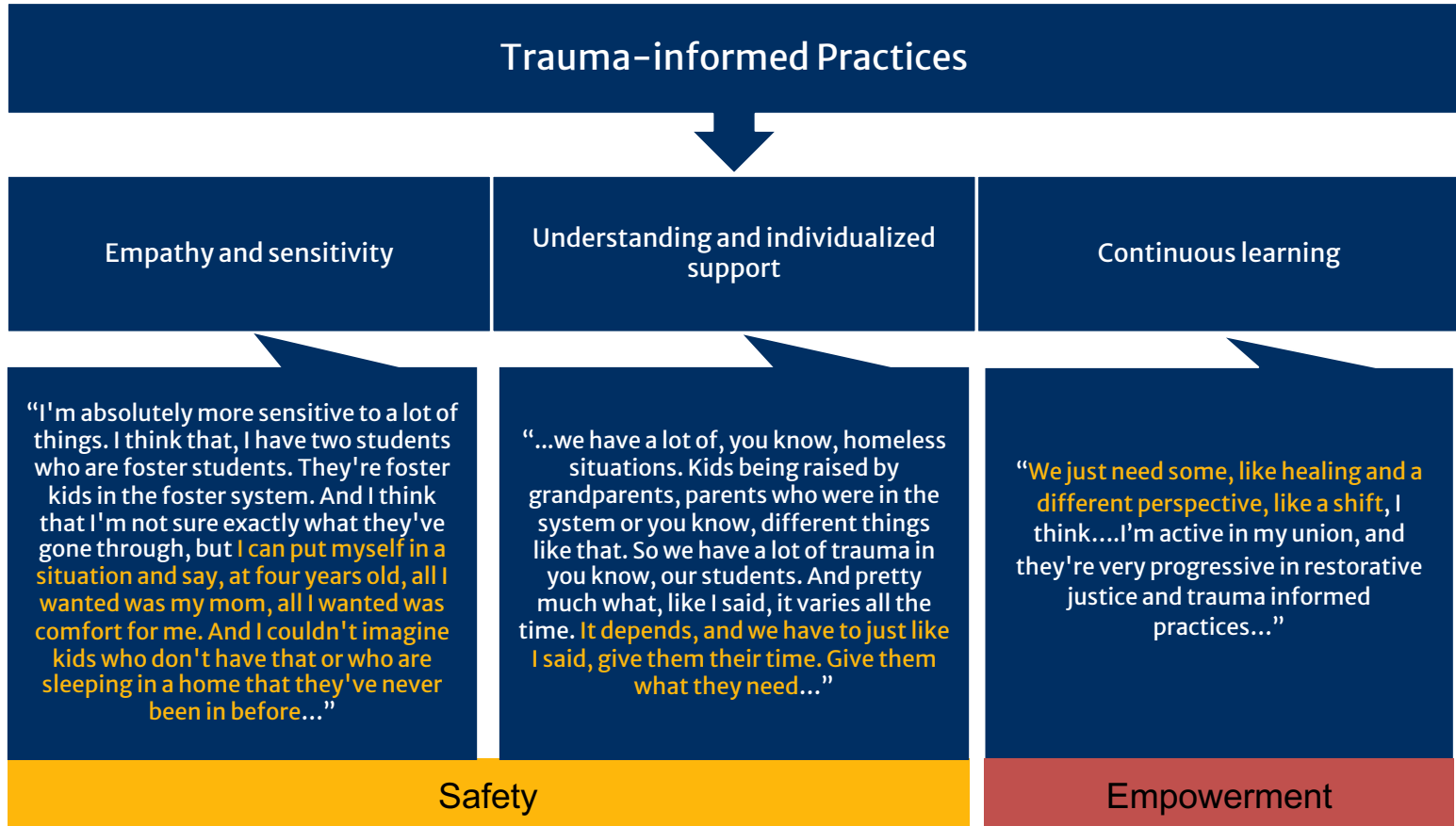Berkeley
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Facilitators of Trauma-informed Practices

Safety		
Creating a safe environment	Participants take care to create a safe and nurturing classroom environment, providing elements that promote comfort and well-being.	
Empathetic and caring approach	Teachers who adopt an empathetic and caring approach found it easier to connect with their students and offer them the support they need.	

Collaboration & Mutuality		
Supportive colleagues	Having supportive colleagues can make the job more manageable and fulfilling for teachers.	
Autonomy & district support	Some participants feel fortunate to work in a district that grants them autonomy and does not micromanage, allowing them to address students' needs creatively.	
Communication strategies	Some participants used nonverbal communication strategies like a "Handle with care" form to identify students who may be going through challenging situations and offer them additional support.	

Trust		
Home-school collaboration	Participants establish open communication with parents to better understand their students' needs and provide appropriate support.	

Empowerment		
Advocacy for ECE & trauma support	Participants advocated for better support from mental health professionals with early childhood experience in order to promote greater understanding and implementation of trauma-informed care.	

"I wrote a grant to get a calm down corner...and that help has been helpful to varying degrees. I'm also requesting that the psychiatric social worker come in and do restorative justice circles with our class so that we can kind of heal from it and recognize the progress that's been made, and try to help support more progress for the student..."

"...So, first and foremost, you have to get to the families. You have to know the family because otherwise, they're the ones that know everything that happened in their lives. And that's how you find out like, okay, and we're in an area that we have a lot of, you know, homeless situations. Kids being raised by grandparents, parents who were in the system or you know, different things like that..."

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Barriers to Trauma-informed Practices

Professional Barriers

Financial barriers — Some participants face financial barriers that affect their ability to effectively support their students.

Lack of support & training — Participants mention challenges with the lack of support and training from colleagues, administrators, or the school district, making it difficult to handle extreme behaviors and high-needs students effectively.

Uncertain disciplinary approaches — Some participants mention difficulties with disciplinary approaches, including a lack of consequences for negative behaviors, leading to challenging classroom environments.

Concerns about future support — Participants express concerns about the upcoming school year, anticipating challenges with the students they will have in their class, especially without the support they had in previous years.

Psychological Readiness Barriers

Emotional strain & stress — The empathetic nature of the job can lead to emotional strain and stress for some participants.

Overwhelming situations — Challenging behaviors and extreme situations in the classroom can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and drained.

Limited access to mental health support — Some participants express difficulty in accessing therapy or mental health support due to insurance limitations.

"I would say having more students, and less support. And, I mean, training. Again, I don't know if I'm doing it right. I haven't had, you know, like I said, sustained training from an expert. You know what I mean? Like, I'm out there googling stuff. At this point, trying to educate myself, you know, and I'm not gonna lie, I don't know that my research skills are the best. But, you know, I do feel like it's making a little bit of a difference. But yeah, maybe a great training program, and more adults would be helpful..."

"...I think therapy would also be good. But it's very hard to get a therapist in this day and age, especially with the insurance that we have. So like, that's hard. But I have considered it very strongly throughout the year and pursued it, too, but I haven't actually, like done it. So. Other ways to cope? I don't know, I think maybe training would help."

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Discussion

- UTK teachers' understandings of trauma-informed practices are related to themes of safety and considerations for continuous learning

- Facilitators were supported by the SAMHSA framework of a trauma-informed approach related to safety, peer support, collaboration & mutuality, and empowerment

- Barriers can be understood as not only professional related barriers but also their psychological readiness and preparedness to be able to engage with trauma-informed practices

Implications

- Integrate trauma–informed education training into teacher education programs to equip pre-service teachers

- Considerations for professional development and training in trauma–informed practices are needed to better support UTK teachers' understandings and capacity

    - Specifically, understandings as it relates to race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and location

    - Empowering and providing voice and choice for this young population

- Address the psychological readiness and preparedness and mitigating secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue

    - Systems level efforts should consider the well–being of UTK teachers and their access to quality mental health services (e.g., school psychologists with professional development in self–care and trauma)

    - Professional development learning opportunities to promote self–reflection and healing

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(Bruner, 2017; Duane, 2023; L'Estrange & Howard, 2022; Schepers & Young, 2021)

Limitations/Future Directions

- Study included 5 UTK educators from California, which may limit the generalizability

  – Larger and more diverse sample could provide more comprehensive understanding of trauma-informed practices in UTK classrooms

- Demographics

  – All participants were female educators and majority were Caucasian/White

- Educator well-being and workforce

  – Exploring themes of educator well-being and their intention whether to remain or leave the workforce should be further explored as it relates to the barriers experienced in the UTK classrooms

Acknowledgement

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- Contributors: Makeda Mayes, Xueqin Lin, Namjoo Kang

Thank You!

Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions.
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