

Understanding Teachers' Trauma-Informed Practices in Universal Transitional Kindergarten



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Learning Objectives *



Understand the foundational principles of trauma-informed care (TIC) and recognize its significance in early childhood education settings, especially Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK).

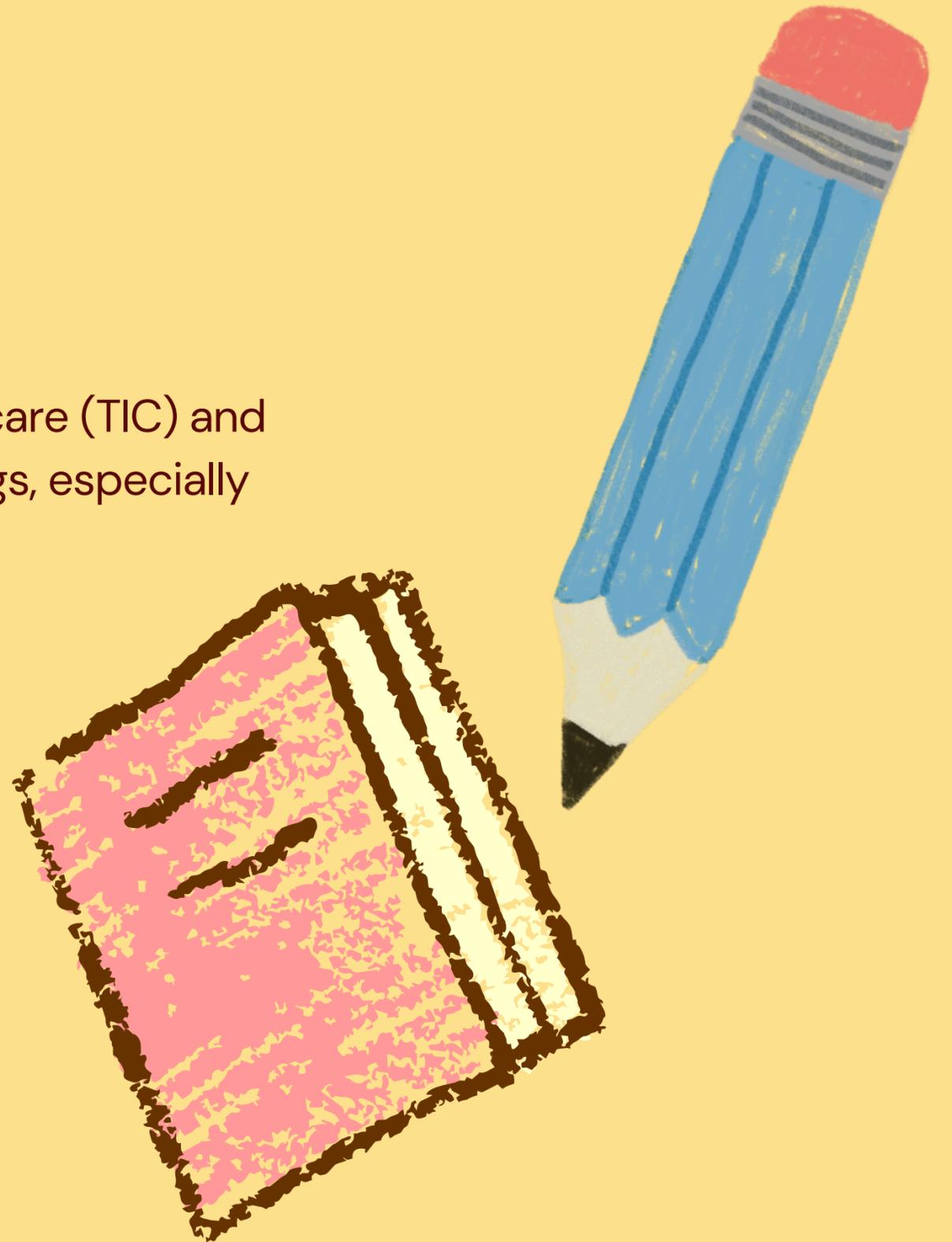


Identify the roles and responsibilities of educators in implementing trauma-informed practices.



Explore systemic challenges and support needs for effective TIC implementation.

Examine the collaborative role of school psychologists in promoting trauma-sensitive environments and maintaining teacher well-being,



Meet the team.✳



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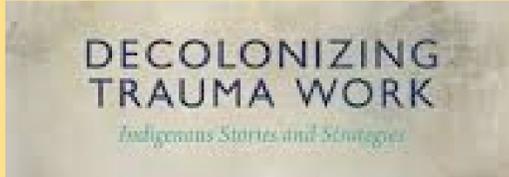
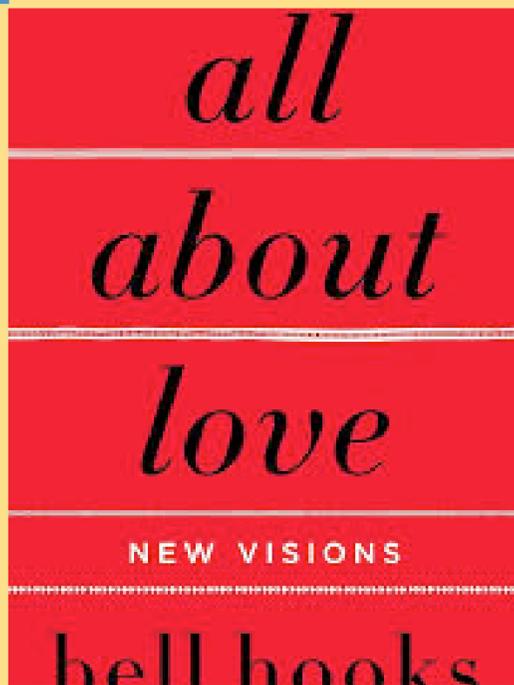
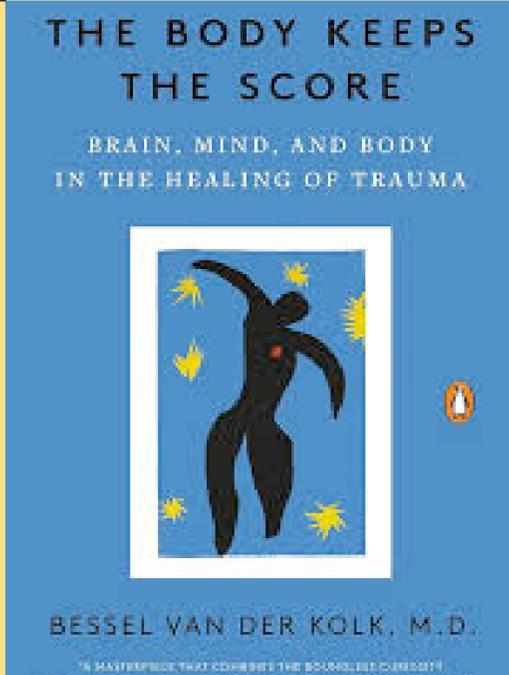
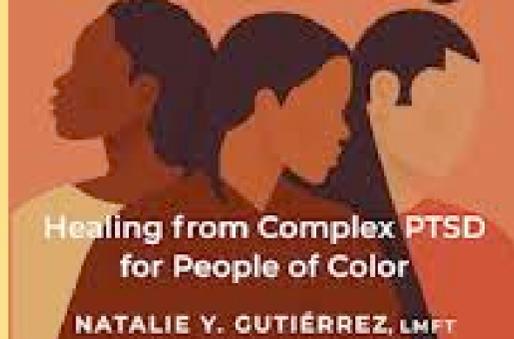
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Trauma can be defined as an event or set of circumstances experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening, leading to lasting negative effects on an individual's psychological, emotional, physical, social, or spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA, 2014)

Traditional Understandings of Trauma

**How have you seen trauma manifest
in your schools & students?**



TIC

Trauma-Informed Care (& Practices)

Trauma-informed approaches have gained recognition as an essential component within ECE settings, particularly for children with significant trauma histories.

(Chudzik et al., 2025)

The current lack of a cohesive TIP framework in educational contexts further complicates clear communication and consistent implementation, emphasizing the need to capture teachers' bottom-up experiences from diverse contexts.

(Watson & Astor, 2025)

Several common components consistently emerge in school settings:

- (a) acknowledging trauma and collectively dedicating efforts to address it,
- (b) comprehensive safety (physical, emotional, psychological),
- (c) adopting strengths-based and whole-person approaches, and
- (d) cultivating trust-based, collaborative, and empowering relationships among all organizational members.

UTK

*Universal
Transition
Kindergarten*



UTK programs are characterized by a play-based curriculum and inclusive teaching strategies tailored to the developmental needs of diverse learners, such as dual-language learners and children with special needs (San Diego County Office of Education, 2024).

California's Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) policy is a prominent effort within the broader UPK framework, designed to provide equitable and inclusive education for all 4-year-olds by 2026 (California School Boards Association, 2022).



Expanding access to early childhood education (ECE) can effectively narrow cognitive and achievement gaps (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013).

Centrality of Teachers



Understanding teachers' perspectives is critical to effectively implementing TIP, as they are the primary implementers of daily practices in schools (Fondren et al., 2020; Miller & Santos, 2020).

By identifying and addressing teachers' experiences and needs, schools can create more effective trauma-informed environments that better support students' academic and social-emotional development (L'Estrange & Howard, 2022).

Study Overview*

143 teachers

Online Survey

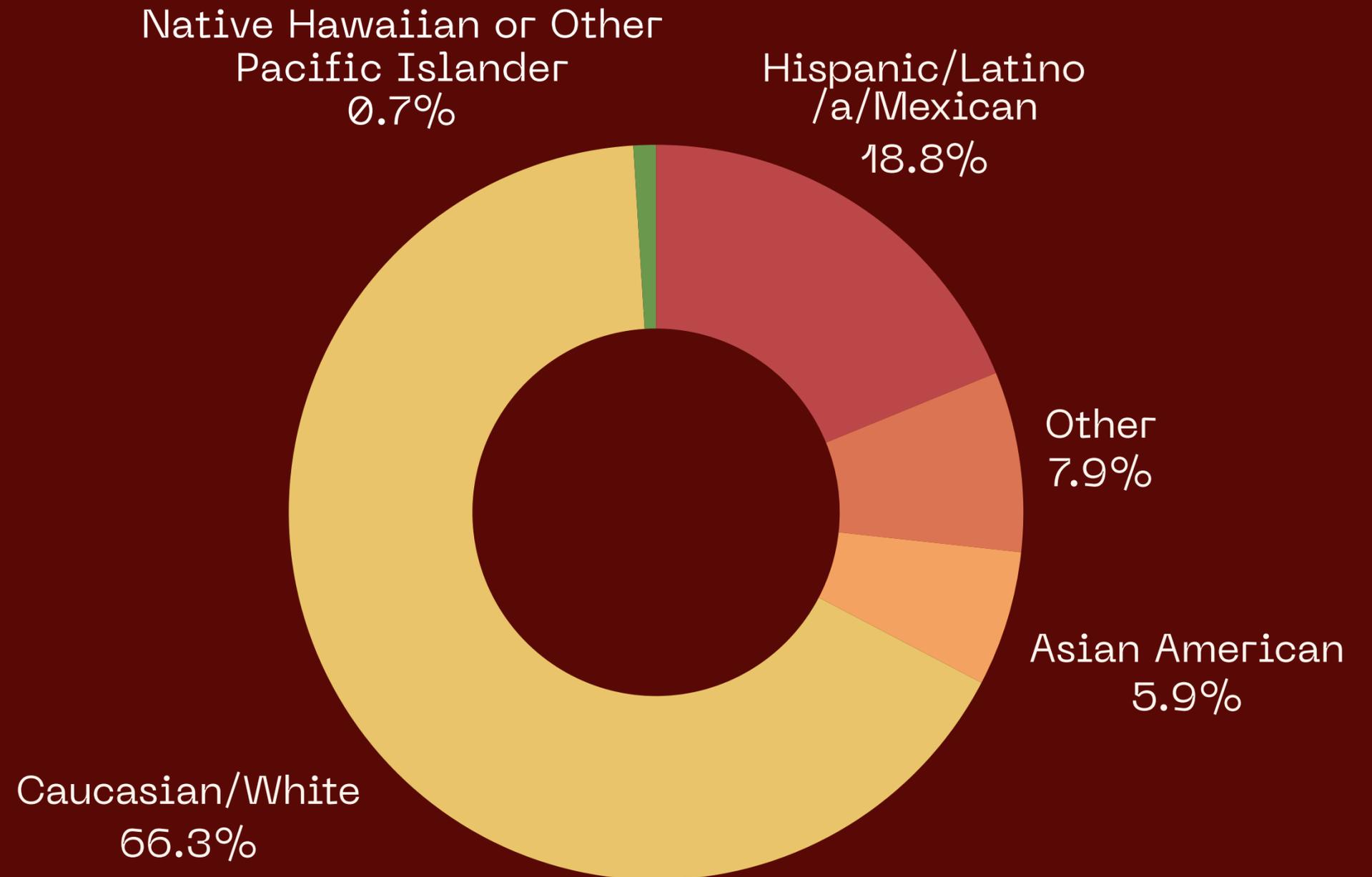
21 teachers

Semi-Structured Virtual Interviews

Demographics.*

23-68

years of age
[\bar{x} = 45.1yo]



Demographics.*

26.8% Northern California

23.6% Central California

49.6% Southern California



60.1% > 15 years of PreK–12 experience

44.8% 0–3 years of TK experience

1.4% > 15 years of TK experience

Protocol and Key Constructs. *

*Teacher Candidates and
Trauma-Informed Practices
Questionnaire
([Brown et al., 2020](#))*

Survey

Demographics
School Climate
SEL
Trauma-Informed Practices *
Family Engagement Practices
Well-being
Turnover Intention
Social & Professional Network
Open-ended question

Interview

General experience
School readiness
SEL Practices
Trauma-informed practices *
Family engagement practices
Demands and Resources
UTK Implementation

Quantitative Categories.

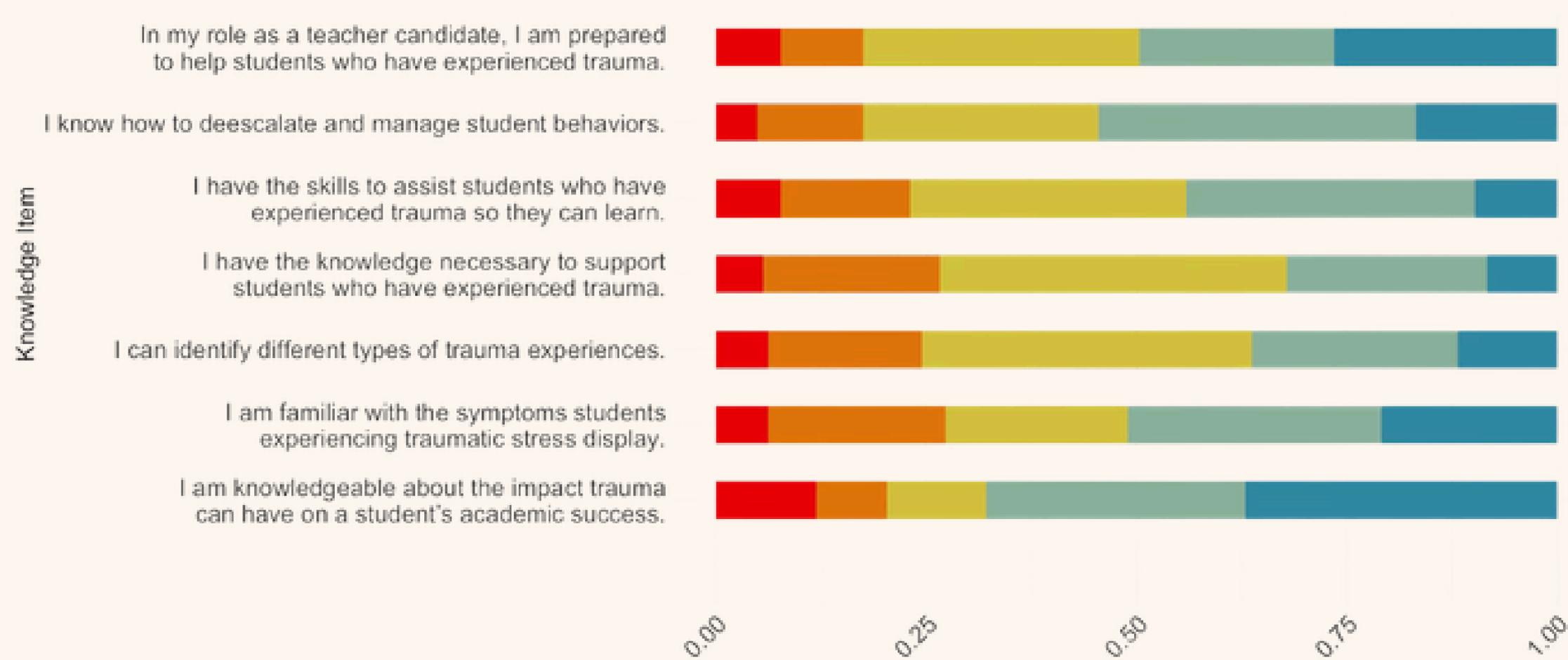
*UTK Teachers' Levels of
Knowledge of TIPs*

*UTK Teachers' **Attitudes**
Toward TIP*

*UTK Teachers' **Confidence**
in TIP Implementation*

A significant portion of educators lack comprehensive knowledge of trauma-informed practices, indicating gaps in awareness of trauma symptoms, impacts on students, and effective de-escalation strategies.

Item Analyses: Knowledge



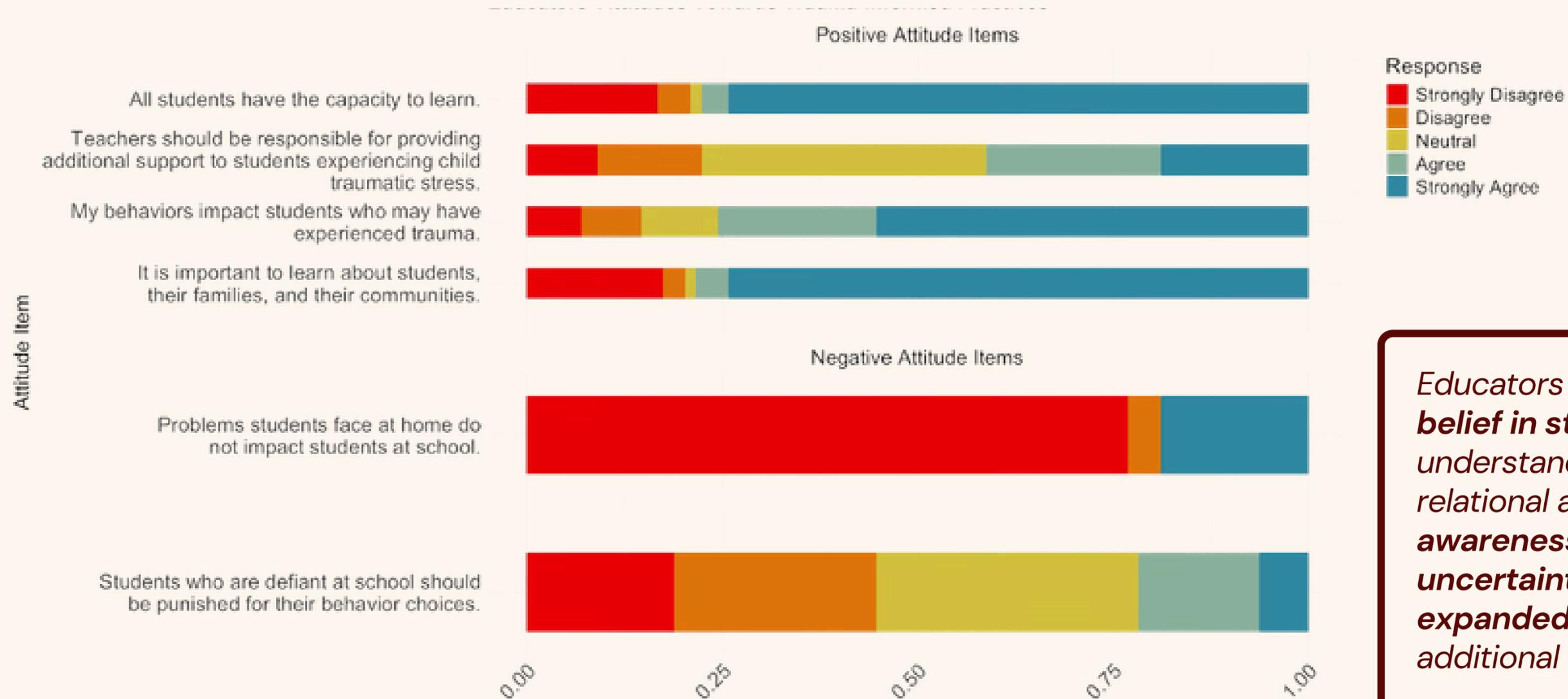
Response

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Educators express confidence in understanding trauma's impact and recognizing symptoms, but less so in identifying different types of trauma and supporting students who have experienced it.

*Most educators have **positive attitudes toward trauma-informed practices**, but some barriers or misconceptions may hinder full implementation.*

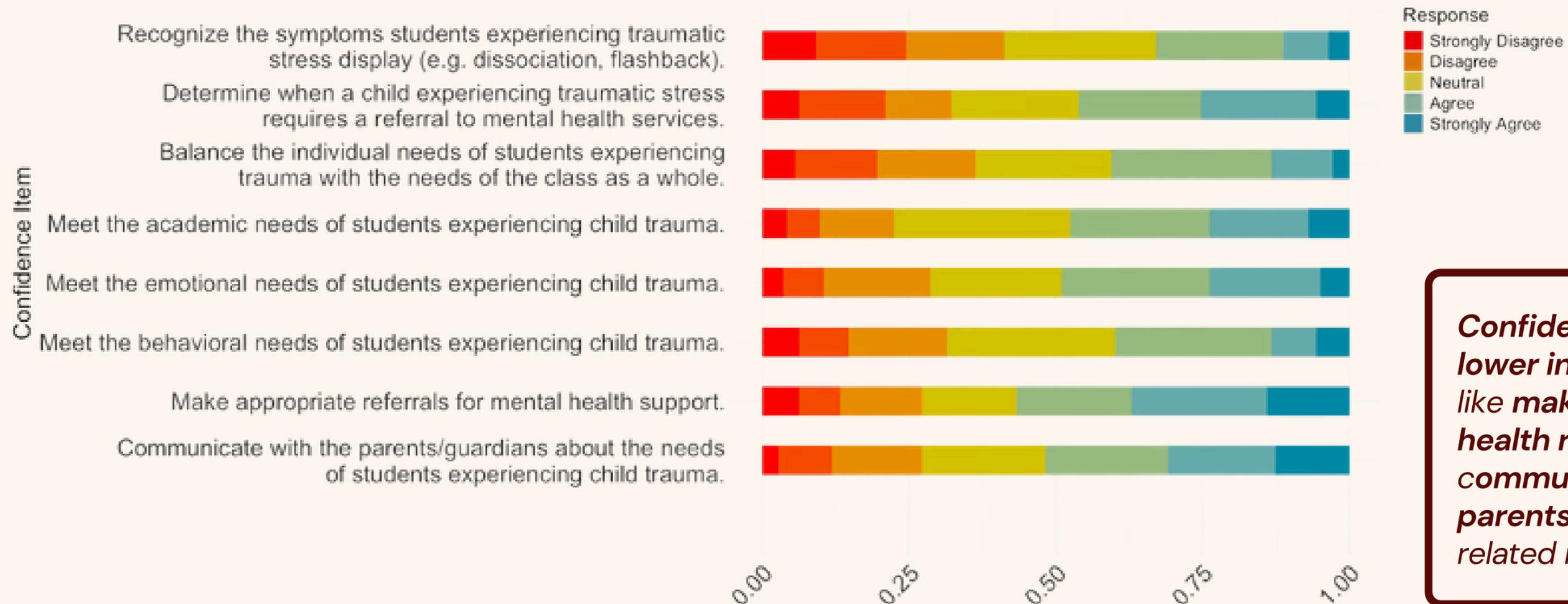
Item Analyses: Attitudes



*Educators demonstrate a **strong belief in student potential** and understand the **importance of relational and contextual awareness**. However, there's **uncertainty about their expanded role** in providing additional trauma support.*

Confidence is particularly low in addressing students' academic, emotional, and behavioral needs.

Item Analyses: Confidence



Confidence is even lower in complex areas like making mental health referrals and communicating with parents about trauma-related needs.

Qualitative case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) due to in-depth exploratory nature, and **reflexive inductive thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to allow **key themes and patterns to emerge organically** from teachers' lived experiences.



Codes were developed inductively from the data (e.g., "emotional safety," "predictable routines," "calming spaces," "inclusivity," "individualized support") and iteratively refined through team discussions that emphasized reflexivity and interpretive engagement.

Qualitative Analyses

Themes and Subthemes

UTK Teachers' Perspectives on Trauma-Informed Practices

Theme 1

Current Trauma-Informed Practices in Classrooms

Sub-theme 1.1

Demonstrating empathy and understanding student needs

Sub-theme 1.2

Fostering an inclusive and safe classroom environment

Sub-theme 1.3

Building strong communication and family relationships

Sub-theme 1.4

Teachers as caregivers: Extending caregiving roles beyond instruction

Theme 2

Supports Needed for Effective Implementation

Sub-theme 2.1

Collaborating with social workers and school psychologists

Sub-theme 2.2

Professional development needs in trauma-informed practices

Sub-theme 2.3

Dealing with secondary traumatic stress

Theme 1:

Current Trauma-Informed Practices in Classrooms 

Theme 2:

Supports Needed for Effective Implementation 

Theme 1 Quotes.

1.1: Demonstrating Empathy and Understanding of Student Needs

"I understand early childhood. I understand trauma-informed care. I know all my students; I know all their families. I know where they come from, I know what's going on in their lives, and I know that's what they need right now." (Female, Asian/Asian American, P2)

1.2: Fostering an Inclusive and Safe Classroom Environment

An inclusive practice means including everybody, with different posters on the walls and everything to make them feel included. We offer different books or puzzles that address disabilities or different experiences students have had." (F, Hispanic/Latino/a/Mexican, P13)

1.3: Building Strong Communication and Family Relationships

"I send home a paper with a heart on it that says, 'Handle with care.' It includes an explanation, letting parents know that if something is going on at home, they don't have to share the details, but they can send the paper with their child as a nonverbal way for me to know that they might need extra support that day." (F, Caucasian/White, P5)

1.4: Teachers as Caregivers: Extending Caregiving Roles Beyond Instruction

"We take on more of a role. We're not just their teacher anymore. I've been in that situation where we have to make sure that we have our stuff stocked up because there's dirt under the nails. We take on a different role. We're the second parent, and in some cases, we're the main parent. We are the example that they see, and we are who they come to for comfort." (F, Hispanic/Latine/Mexican, P4)

Theme 2 Quotes.

2.1: Collaborating with Social Workers & School Psychologists

"We do have a counselor and **school psychologist on-site**, and **our counselor is great**. And she's done two SELs with the children just to get them comfortable with her and her place in the school. So, if we ever had a big traumatic situation, **we would have somebody else to help us with it.**" (*Female, Caucasian/White, P10*)

2.2: Professional Development Needs in TIPs

"**My district treats it like a box to check off.** Like, "Oh, we gave teachers a PD [professional development] on TIP, **and it was just an online PD with a short quiz.**" I kind of wish I had a suitcase full of more tools under that trauma umbrella." (*Female, Caucasian/White, 15*)

2.3: Dealing with Secondary Traumatic Stress

"When you first start teaching, you feel sad. **But after you [sic] so many people experience that, and it doesn't really bother me.** I don't get depressed." (*Female, Caucasian/White, P5*)

Implication

Critical Considerations



Thinking about adapting to changing immigration policies, police responses to mental health, safety planning and strategies around crisis prevention in schools.



Providing structured mental health support, facilitating reflective practice, and offering targeted self-care programs.



Highlighting teachers' real-world strategies and specific support needs, this study informs efforts to develop a comprehensive and coherent TIP framework.



Creating and sustaining trauma-informed school cultures: consistent administrative backing, providing timely resources, fostering environments where peer collaboration and emotional support among staff are prioritized.

“We Understand, But Need Support”: Teachers’ Perspectives on Trauma-Informed Practices in Universal Transitional Kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

As the national movement toward universal preschool gains momentum, trauma-informed practices (TIP) are increasingly recognized as foundational for promoting equitable and developmentally responsive early education. Despite this growing emphasis, research remains limited in examining TIP within transitional kindergarten settings, particularly in California’s pioneering Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK). Additionally, the absence of a cohesive TIP framework complicates effective implementation and highlights the need to understand teachers’ experiences. To address these gaps, we conducted reflexive thematic analysis of semistructured interviews with 21 UTK teachers across California to explore their understanding of TIP and experiences as early implementers. Two major themes emerged: (a) current TIP strategies—including demonstrating empathy, fostering inclusive and emotionally safe classroom environments, building robust family-school partnerships, and adopting caregiver roles beyond academics; and (b) critical supports necessary for effective TIP implementation, notably structured interdisciplinary collaboration with school psychologists and social workers, targeted professional development, and resources addressing secondary traumatic stress among educators. Findings highlight significant gaps between existing TIP implementation and essential systemic support. This study provides crucial insights to inform UTK policy, refine TIP frameworks, and delineate pivotal roles school psychologists play in fostering sustainable trauma-informed educational environments, thereby enhancing developmental outcomes and school readiness for young children.

IMPACT STATEMENT

This study reveals that teachers in UTK programs actively use trauma-informed practices, such as empathy and family engagement and fostering family engagement, to support young children’s emotional needs. However, findings highlight critical gaps, emphasizing the urgent need for structured collaboration with school psychologists and targeted professional development to enhance teacher well-being and promote effective trauma-informed early childhood education. By illuminating teachers’ lived experiences and practical challenges, our findings provide empirical insights essential for developing a cohesive TIP framework.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Creating Safe Spaces: Exploring Trauma-Informed Practices in Transitional Kindergarten Education (Part 2)

Executive Summary

California’s Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) policy is a key part of the state’s initiative to broaden access to early childhood education through the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program. As California aims to ensure all four-year-old children can access early education by 2026, educators’ roles are especially critical during UTK’s early implementation stages. This project brief examines the current attitudes, knowledge, and confidence of Transitional Kindergarten (TK) educators in California regarding trauma-informed practices (TIP) and identifies the specific supports needed to enhance their ability to address trauma-related needs in students.

As part of a longitudinal mixed-method study, the data were collected from 143 TK teachers across 45 California school districts during the 2022–2023 school year. Key findings highlight critical gaps in educators’ knowledge, confidence, and attitudes toward trauma-informed practices, underscoring the need for targeted professional development and systemic support. Approximately 22% of teachers reported a lack of comprehensive knowledge of trauma-informed practices, with many uncertain of how trauma impacts students academically, emotionally, and behaviorally. While many educators demonstrated confidence in specific areas, such as understanding trauma’s impact and recognizing trauma symptoms, significant gaps remain in areas like identifying different types of trauma and effectively supporting students who have experienced it. Notably, 67.9% of educators expressed uncertainty or a lack of confidence when asked about their ability to support students with trauma, reflecting substantial uncertainty in translating theoretical knowledge into practice.

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Thank you!

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