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

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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.

KEY TERMS

► **Trauma-Informed Practices (TIP):** A set of practices that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma on students' development, learning, and behavior (Jennings, 2018). It emphasizes creating safe, supportive environments that minimize retraumatization and foster healing by integrating an understanding of trauma into all aspects of school culture, policies, and interactions.

Attitudes toward trauma-informed practices were generally positive. However, about a third of educators (36.4%) expressed neutrality about their role in providing additional trauma support, indicating hesitancy or lack of clarity about these responsibilities. Additionally, mixed perspectives on discipline suggest an opportunity to shift attitudes toward supportive, trauma-sensitive alternatives, as a little over half of educators (55.3%) were neutral or still inclined toward punitive measures for defiant behavior.

Furthermore, confidence levels varied vastly across key competencies, demonstrating mixed views regarding the responsibility of teachers in providing additional trauma support, with many teachers unsure of their role in addressing these needs. While 55% of educators reported moderate to high confidence in implementing trauma-informed practices, confidence was notably lower in addressing students' academic, emotional, and behavioral needs. For instance, fewer than 7% of educators rated their confidence at the highest level (7 on a 7-point Likert scale) across critical areas like making mental health referrals and communicating with families about trauma-related needs, with over 70% rating their confidence between 1 and 4. These findings indicate a need for targeted interventions to build educators' capacity to address complex student needs through trauma-informed approaches.

To address these gaps, professional development programs should prioritize building foundational knowledge such as recognizing trauma symptoms, understanding the effects of trauma on learning, and employing effective de-escalation strategies. Training must also focus on equipping educators with practical skills to meet students' academic and emotional needs, fostering confidence in managing trauma-related behaviors, and facilitating effective collaboration with families and mental health professionals. Additionally, efforts should address educators' attitudes toward discipline and clarify their roles in a school-wide trauma-informed approach. In conclusion, this research underscores the critical importance of sustained, targeted interventions to improve educators' knowledge, confidence, and attitudes toward trauma-informed practices. By building on educators' strengths—such as their belief in student potential and relational awareness—while addressing areas of uncertainty, schools can create environments that are responsive to the needs of all students, particularly those affected by trauma. Comprehensive support systems, including professional learning opportunities and a systems-level approach to trauma-informed care, are essential to equipping educators with the tools to foster student resilience and success.

Background

Trauma encompasses physical, emotional, and/or life-threatening harm resulting in adverse effects on individuals' mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). To address the high rates of young children's exposure to traumatic experiences, trauma-informed practices offer a strengths-oriented approach, emphasizing safety and empowerment for both providers and survivors (Hopper et al.,

2010, p. 82). Given the importance of schools as immediate environmental settings where adults and peers can influence children's beliefs and actions (Bronfenbrenner, 2007), teachers play a crucial role in supporting children's development.

With the rising emphasis on early childhood education through policies like California's UTK initiative (California School Boards Association, 2022), examining TK teachers' trauma-informed practices becomes essential. Ensuring that teachers are equipped to respond to the complex needs of children exposed to trauma can enhance the effectiveness of UTK's equitable education goals, making classrooms accessible and supportive. Given that UTK aims to provide equitable early education access (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022), understanding how teachers perceive and understand trauma-informed practices can highlight the gaps and strengths in current practices. This examination is critical when considering teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and confidence toward trauma-informed practices. By analyzing these aspects, educational partners can identify areas where teachers might need more support or training, ensuring they are well-prepared to foster resilient and supportive environments for children who may have experienced trauma.

Main Research Questions: How confident and prepared are TK educators in implementing trauma-informed practices, and what support is needed to enhance their ability to address the trauma-related needs of students?

1. Assess the capacities of TK educators to identify, manage, and support the academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of students experiencing trauma.
2. Analyze TK educators' knowledge and perceptions of their responsibilities in addressing students' trauma-related needs, both academically and emotionally.

Overview of Survey

Survey data come from the first wave of a three-year longitudinal mixed-method study exploring TK teachers' experiences during the ongoing implementation of the UPK policy in California. We recruited participants in collaboration with UC Berkeley and 21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy), who provide no-cost professional learning to school districts across the state. Participants needed to work with four-year-old children in a transitional kindergarten setting to qualify for the study.

To investigate TK teachers' knowledge and application of trauma-informed practices, participants were asked to provide insights into their understanding of trauma's impact on academic success, their familiarity with symptoms of traumatic stress displayed by students, and their ability to identify different types of trauma experiences. They also provided demographic details. The survey included questions assessing their confidence in supporting students who have experienced trauma, managing and de-escalating behaviors, and balancing the individual needs of traumatized students with those of the entire class. Additionally, educators were prompted to express their perceptions of their responsibilities in addressing the emotional and behavioral needs of students facing trauma.

Demographic Information of Survey Participants

Data were collected from teachers working with four-year-olds in TK classrooms across approximately 45 school districts in California between April 2023 and August 2023, during the first school year (2022–2023) of UPK policy implementation in California. The sample comprised 143 TK teachers (97.2% female, 2.1% male, 0.7% non-binary). The ages of the participants

ranged from 23 to 68, with an average age of 45.1. Educators worked in predominantly urban settings, with 42.7% working at schools in cities and 39.9% in suburban areas, while only 8.4% worked in towns, and 9.1% were in rural schools, as classified by the National Center for Education Statistics (Geverdt & Maselli, 2024). Regarding racial and ethnic backgrounds, the breakdown was as follows: 67.1% Caucasian/White, 18.9% Hispanic/Latino/a/e/Mexican, 5.6% Asian/Asian American, 0.7% Native Hawaiian

or Other Pacific Islander, and 7.7% identifying as Other.¹ As shown in Table 1, our participants' years employed suggest that a substantial portion of teachers have less experience in TK compared to their overall Pre-K-12 teaching experience.

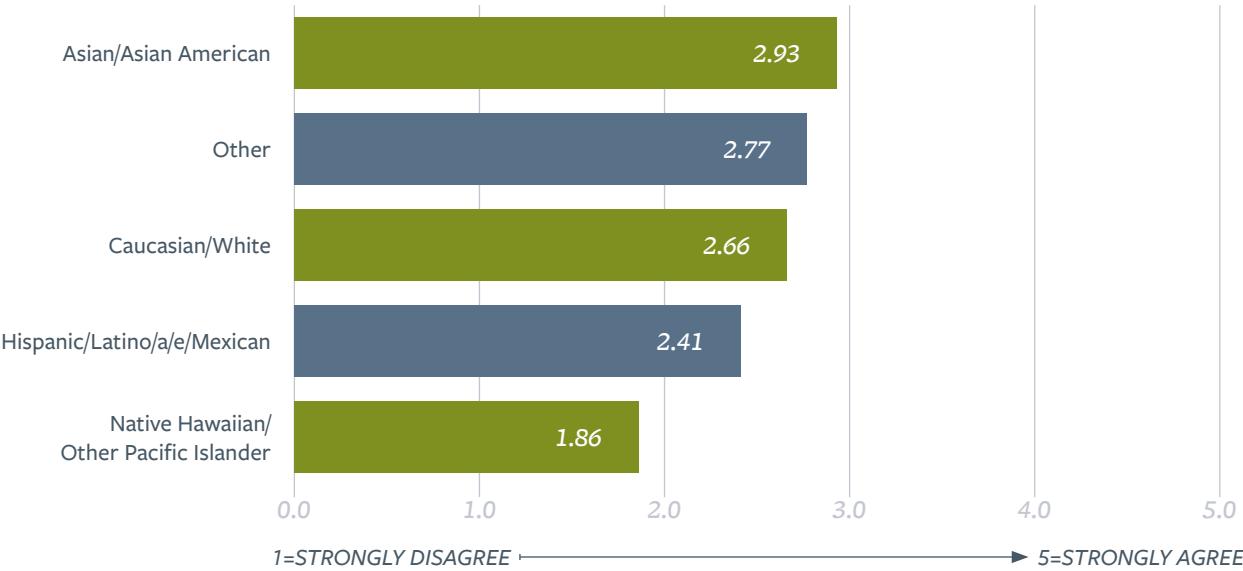
¹ The absence of Black/African American teachers in this dataset is a critical limitation. Given the unique perspectives and cultural contributions of Black educators, their exclusion may limit the generalizability of these findings. Caution is advised when interpreting results, as they may not fully reflect the experiences of a racially diverse teaching workforce.

Table 1

Survey Participants by Years Employed				
YEARS EMPLOYED	Pre-K-12		Transitional Kindergarten	
	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
0-3	9	6.3%	64	44.8%
4-10	27	18.9%	56	39.2%
11-15	21	14.7%	21	14.7%
>15	86	60.1%	2	1.4%

Figure 1

Has Knowledge of TIP: Average Agreement Level by TK Teacher Race/Ethnicity



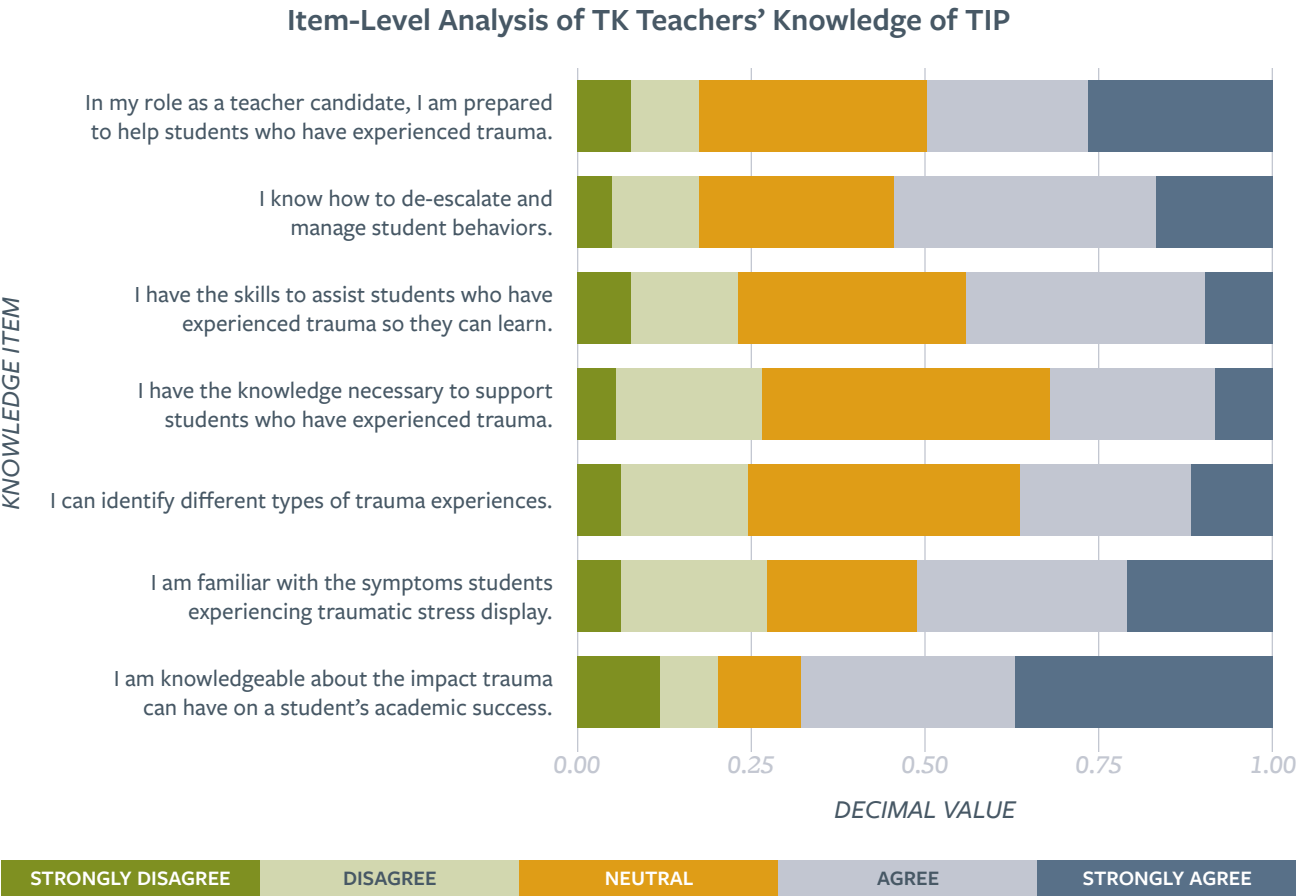
TK Teachers’ Knowledge of Trauma-Informed Practices

As shown in Figure 1, Asian/Asian American TK teachers reported the highest knowledge on average in trauma-informed practices (2.93 on a 5-point scale), followed by teachers who self-described or identified as Other² (2.77), Caucasian/White teachers (2.66), and Hispanic/Latino/a/e/ Mexican teachers (2.41). In contrast, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander TK teachers reported the lowest level of knowledge (1.86).

² Other applies to teachers who self-identified as mixed, biracial, or multiracial (encompassing multiple ethnicities).

Foundational knowledge (i.e., knowledge of symptoms, impact of trauma, de-escalation skills) of trauma-informed practices in educational spaces can help educators collaborate to support student mental and physical health (Morton & Berardi, 2018). When asked about their understanding of trauma-informed practices, we found that about 30% of educators expressed a neutral stance on their overall comprehensive knowledge in this area. Additionally, a quarter (22%) of educators expressed a lack of overall comprehensive understanding in this area, with 15% disagreeing and 7% strongly disagreeing with the notion that they have such knowledge.

Figure 2



As shown in Figure 2, many educators understood trauma’s impact (67.9% agreed or strongly agreed), could recognize its symptoms (51.1% agreed or strongly agreed), and felt confident (54.6% agreed or strongly agreed) in their capacity to de-escalate trauma-related behaviors. However, fewer felt confident in identifying various types of trauma, with 36.4% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing and 39.2% expressing a neutral stance. A significant portion of educators felt neutral about having the knowledge to support trauma-affected students (41.3%), and, subsequently, their ability to help these students (32.9%). About a quarter of educators disagreed on their capacities for both items (26.6% and 23.1%, respectively). Additionally, 28% of educators were neutral in managing student behaviors, while 17.5% lacked confidence in this area. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive

training and support systems to enhance educators’ competence in trauma-informed approaches.

TK Teachers’ Attitudes Toward Trauma-Informed Practices

As shown in Figure 3, TK teachers self-identified as Other reported the highest positive attitude (2.98 on a 5-point scale) toward trauma-informed practices, followed by Hispanic/Latino/a/e/Mexican teachers (2.68), Caucasian/White teachers (2.62), and Asian/Asian American teachers (2.48), while Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander teachers reported the lowest (2.17).

Positive attitudes toward trauma-informed practices are crucial for fostering responsive learning environments (Muskett, 2013; Kim et al., 2021). When asked about their attitudes toward trauma-

Figure 3
Has Favorable Attitudes Toward TIP: Average Agreement Level by TK Teacher Race/Ethnicity

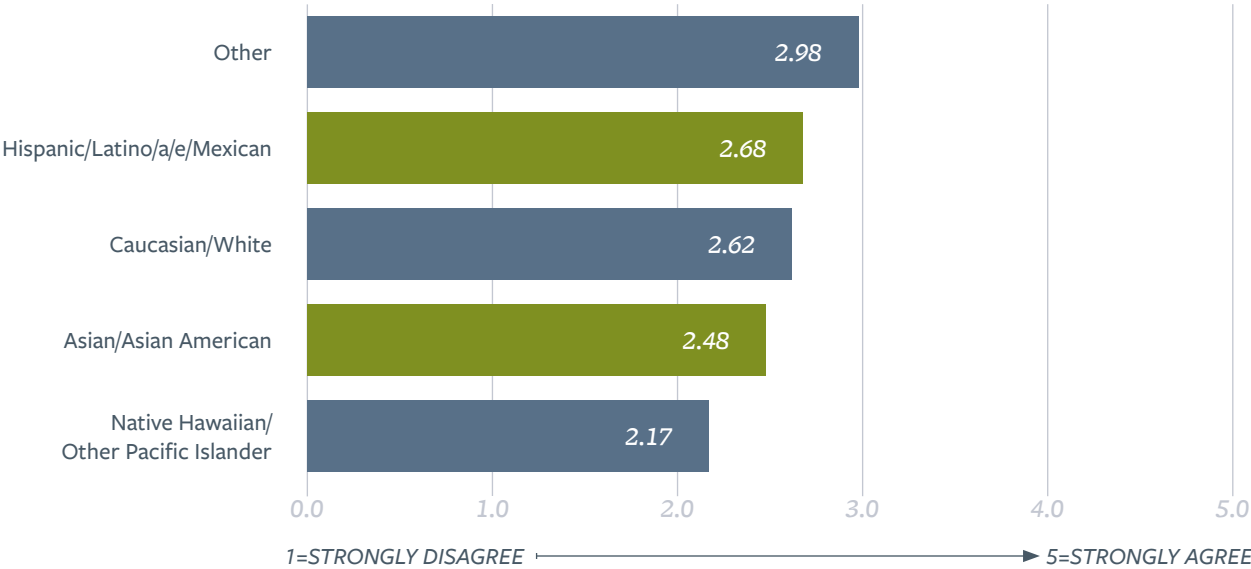
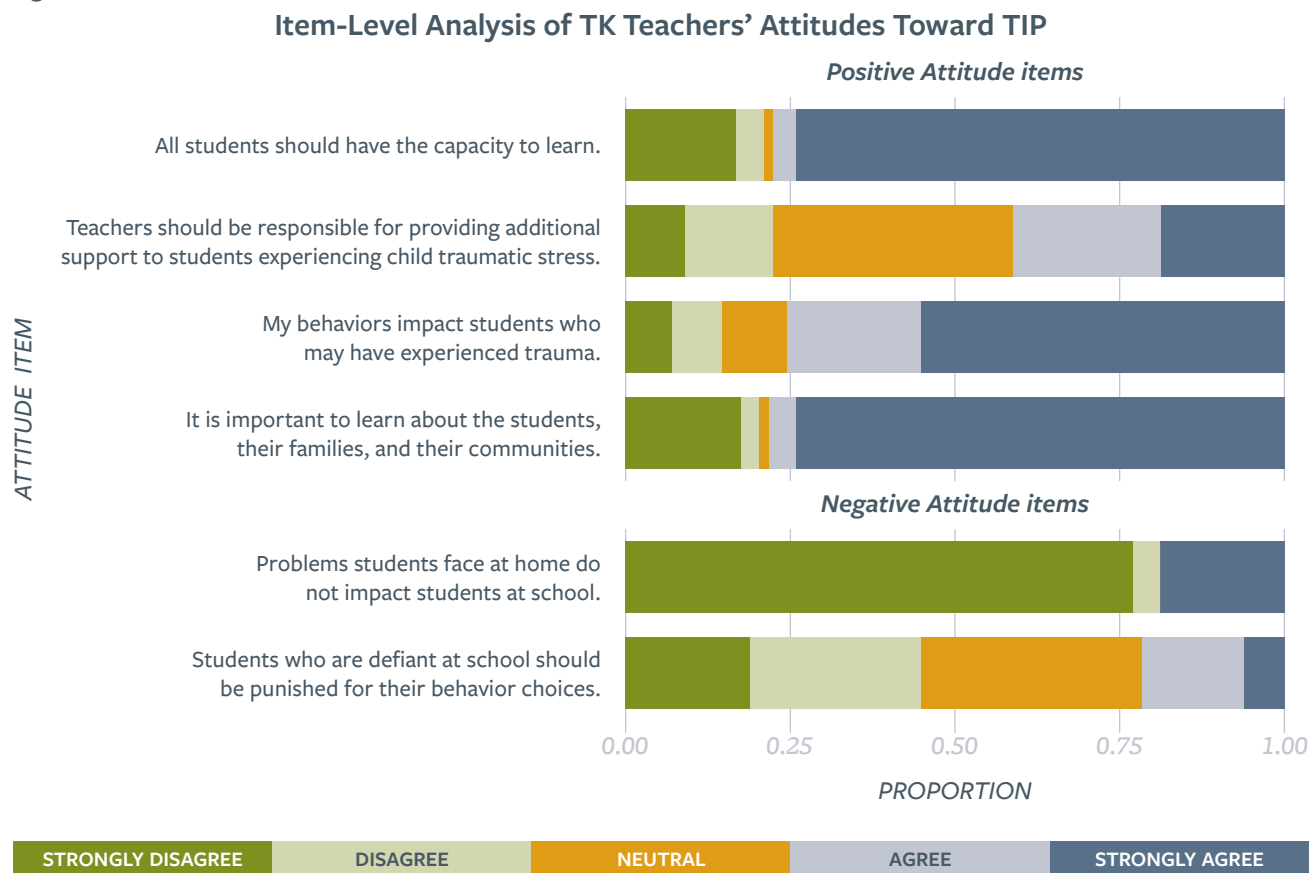


Figure 4



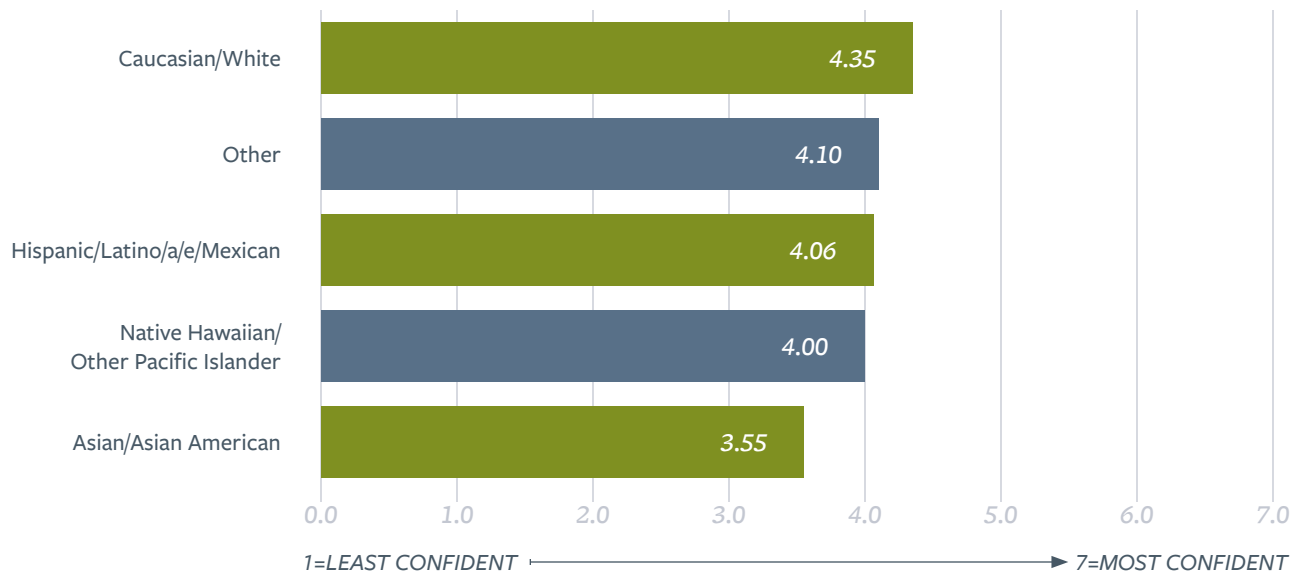
informed practices, we found that a majority (66%) of teachers held positive views, with 53% strongly agreeing and 13% agreeing with statements reflecting favorable attitudes toward trauma-informed care. As shown in Figure 4, 74.1% strongly believe that all students can learn, and 75.5% recognize their influence on students who have experienced trauma. Additionally, 74.1% emphasize learning about students' broader contexts, with 76.9% acknowledging that home problems impact school. These findings suggest that most educators recognize the value of trauma-informed approaches.

However, the remaining 14% who expressed neutrality and the 20% who disagreed or

strongly disagreed overall may reflect underlying hesitations or barriers, underscoring the importance of addressing misconceptions or gaps in understanding to ensure the effective implementation of trauma-informed practices for supporting student well-being and resilience. Views are mixed on expanded trauma support roles (36.4% neutral, 22.4% disagree or strongly disagree) and discipline (44.8% against punitive measures, 33.6% neutral, and 21.7% supportive), highlighting the need for professional development to enhance educators' strengths while addressing gaps in self-awareness, cultural responsiveness, and trauma-informed discipline approaches.

Figure 5

Can Implement TIP: Average Confidence Level by TK Teacher Race/Ethnicity



TK Teachers' Confidence in Trauma-Informed Practices Implementation

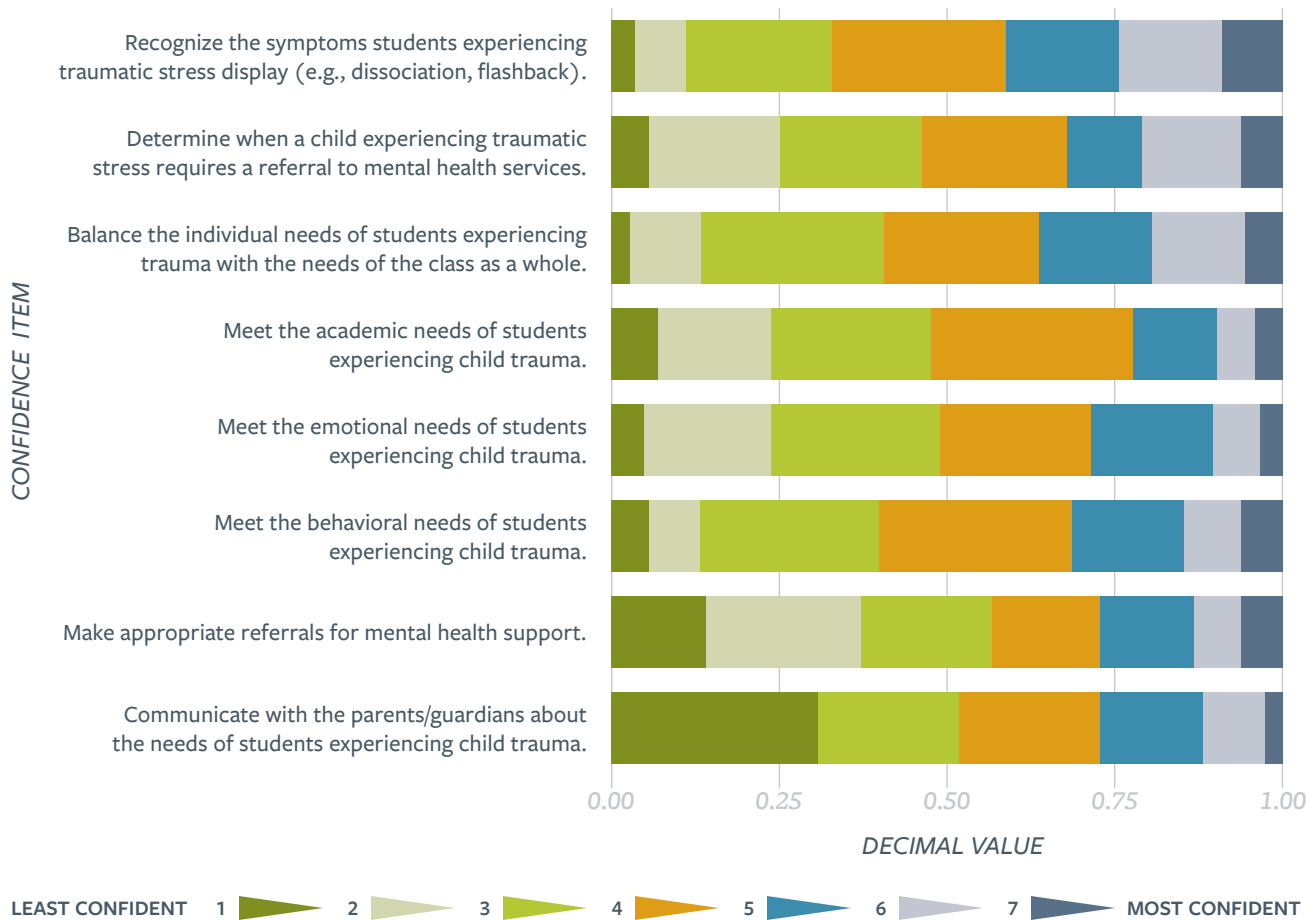
As shown in Figure 5, Caucasian/White teachers reported the highest confidence in implementing trauma-informed practices (4.35 on a 7-point scale), followed by teachers who self-described or identified as Other (4.10), Hispanic/Latino/a/e/Mexican teachers (4.06), and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander teachers (4.00), while Asian/Asian American TK teachers reported the lowest (3.55).

Educator confidence in applying trauma-informed practices is critical in creating safe and supportive classroom environments (Bilbrey et al., 2024; Brown et al., 2022). When asked about their confidence levels, we found that 55% of teachers felt fairly positive (5 or higher) about their ability to implement these practices. Specifically, 6% reported feeling most confident (rating a 7), 10% rated their confidence at a 6, and 15% at a 5. As shown in Figure 6, educators show moderate proficiency in recognizing trauma symptoms and addressing individual needs but face significant

gaps in meeting students' academic, emotional, and behavioral needs. While confidence levels at 5 or 6 are considered acceptable, striving for a 7 is ideal. For example, 16.8% rated their confidence in recognizing trauma symptoms at 5, 15.4% at 6, and 9.1% at 7. Confidence is slightly lower for determining students' needs (11.2% at 5, 14.7% at 6, and 6.3% at 7) and balancing individual student needs (16.8% at 5, 14.0% at 6, and 5.6% at 7). Most ratings for meeting academic, emotional, and behavioral needs fell between 2 and 4, with fewer than 6.9% at 7. Additionally, 72.8% rated their confidence between 1 and 4 for making mental health referrals and communicating with parents. While these findings indicate that a third of educators generally feel capable overall in creating learning environments that support students affected by trauma, the distribution reveals areas for enhancing educator confidence in applying trauma-informed approaches effectively, highlighting the need for targeted support and professional development to address students' comprehensive needs with greater confidence and efficacy.

Figure 6

Item-Level Analysis of TK Teachers' Levels of Confidence in TIP Implementation



Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings from this project brief highlight both the progress and persistent challenges in educators' understanding and confidence in trauma-informed practices within California's UTK initiative. While most educators have positive attitudes and strong foundational beliefs, gaps in confidence and comprehensive knowledge persist, particularly in identifying trauma types, meeting students' needs, and handling complex responsibilities.

This underscores the need for targeted professional development that builds on existing strengths

and addresses uncertainties. Training should focus on practical strategies for applying trauma-informed principles to address diverse student needs effectively. Furthermore, the data highlight that bridging the gap between educators' general confidence in recognizing trauma symptoms and providing actionable support is crucial.

Integrating trauma-informed practices with academic and social-emotional strategies through professional learning initiatives can help teachers foster responsive and empowering learning environments for students. This aligns with broader insights in the literature emphasizing the

interconnectedness of social-emotional learning and academic practices (Wassink-de Stigter et al., 2022; Perry & Daniels, 2016). Comprehensive professional development is crucial for enhancing teachers' confidence and proficiency, ensuring the successful implementation of trauma-informed practices, and supporting students' academic and emotional growth in transitional kindergarten classrooms.

Key Takeaways

Knowledge

- ▶ 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. School leaders should prioritize professional development programs that build foundational knowledge, including recognizing trauma symptoms, understanding trauma's effects on learning, and implementing de-escalation techniques. Such training should be embedded in teacher preparation curricula and reinforced through continuous professional development.
- ▶ 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. This suggests the need for targeted training to increase knowledge and build confidence in applying trauma-informed practices in real-world settings.

Attitudes

- ▶ Most educators have positive attitudes toward trauma-informed practices, but some barriers or misconceptions may hinder full implementation. School leaders should address misunderstandings and provide clear, evidence-based strategies for implementing trauma-informed care to enhance student resilience and well-being.

▶ Educators demonstrate a strong belief in student potential and understand the importance of relational and contextual awareness. However, there is uncertainty about their expanded role in providing additional trauma support. To build on these strengths, school leaders should promote professional development that strengthens relational practices and cultural responsiveness and clarifies educators' roles in a collaborative, school-wide trauma-informed approach.

- ▶ Despite positive attitudes, some educators still support punitive measures for defiant behavior. It's crucial to embrace supportive, trauma-sensitive alternatives. School leaders should provide training on restorative practices and equip educators with strategies that prioritize understanding and support rather than punishment.

Confidence

- ▶ Educators' confidence in trauma-informed practices reveals room for growth. Few feel highly confident (7/7) and about half rate themselves moderately confident (4 to 6). Confidence is particularly low in addressing students' academic, emotional, and behavioral needs, with most ratings between 2 and 4. School leaders should invest in professional development to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.
- ▶ Confidence is even lower in complex areas like making mental health referrals and communicating with parents about trauma-related needs, with most educators rating themselves between 1 and 4. To help educators feel more competent, school leaders should provide targeted support such as role-playing scenarios, step-by-step guides, and mentorship. Regular assessments and ongoing support will help embed these practices in school culture, leading to lasting change.

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21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research>

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