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Teachers' Experiences with Trauma-Informed Practices as Early Implementers of UTK Expansion (Part 5)

Executive Summary

California's expansion of Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) represents a major investment in early childhood education, with full implementation expected by 2025–2026 (California School Boards Association, 2023). As classrooms increasingly serve children with diverse developmental and social-emotional needs, trauma-informed practices (TIP) have become essential for supporting student learning and well-being (Chudzik et al., 2025; Whitaker et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2021).

Findings from interviews with 21 transitional kindergarten (TK) teachers indicate that TIP are already embedded in daily classroom interactions. Teachers described actively fostering emotional safety, building strong relationships with families, and supporting children's needs beyond academic instruction.

However, these practices are largely sustained through individual teacher effort rather than coordinated system-level support. Teachers reported limited access to sustained professional development, insufficient collaboration with mental health professionals, and experiences of secondary traumatic stress.

These findings suggest that while TK teachers are already engaging in trauma-informed work, system-level infrastructure has not yet caught up to classroom realities. Strengthening professional learning systems, interdisciplinary collaboration, and teacher well-being support will be critical for the sustainable implementation of TIP in UTK.

Key Terms

► Trauma-Informed Practices (TIP)

An approach to education that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and integrates this understanding into classroom practices, policies, and interactions. It emphasizes creating safe and supporting environments and responding to students' emotional and behavioral needs to promote well-being and learning.

Background

TIP has been increasingly recognized as an important framework for supporting children, particularly in early childhood education settings, exposed to adversity (Chudzik et al., 2025). Prior research suggests that TIP can promote children's school readiness and healthy developmental outcomes (Chudzik et al., 2025; Whitaker et al., 2019).

However, much of the existing literature has focused on preschool and childcare contexts, with limited attention to TK settings situated within K–12 systems (Chudzik et al., 2025). This distinction is important, as TK classrooms operate within different institutional structures, expectations, and resource constraints compared to traditional early childhood settings.

In addition, TIP is not consistently defined or implemented across educational contexts, contributing to variability in how teachers understand and apply these approaches in practice (Watson & Astor, 2025). Given the rapid expansion of UTK in California, there is a critical need to

understand how teachers are enacting TIP in this unique context and what support is necessary to sustain their implementation.

Main Research Questions

- How do TK teachers understand and enact TIP in their daily work?
- What supports, conditions, and system-level resources do teachers perceive as necessary for effective TIP implementation?

Overview of Interviews

Interview data were drawn from the first wave of a three-year longitudinal mixed-method study examining TK teachers' experiences during the ongoing implementation of the Universal Pre-Kindergarten policy in California. Participants were recruited through collaboration with 21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) as well as outreach to school districts across the state. To be eligible, participants needed to be working with four-year-old children in a TK setting.

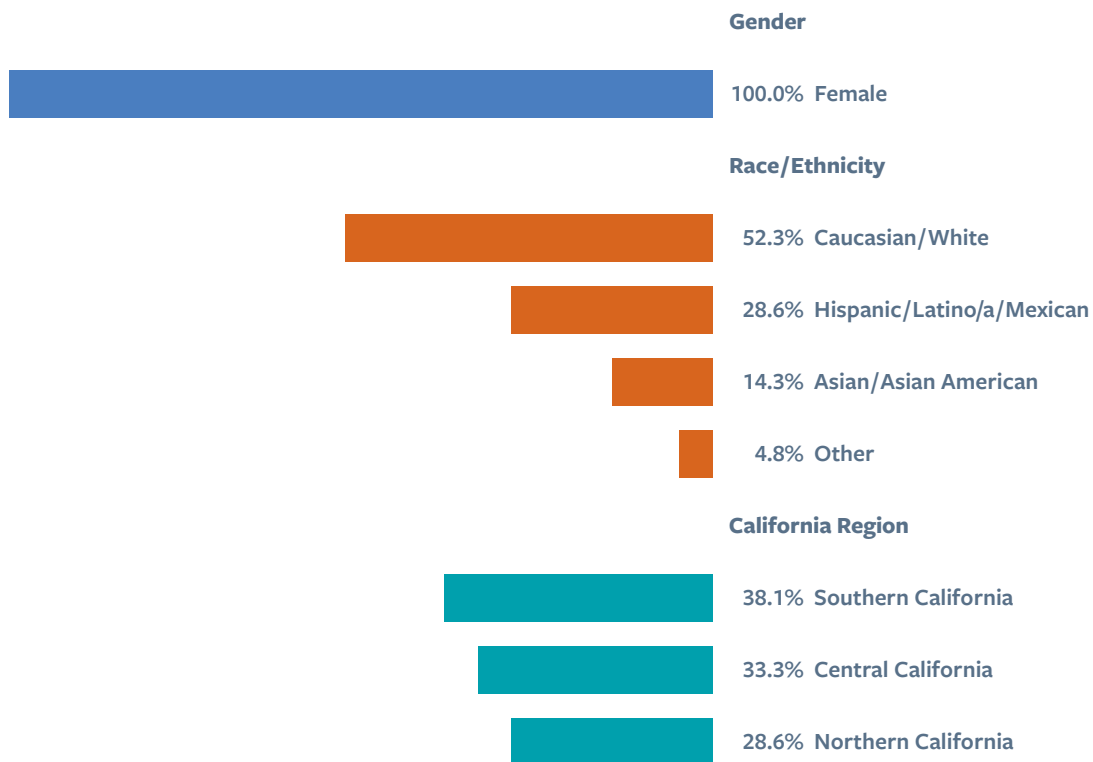
Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews focused on teachers' experiences implementing TIP and the support and challenges they encountered in TK classrooms.

Demographic Information of Interview Participants

The study involved 21 TK teachers working with four-year-olds across California, interviewed between April and August 2023 during the first year of UTK implementation (2022–2023). As shown in Figure 1, all participants identified as female, and their ages ranged from 33 to 67, with an average of 47.8 years. The racial and ethnic backgrounds of the interviewees were as follows: 52.3% Caucasian/White, 28.6% Hispanic/Latino/a/Mexican, 14.3% Asian/Asian American, and 4.8% identifying as Other.

Figure 1

Demographic Composition of TK Teachers Interviewed



Participants had varying levels of experience in TK/pre-K classrooms, ranging from 1 to 18 years. Most participants were based in Southern California (38.1%), followed by Central (33.3%) and Northern (28.6%) California.

TK Teachers' Perspectives on Trauma-Informed Practices

Two overarching themes emerged from the TK teachers' perspectives on TIP:

1. Current trauma-informed practices within classrooms
2. Supports needed for effective implementation of TIP

Figure 2 depicts detailed subthemes.

Theme 1: Trauma-Informed Practices Are Embedded in TK Classrooms

Teachers described multiple ways they enact TIP in their daily work, with four key subthemes emerging.

Demonstrating empathy and understanding

student needs: Nearly all teachers (95.2%, n = 20) emphasized the importance of recognizing and responding to students' emotional and behavioral needs, often by closely attending to students' experiences both inside and outside the classroom.

Figure 2
Themes and Subthemes from TK Teachers' Perspectives on TIP



“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)

“I had a student who lost a parent earlier this year. And so that was one of the things that we did. We used that paper, and I was able to know something was going on. Maybe I didn’t need to know the details, but I was able to help her work through that.” (Female, Caucasian/White, P5)

Fostering an inclusive and safe classroom environment:

About three-quarters of teachers (76.2%, n = 16) described creating environments that promote belonging, emotional safety, and individualized support, particularly through inclusive materials and responsive classroom management strategies.

“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.” (Female, Hispanic/Latino/a/Mexican, P13)

“I do try to work with the kids on understanding that fairness is not necessarily equal. Sometimes someone’s going to need more than someone else, and that’s okay.” (Female, Other, P19)

Building strong communication and family relationships:

Two-thirds of teachers (66.7%, n = 14) highlighted ongoing communication with families as essential for understanding students’ contexts and supporting their needs.

“First and foremost, you have to get to the families. You have to know the family because they are the ones who know everything happening in their lives. We work with kids in homeless situations, kids raised by grandparents, and kids whose parents have been in the system. Knowing their background helps us understand their needs.” (Female, Asian/Asian American, P2)

“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.” (Female, Caucasian/White, P5)

Teachers as caregivers—extending caregiving roles beyond instruction:

Some teachers (33.3%, n = 7) described taking on caregiving responsibilities, such as meeting students’ basic needs and providing emotional support, often beyond their formal teaching roles.

“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. So, we take on more than just teacher roles.... Their jacket wasn’t quite thick enough. I have a thicker jacket here that I can give them. And most of the time, it comes out of my own pocket.” (Female, Hispanic/Latino/a/Mexican, P4)

Creating consistent opportunities for collaboration, reflection, and support within schools will be critical for translating trauma-informed principles into sustainable classroom practices.

Theme 2: System-Level Supports Are Needed for Sustainable Implementation

Despite actively implementing TIP, teachers identified several critical gaps in support systems necessary for sustaining this work.

Collaborating with social workers and school psychologists: Over half of teachers (57.1%, n = 12) emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, while also noting challenges such as limited access and lack of early-childhood-specific expertise.

“We have a psychologist, but she doesn’t have early childhood experience or knowledge. So I’m working on getting them trained. I realized that when I went to meet with this whole SEL thing and that none of our psychologists have any early childhood experience.” (Female, Asian/Asian American, P2)

Professional development needs in TIP: Many teachers (61.9%, n = 13) reported insufficient or inconsistent training in trauma-informed practices, often relying on personal experience rather than formal preparation.

“My district treats it like a box to check off. Like, ‘Oh, we gave teachers a PD 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, P15)

Dealing with secondary traumatic stress: A substantial proportion of teachers (66.7%, n = 14) described emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout associated with supporting trauma-exposed students. Some teachers also described becoming emotionally desensitized over time as a way of coping with repeated exposure to students’ traumatic experiences.

“When you first start teaching, you feel sad. But after you see so many people experience that, and it doesn’t really bother me. I don’t get depressed.” (Female, Caucasian/White, P5)

Conclusions

This study highlights that TK teachers are already engaging in TIP in their daily work, particularly through fostering emotional safety, building strong relationships, and responding to students’ diverse needs. However, these efforts are largely sustained through individual commitment rather than coordinated system-level support.

The findings highlight a critical gap between expectations for TIP and the availability of resources needed to sustain it. Limited access to targeted professional development, insufficient collaboration with mental health professionals, and the emotional toll of supporting trauma-exposed students present ongoing challenges for teachers.

To support sustainable implementation of TIP in UTK, greater investment in structured professional learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and teacher well-being support is essential. In particular, policies that prioritize ongoing practice-based training, increase access to school-based mental health professionals with early childhood expertise, and integrate support for addressing secondary traumatic stress can strengthen teachers' capacity to implement TIP effectively.

At the practice level, creating consistent opportunities for collaboration, reflection, and support within schools will be critical for translating trauma-informed principles into sustainable classroom practices. Strengthening these systems will ultimately support both educator well-being and positive developmental outcomes for young children.

Key Takeaways

1. TK teachers are actively implementing TIP, particularly through empathy, emotional safety, and strong family partnerships.
2. However, these practices are largely sustained through individual effort rather than coordinated system-level support.
3. Teachers report significant gaps in professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and access to mental health resources.
4. Many TK teachers experience secondary traumatic stress and burnout, highlighting the need for stronger support for teacher well-being.
5. Strengthening training, collaboration with school psychologists and social workers, and system-level support are critical for sustainable trauma-informed practice in TK classrooms.

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- The brief is based on a full research article published in *School Psychology Review*:
- Rho, E., Kodaiarasu, K., Yang, C., Lin, X., Dong, Q., & Cheung, R. (2026). “We understand, but need support”: Teachers' perspectives on trauma-informed practices in universal transitional kindergarten. *School Psychology Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2026.2622300>

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 21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research.

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