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Professional and Social Support Networks for California Transitional Kindergarten Teachers
(TK Survey Part 1)

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Professional and Social Support Networks for California Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) Teachers (Part 1)

Executive Summary

The Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) policy is a cornerstone of California's broader efforts to expand early childhood education under the Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) initiative. As the state progresses toward making early childhood education accessible to all four-year-olds by 2026, the role of teachers in the early implementation of UTK is vital. Exploring the professional and social support networks and systems available to UTK teachers will help identify opportunities for improving their effectiveness in early childhood education.

We collected survey data from 143 UTK teachers, and conducted interviews with 21 of the survey respondents. Teachers reported receiving professional support from an average of 3.1 individuals out of a possible 6 and social support from an average of 2.67 individuals out of a possible 6. However, there was a notable gap, with 38.5% of teachers reporting no social support, and 17.5% reporting no professional support. This highlights the need to improve opportunities for teachers to strengthen social and professional connections.

Additionally, the connections among individuals providing support were sparse, with only 11% of social support providers and 8% of professional support providers being connected to other support providers. This fragmentation indicates a lack of cohesiveness among partners, which could hinder the effectiveness of the support they provide to teachers. Furthermore, teachers perceived both the levels and benefits of professional and social support as moderate, indicating a clear need for improvement in both areas.

Key practices that emerged as effective professional support include mentoring, coaching, targeted professional development sessions, and communities of practice. Additionally, teachers identified partners such as districts, school administrators, and peer educators as essential contributors to professional support, and identified peer educators and external networks as partners providing social support.

The findings call for a more integrated approach to supporting UTK teachers, ensuring that professional and social networks are strengthened through collaboration among districts, administrators, and peer educators. By addressing the current gaps, UTK teachers in California can be better supported, reducing teacher turnover and enhancing the success of UTK initiatives.

Background

Recognizing the importance of early childhood education in reducing achievement gaps (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013), multiple states throughout the U.S. are progressing toward the implementation of UPK programs, with the goal of making early childhood education accessible to all children, regardless of family income (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). In line with this educational reform, California has launched the UTK policy as a key component of the larger UPK initiative, aiming to offer equitable and inclusive education for all four-year-olds by 2026 (California School Boards Association, 2022).

Amidst this pivotal shift, a crucial question arises: Are UTK early-implementing teachers receiving adequate support? This is particularly vital given the ongoing challenges of burnout, low levels of well-being, and attrition among early childhood educators (Bassok et al., 2021). Supporting teachers as early implementers of UTK programs is essential for the successful execution of the UTK initiative.

KEY TERMS

- **Professional Support:** Work-centered guidance, resources, and practical assistance aimed at advancing career development, refining teaching skills, and building expertise.
- **Social Support:** Encompasses emotional, informational, and practical assistance unrelated to specific work tasks. This support can include, but is not limited to, managing work-life balance, fostering self-confidence, shaping self-perception, and addressing personal influences.

Main Research Question: How do California UTK teachers describe the structure of their professional and social support networks and systems, and do these support mechanisms provide sufficient assistance?

Specific Aims:

1. Analyze the structural characteristics of UTK teachers' support networks.
2. Examine whether UTK teachers feel they receive enough professional and social support and explore the benefit of support reported.
3. Identify the key components of the UTK teacher professional and social support system.

Overview of Survey and Interview

Survey and interview data came from the first wave of a three-year longitudinal mixed-method study exploring UTK teachers' experiences during the ongoing implementation of the UPK policy in California. Participants were recruited by the Risk, Resilience, and Cultural Lab at the University of Maryland, College Park through a collaboration with 21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy), which provides professional learning support to school

districts across the state. To qualify for the study, participants needed to be working with four-year-old children in a transitional kindergarten setting.

To investigate UTK teachers’ professional and social support networks, participants were asked to provide the pseudonym initials of up to six individuals they turn to for social and professional support, along with additional demographic information about these supporters and whether they are connected to each other. Additionally, some of the participants took part in one-hour semi-structured interviews via Zoom, where they discussed their primary challenges and provided suggestions for building a support system for UTK teachers.

Demographic Information of Survey Participants

Data were collected from teachers working with four-year-olds in transitional kindergarten classrooms across 45 school districts in California from April 2023 through August 2023, which is during the first school year (2022–2023) of UPK policy implementation in California. The sample comprised a total of 143 UTK teachers (97.2% female, 2.1% male, 0.7% nonbinary). The ages of the participants ranged from 23 to 68, with an average age of 45.1. Regarding racial and ethnic

backgrounds, the breakdown was as follows: 67.1% Caucasian/White, 18.9% Hispanic/Latino/a/Mexican, 5.6% Asian/Asian American, 0.7% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 7.7% identifying as Other.¹ Our participants’ years employed suggest that a substantial portion of teachers have less experience in transitional kindergarten compared to their overall Pre-K–12 teaching experience.

Of the 143 UTK teachers, 21 UTK teachers were invited to participate in an interview. All participants identified as female (100%), and their ages ranged from 33 to 67, with an average age of 47.8. 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. Participants had varying levels of experience in transitional kindergarten 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.

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%

UTK Teachers' Professional and Social Support Networks

The 143 UTK teachers surveyed reported a total of 444 individuals providing professional support and 386 individuals providing social support. On average, UTK teacher participants receive professional support from 3.10 individuals, while they receive social support from 2.67 individuals, out of a possible maximum of 6. We also measured how connected the people providing professional or social support were to each other. For social support, only 11% of the possible connections between them existed, meaning that as a group they were somewhat connected, but not very connected. For professional support, only 8% of the possible connections existed. Figure 1 illustrates UTK teachers' professional and social support networks.

Table 2 shows the number of individuals from whom teachers reported receiving professional or social support, along with the corresponding count and percentage of teachers in each category. There is a

notable disparity between the levels of professional and social support. While only 17.5% of teachers reported receiving no professional support, a significant 38.5% of teachers reported receiving no social support. On the other hand, 25.2% of teachers received professional and social support from six individuals, indicating that a small portion of teachers have well-established support networks.

Figure 2 illustrates UTK teachers' perceptions of the benefit and level of both social and professional support, rated on a scale of 1 (not beneficial at all or no support at all) to 10 (extremely beneficial or extreme level of support). Teachers generally perceived both types of support as moderate in terms of both benefit and level. However, social support was rated slightly higher, with a perceived benefit of 5.9 and a level of 5.8, compared to professional support, which was rated at 4.8 for benefit and 4.7 for level. Despite receiving lower levels of social support compared to professional support, teachers found social support to be slightly more beneficial overall.

Figure 1

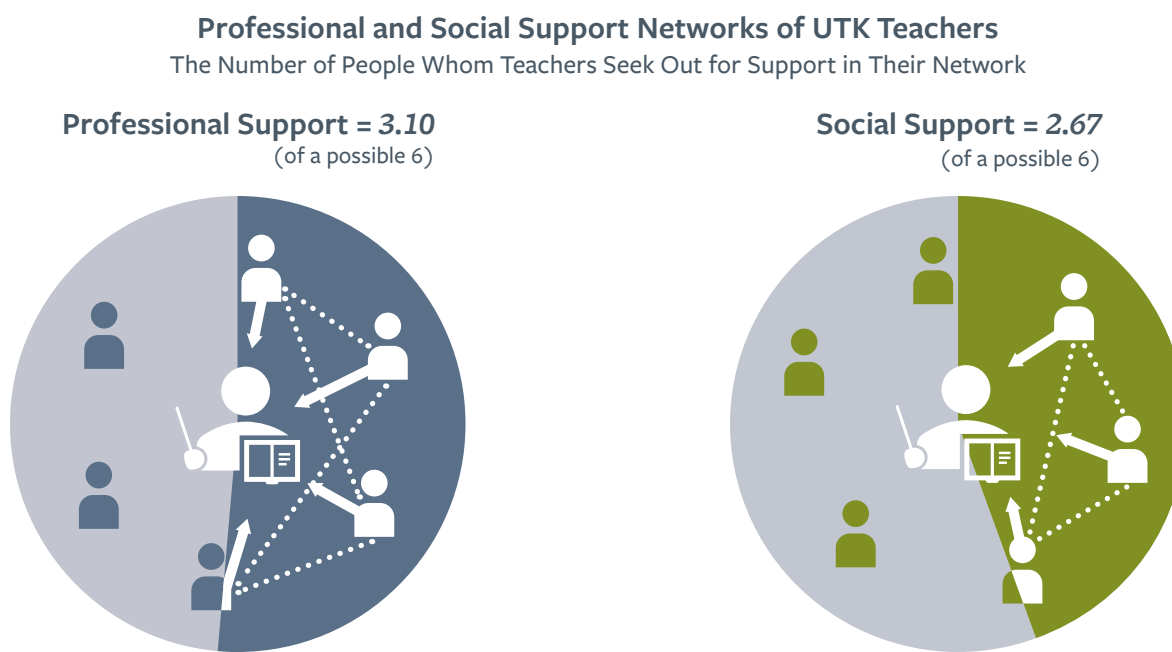


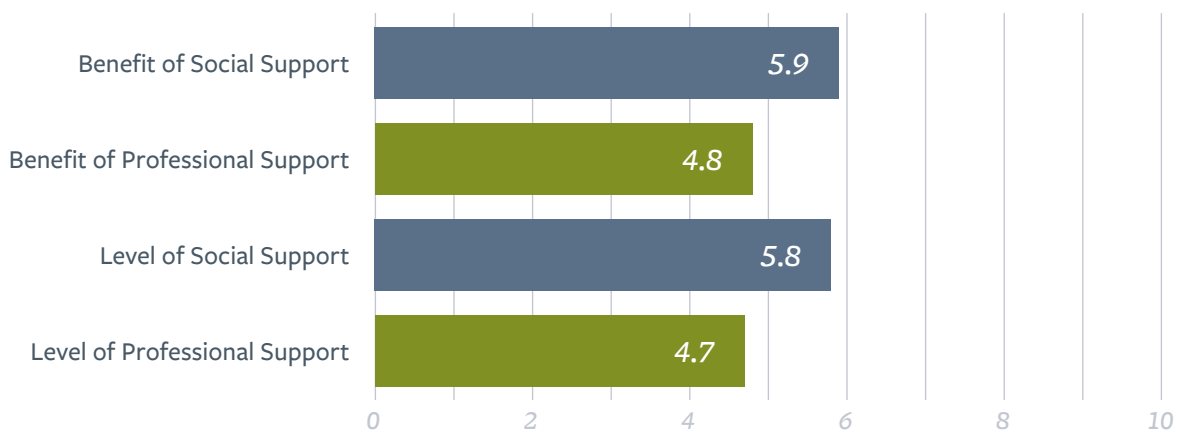
Table 2

Professional and Social Support Networks of UTK Teachers

Number of individuals from whom teachers reported receiving support	Professional		Social	
	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
0	25	17.5%	55	38.5%
1	14	9.8%	5	3.5%
2	18	12.6%	7	4.9%
3	28	19.6%	17	11.9%
4	16	11.2%	15	10.5%
5	6	4.2%	8	5.6%
6	36	25.2%	36	25.2%

Figure 2

UTK Teachers' Perceptions of the Benefit and Level of Support



UTK Teachers' Professional and Social Support Systems

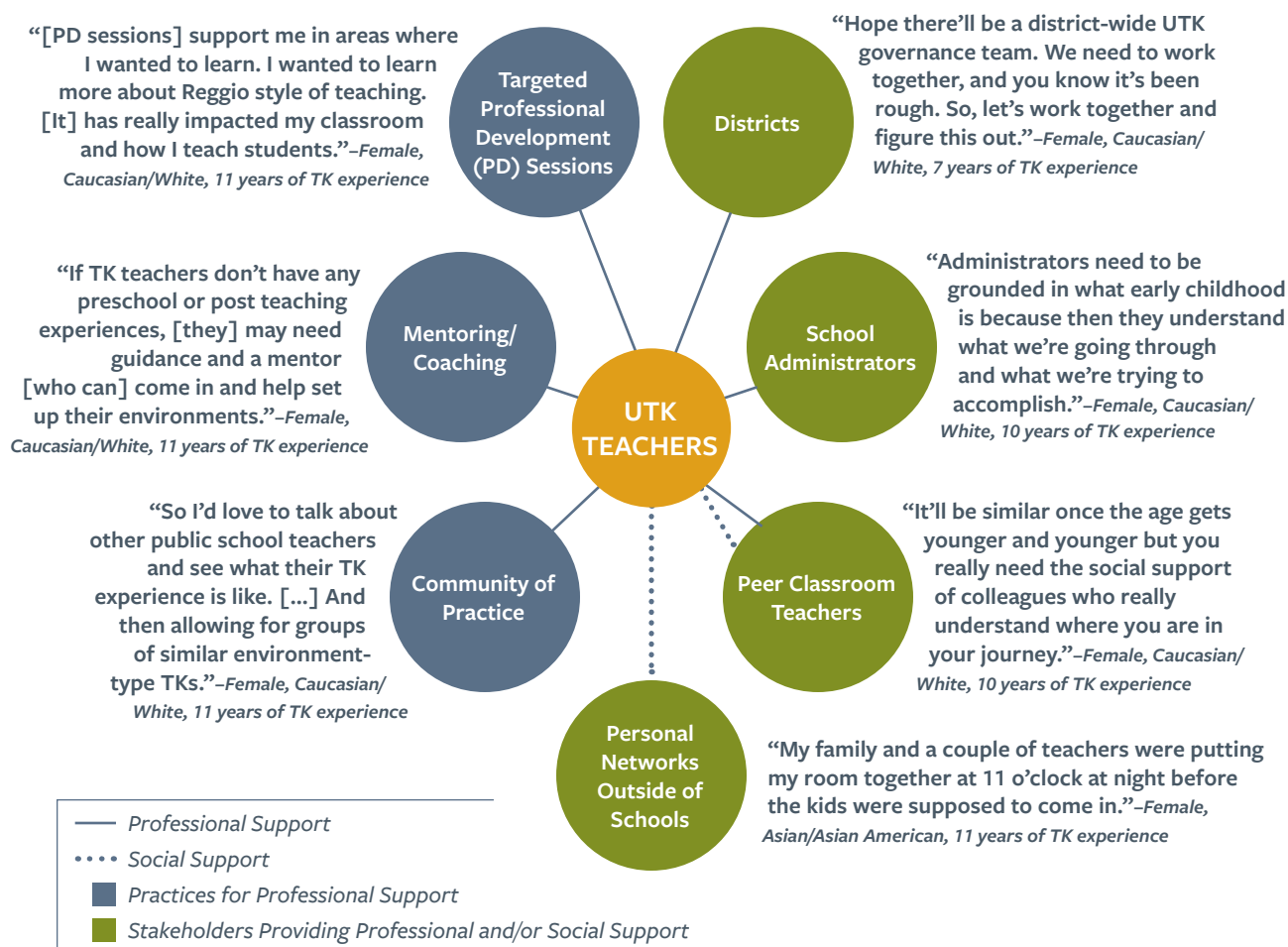
From interviews with 21 UTK teachers, we identified a support system that encompasses practices for professional support and involves partners providing professional and/or social support. UTK teacher participants identified support that was helpful for them, or that they were not currently receiving but needed. Figure 3 illustrates this support system, including quotes from participants highlighting the types of support they found helpful or necessary.

The findings emphasize the importance of

both social and professional support for UTK teachers. Key professional support practices include targeted professional development (PD) sessions, mentoring/coaching, and participation in communities of practice. Communities of practice consist of individuals who gather as a community, connected by a common interest or passion (domain), to engage in discussions, share ideas, and improve their skills and knowledge through collaborative learning (Wenger, 1998). These communities of practice not only offer professional growth but also facilitate valuable connections with early learning professionals from

Figure 3

Teachers' Professional and Social Support Systems



spaces like preschools and Head Start programs, further enriching the support available to UTK teachers. These practices are instrumental in helping teachers navigate their roles effectively.

In addition, the findings highlight the vital roles played by various partners in providing both professional and social support. Teachers identified districts, school administrators, peer classroom teachers, and personal networks outside of schools as crucial sources of support, helping them meet the challenges of their profession and enhancing their sense of community.

Conclusions

The findings from this study highlight the significant role that both professional and social support plays in the experiences of California UTK teachers. While professional support was more prevalent, with a substantial majority of teachers receiving it, social support was notably lacking, with 38.5% of teachers reporting no one to turn to for emotional and non-work-related assistance. This gap suggests the need for enhanced opportunities that allow teachers to build connections beyond professional interactions, which are essential for their emotional

well-being and resilience. Despite having fewer individuals offering social support, teachers rated the perceived benefit and level of social support higher than that of professional support, reinforcing the importance of nurturing these bonds.

The fragmented nature of both professional and social support networks, characterized by low connectedness among those providing support, indicates that partners may not be working cohesively. Strengthening these connections through more integrated and collaborative efforts among districts, school administrators, and peer educators could lead to a more comprehensive support system that better addresses teachers' diverse needs.

Interview findings revealed key components of a robust support system for UTK teachers, with professional support practices such as mentoring, coaching, targeted professional development sessions, and communities of practice emerging as particularly valuable. These structured opportunities allow teachers to engage with peer educators, share knowledge, and enhance their pedagogical skills. Additionally, partners like district leaders, school administrators, and peer networks play a crucial role in offering professional and/or social support, reinforcing the survey finding that a more intentional and coordinated effort to integrate these support channels is needed.

Key Takeaways

Most California UTK teachers in our study have individuals in their network from whom they can seek professional support, but individuals who can seek social support were notably lacking, with 38.5% of teachers reporting no emotional or non-work-related assistance. This highlights the urgent need to create more opportunities for teachers to build meaningful social connections that foster emotional resilience and well-being.

Teachers reported moderate levels and benefits of both professional and social support, suggesting that while both types of support were helpful, there is still room for improving the quality of support to better meet their emotional and professional needs.

The fragmented nature of professional and social support networks, with low connectedness among partners, suggests that current professional and social support providers are not working cohesively. Strengthening the integration of support networks through coordinated efforts among districts, administrators, and peer educators is essential. A more cohesive approach will better meet the diverse and evolving needs of UTK teachers, enhancing their ability to succeed in their roles.

Existing connections with early learning professionals, such as those in preschools or Head Start programs, through communities of practice, provide valuable support to UTK teachers. Expanding and strengthening these collaborations could further enhance the effectiveness of the support networks, considering UTK teachers' unique positions.

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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 research 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, research briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research>

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