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School Climate and Teacher Well-Being in Transitional Kindergarten Education: Insights Into Compassion Fatigue, Compassion Satisfaction, and Turnover Intention (Part 3)

Executive Summary

This report examines Transitional Kindergarten (TK) teachers' perceptions of school climate and its associations with compassion satisfaction, compassion fatigue, and turnover intention. The survey involved 143 teachers from approximately 45 school districts in California, focusing on how school climate affects teachers' professional experiences.

The majority of TK teachers (97.9%) reported a positive perception of their overall school climate. However, despite this overall positivity, it is important to note that each category of school climate may carry different meanings and should also be examined separately. Differences in perceptions based on race and gender are evident, with Caucasian/White and Asian/Asian American teachers showing higher average levels of agreement with positive perceived school climate. Male teachers also reported higher average satisfaction compared to female and non-binary teachers.

Additionally, our findings indicated that a positive school climate was associated with higher levels of compassion satisfaction but did not show a significant correlation with reduced compassion fatigue, suggesting that additional support may be required to address this aspect. Moreover, school climate significantly influences turnover intentions, with nearly half of the participants recently considering leaving their jobs. These findings underscore the need to foster a supportive school environment that enhances both teacher retention and overall well-being.

KEY TERMS

► **School Climate:** “Quality and character of school life” (National School Climate Center, n.d., para. 3) shaped by shared values, norms, and goals. It affects relationships, safety, and the learning environment in the school community.

► **Compassion Satisfaction:** The positive feelings of fulfillment and pride that individuals experience from their ability to help others, derive pleasure from their work, and feel good about their contributions to their professional environment (Radey & Figley, 2007; Sinclair et al., 2016).

► **Compassion Fatigue:** Emotional and physical exhaustion that results from the constant exposure to others’ trauma and stress, often leading to a reduced ability to empathize and a diminished capacity to maintain positive relationships and work performance (Stamm, 2010).

► **Turnover Intention:** The possibility or likelihood that a teacher may either leave the teaching profession entirely or switch to a different job in the near future (Boe et al., 2007).

Background

Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) initiatives are part of California’s effort to broaden access to early childhood education, ensuring that more children can benefit from high-quality learning experiences before kindergarten. UTK focuses explicitly on providing Transitional Kindergarten to all four-year-olds as part of a broader Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) initiative (California Department of Education, n.d.). Given the recent integration of TK classrooms into the K–12 framework, which places early childhood educators within school systems traditionally focused on older students (California Department

of Education, 2024), TK teachers are witnessing changes and transitions in both traditional early childhood education and K–12 environments, each with unique school climate dynamics. These changes may impact their well-being and vulnerability to burnout, which may have a substantial impact on their professional identity, sense of belonging, interactions with families and school personnel, and perceptions of job obligations. Therefore, comprehending how school climate affects TK teachers’ well-being is more important than ever, especially in light of the paucity of research on this demographic.

Examining how TK teachers perceive the school climate is a crucial aspect of understanding the success of these initiatives. Teachers’ perceptions can provide valuable insights into the challenges and strengths of the current educational environment, helping to inform targeted support that can enhance the effectiveness of TK and ultimately improve outcomes for young learners.

Main Research Questions:

1. How do TK teachers perceive their school climate?
2. How is TK teachers’ perceived school climate associated with their compassion satisfaction and fatigue?
3. How is TK teachers’ perceived school climate associated with their turnover intention?

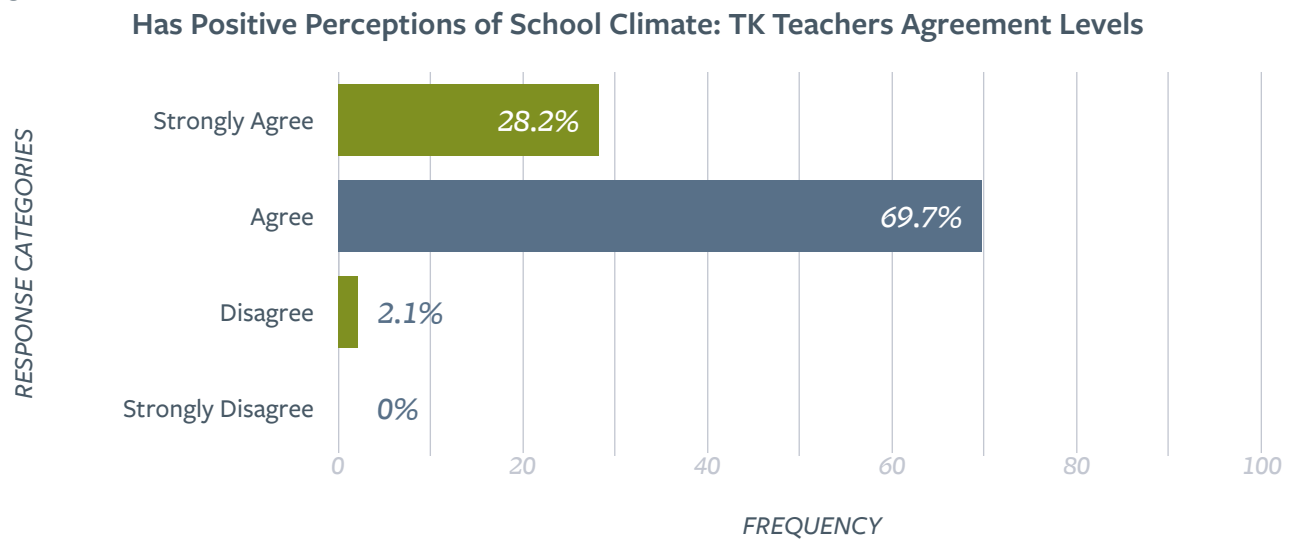
Demographic Information of Survey Participants

Participants included 143 teachers working with 4-year-olds in TK classrooms across 45 school districts in California between April 2023 and August 2023, during the first school year (2022–2023) of UPK policy implementation in the state. 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. Regarding racial and ethnic backgrounds,

Table 1

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



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 number of participants had extensive experience as Pre-K-12 teachers but limited experience in TK, indicating that many were transferred into TK from Pre-K-12 settings due to the recent expansion of TK.

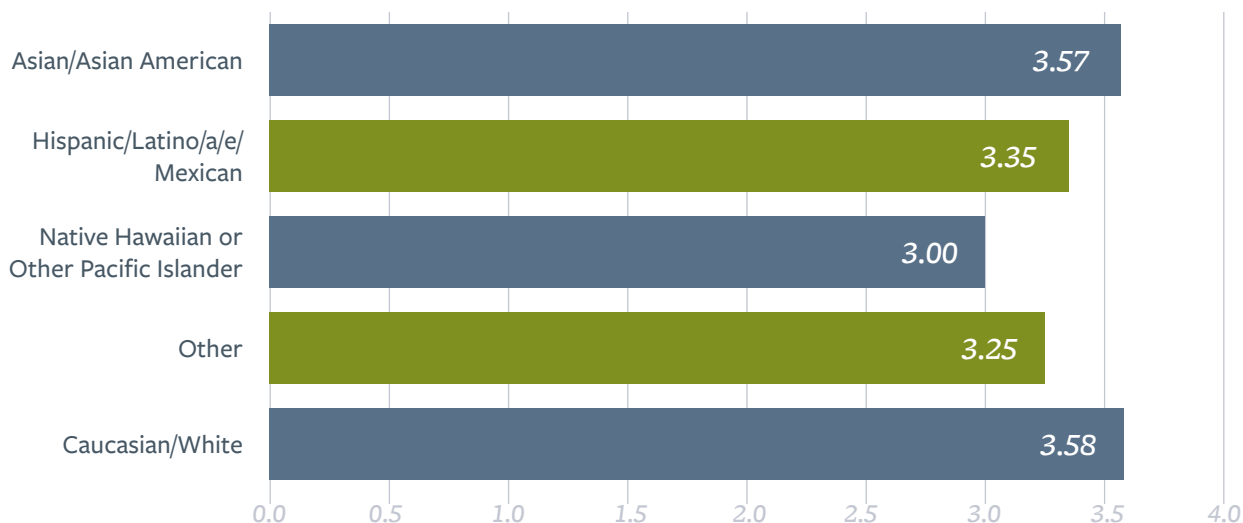
We asked TK teachers ten questions regarding their perceived school climate. As shown in Figure 1, most teachers, totaling 97.9% (combining Strongly Agree and Agree), have a generally positive perception of the overall school climate. A small portion of teachers (2.1%) disagreed with the statement about a positive school climate.

As shown in Figure 2, Caucasian/White participants had the highest average strength of agreement,

¹ Other applies to teachers who self-identified as mixed, biracial, or multiracial (encompassing multiple ethnicities). 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.

Figure 2

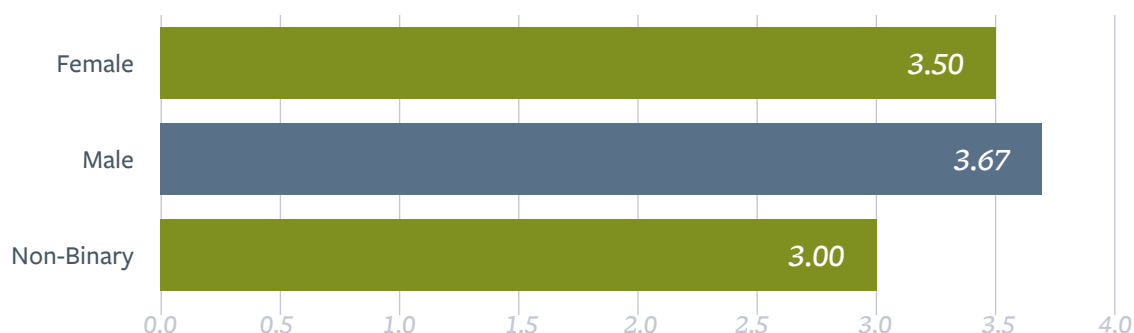
Has Positive Perceptions of School Climate: Average Agreement Level by TK Teacher Race/Ethnicity



AVERAGE STRENGTH OF AGREEMENT: 1=STRONGLY DISAGREE → 2=DISAGREE → 3=AGREE → 4=STRONGLY AGREE

Figure 3

Has Positive Perceptions of School Climate: Average Agreement Level by TK Teacher Gender



AVERAGE STRENGTH OF AGREEMENT: 1=STRONGLY DISAGREE → 2=DISAGREE → 3=AGREE → 4=STRONGLY AGREE

at 3.58, indicating a tendency towards Strongly Agree on perceived school climate. Asian/Asian American-identifying teachers have an average strength of agreement of 3.57, while Hispanic/Latino/a/e/Mexican-identifying teachers have an average of 3.35. Other racial-identifying groups have an average strength of 3.25, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander-identifying teachers have an average of 3.00. These values

suggest that teachers identifying as Caucasian/White and Asian/Asian American generally exhibit a more substantial level of perceived positive school climate compared to other racial groups.

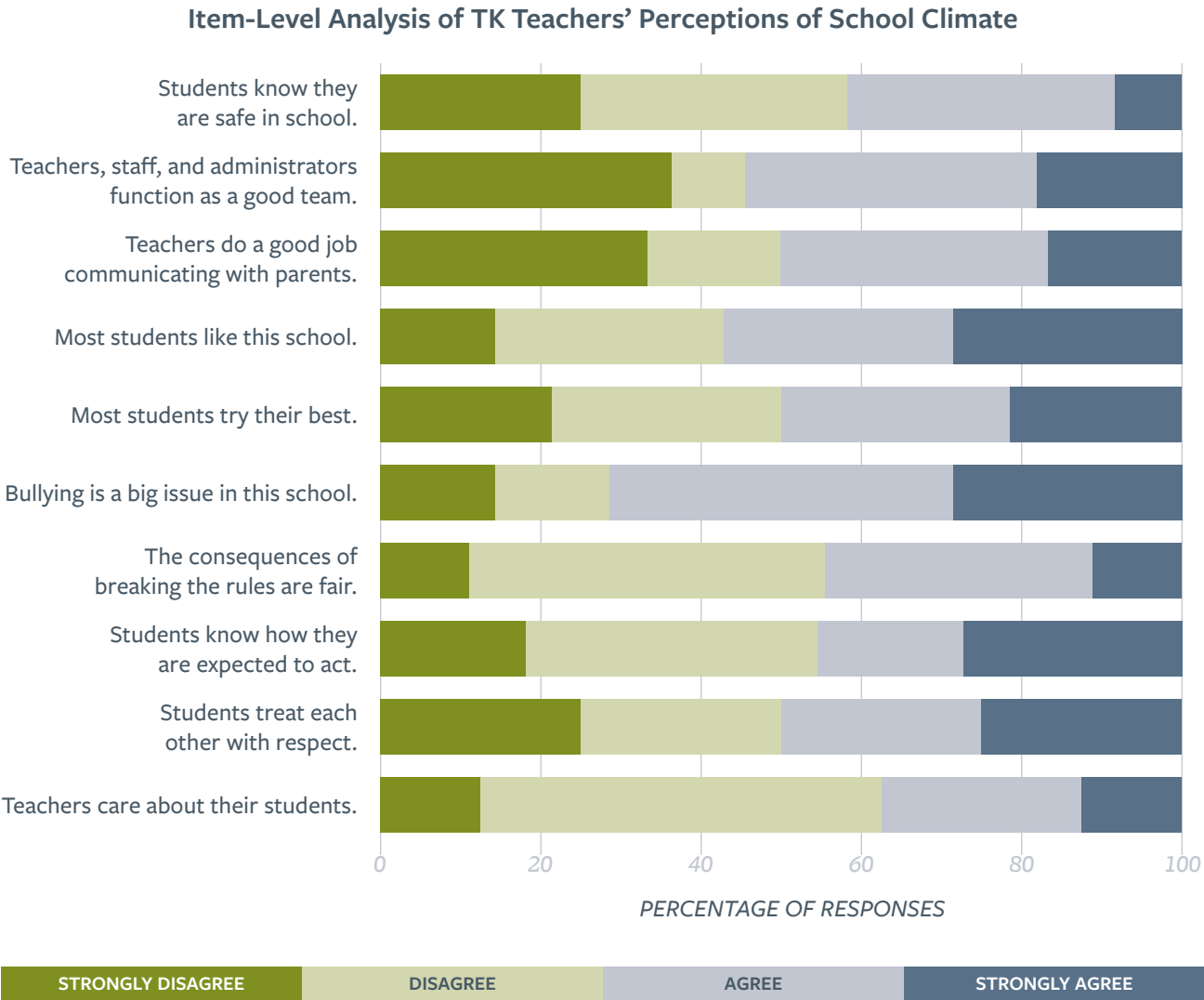
As shown in Figure 3, the average strength of agreement for males is 3.67, the highest among the gender groups, indicating a strong tendency towards Strongly Agree. Female teachers have an

average strength of agreement of a positive school climate of 3.50, suggesting a strong agreement but slightly lower than that of males. Non-binary teachers have an average strength of agreement of 3.00, indicating moderate agreement.

Figure 4 shows TK teachers’ perception of school climate across 10 areas. While there are some positive responses, particularly in agreement with students liking the school and trying their best, a significant portion of teachers expressed concerns

about school climate, particularly regarding safety, teamwork, discipline, communication, and teacher–student relationships. This was overshadowed by the overall positive perception presented in the report. These findings suggest that challenges in school climate may contribute to high turnover intention among teachers, despite any positive aspects that may have been highlighted in broader reports. Addressing these concerns is essential for fostering a more supportive and cohesive school environment.

Figure 4



School Climate, Compassion Satisfaction, and Compassion Fatigue

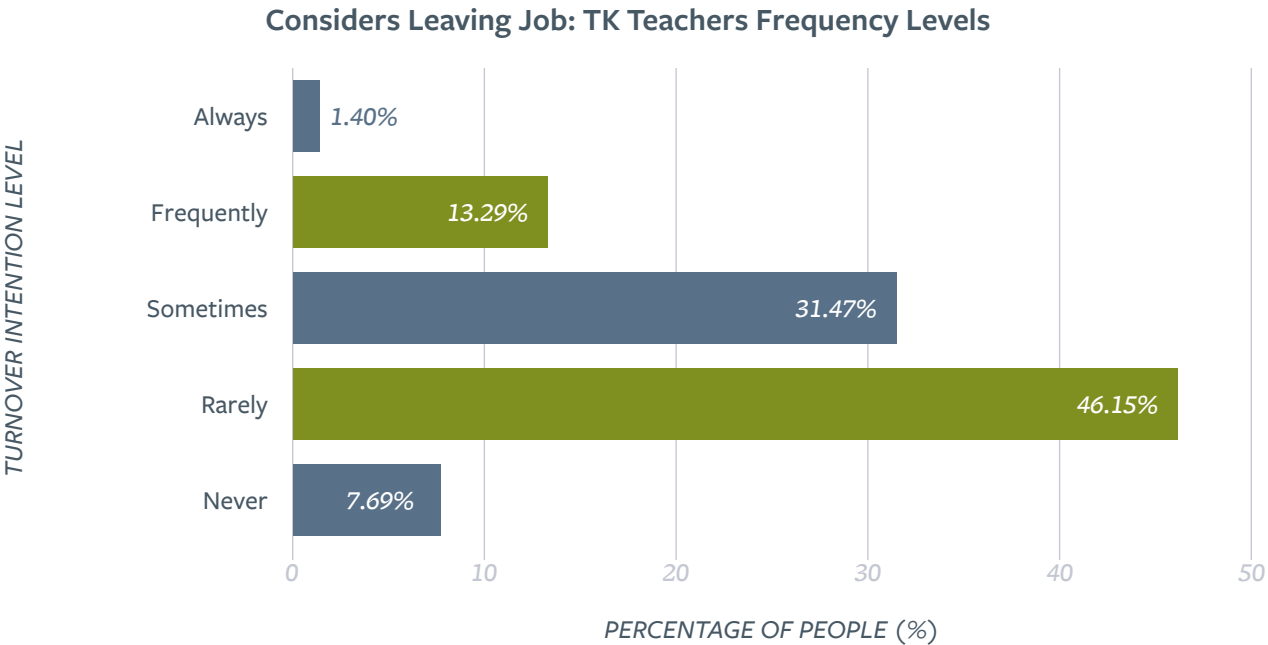
A positive school climate, which includes supportive relationships, clear expectations, and a sense of belonging, is directly related to how fulfilled and satisfied teachers feel in their roles (National School Climate Center, 2021). When teachers perceive their school environment as positive and supportive, they are more likely to experience compassion satisfaction, meaning they feel proud of their work, believe in their ability to make a difference, and find joy in supporting their students and colleagues.

Interestingly, while school climate had a clear connection with compassion satisfaction, we did not find a significant relationship between school

climate and compassion fatigue. This suggests that even in schools with a positive climate, other factors (e.g., personal stressors or external pressures) may contribute to feelings of exhaustion and emotional fatigue that are not directly related to the school environment. Therefore, while improving school climate can boost teachers’ job satisfaction, addressing compassion fatigue might require more individualized support, like mental health resources or workload management.

We asked 143 teachers how often, over the past nine months, they considered leaving their jobs. As shown in Figure 5, 46.16% (almost half of our participants) of TK teachers reported that they often or sometimes considered leaving their jobs.

Figure 5



School climate also significantly influences teachers’ decisions to stay in their positions or consider leaving. When teachers perceive their school environment as positive, they are less likely to consider leaving their positions. In other words, a negative school climate, where teachers feel unsupported or disconnected, can increase turnover intention, making teachers more likely to consider leaving their jobs. Creating a positive school environment is crucial to retaining TK teachers.

Compassion fatigue, which refers to the emotional and physical exhaustion caused by caring for others, is an important aspect of teacher well-being. High levels of compassion fatigue can lead to burnout and negatively impact teachers’ effectiveness

and job satisfaction. We asked 143 TK teachers about their levels of compassion fatigue. Figure 6 shows that almost half of the teachers (46.85%) reported experiencing compassion fatigue rarely, while 25.87% reported experiencing it sometimes. Only 9.79% of the teachers frequently experienced compassion fatigue, and 16.78% said they never experienced it. A small percentage (.70%) did not specify their level of compassion fatigue.

The data suggest that while some teachers experience compassion fatigue frequently, a significant portion of them experience it at lower levels. However, almost 26% of teachers experience it sometimes, indicating that compassion fatigue is still a concern.

Figure 6

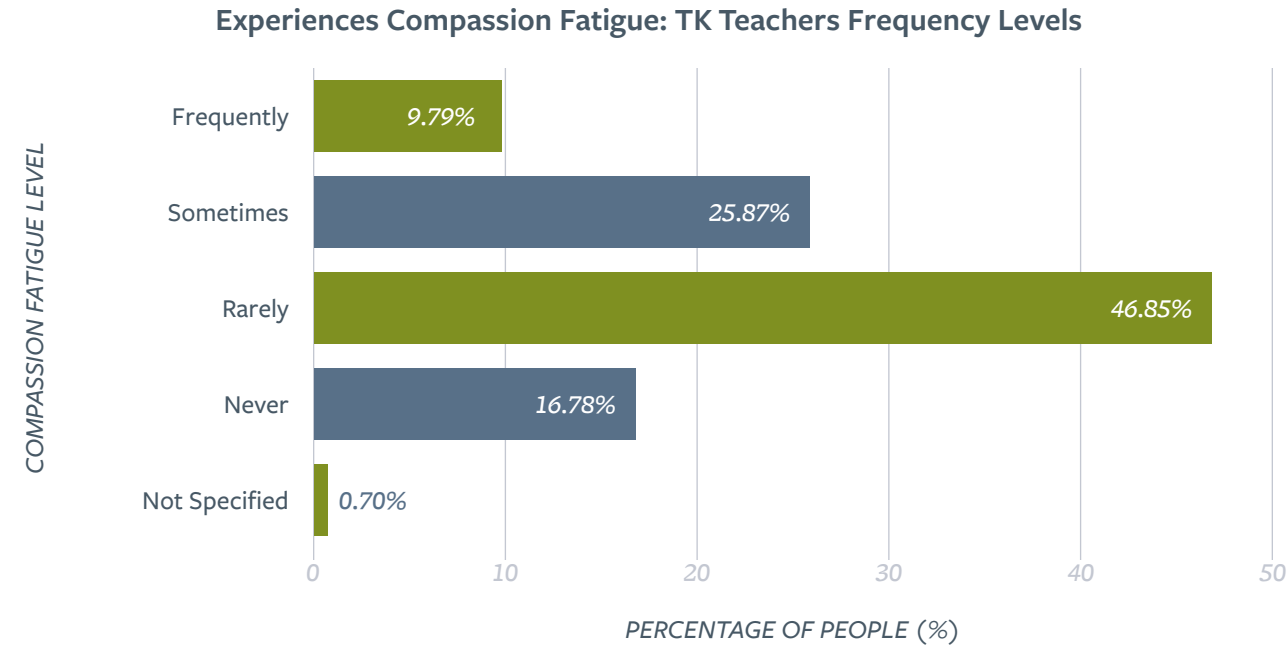
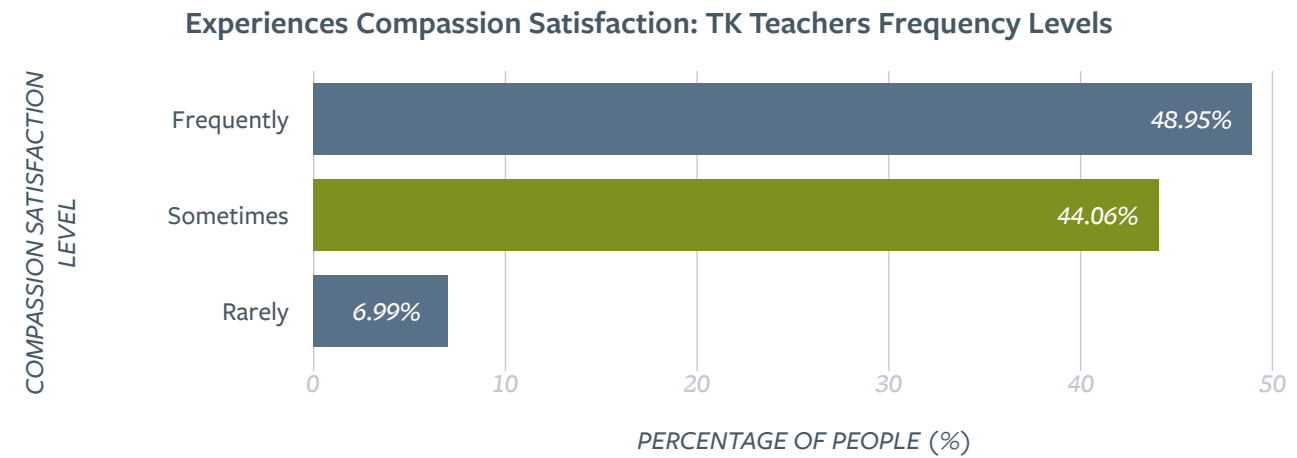


Figure 7



Compassion satisfaction refers to the positive feelings of helping others and making a difference, which can boost job satisfaction and resilience. We asked 143 TK teachers about their levels of compassion satisfaction. Figure 7 shows that almost half of the teachers (48.95%) reported experiencing compassion satisfaction frequently, while 44.06% experienced it sometimes. Only 6.99% of the teachers said they rarely experienced compassion satisfaction.

The data suggest that most TK teachers are experiencing some level of compassion satisfaction, with a significant portion feeling it frequently. This indicates that many TK teachers find fulfillment in their roles.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the study highlights that a positive school climate is crucial for fostering teacher satisfaction and reducing turnover intention among TK teachers. Most teachers perceive their school climate favorably, with significant differences observed based on race and gender. Constituents, including administrators and policymakers, should continue to invest in practices that enhance school climate, such as fostering collaboration, providing professional development opportunities, and ensuring teachers feel valued and supported. However, addressing compassion fatigue remains a separate challenge that requires more individualized support, such as mental health resources and workload management. Sustaining teacher well-being and workforce stability will require both structural improvements to school climate and targeted supports addressing emotional fatigue.

Key Takeaways

► **Positive Perception of School Climate:** The majority of TK teachers (97.9%) have a very positive perception of their school climate, while only 2.1% perceive it negatively. The overall perception of school climate might appear positive at first glance, but a closer examination of individual items in the survey reveals significant variations in teachers' experiences and concerns. While certain aspects received favorable responses, there are notable areas where dissatisfaction is prevalent, indicating that the school climate is not uniformly positive. These variations highlight underlying challenges that may influence

teacher morale and student experiences and potentially contribute to turnover intention.

► **Takeaways for School Leaders:** School leaders' roles are to facilitate systems of care around teamwork, communication, and promoting more positive teacher–student relationships, which are closely related to school climate's key dimensions, such as safety, teamwork, discipline, communication, and teacher–student relationships. These aspects of school climate are not isolated; each informs the others, and school leaders should examine and reflect on what school culture and practices look like.

► **Racial Differences:** Teachers identifying as Caucasian/White reported the most positive perception of school climate, followed closely by Asian/Asian American teachers. Hispanic/Latino/a/e/Mexican teachers had an average of 3.35, and the Other group had 3.25. Given that Caucasian/White teachers make up the majority of the sample, it is necessary to disaggregate the experiences of teachers of color to comprehend their unique perspectives. Equal participation of teachers of color is critical, as their experiences and impressions of the school environment may differ from those of their Caucasian/White colleagues. Racialized experiences, microaggressions, racial weathering, and the additional burdens that instructors of color bear when serving students of color may all influence their impression of the school climate. Exploring these negative signs is critical for developing a more comprehensive picture of school climate and ensuring that all teachers feel supported and respected.

► **Gender Differences:** Male teachers had the highest average strength of agreement, followed by female teachers. Non-binary respondents had an average strength of agreement. This suggests disparities in how teachers with different gender identities view their educational environment. These findings highlight the necessity of investigating the underlying causes of perceptual disparities. Constituents, especially administrators, should try to understand why male teachers are more likely to agree than non-binary teachers. It may be necessary to investigate whether non-binary teachers confront specific challenges or barriers in the school environment that harm their experience. Addressing these concerns is critical for creating an inclusive climate where all teachers feel equally appreciated and supported.

► **Compassion Satisfaction vs. Fatigue:** While a positive school climate is clearly linked to higher compassion satisfaction among educators, it does not necessarily buffer against compassion fatigue—a chronic condition that can deeply impact teacher well-being and effectiveness. For TK teachers, compassion fatigue is often compounded by ongoing exposure to student trauma, challenging behaviors, and the emotional demands of being a consistent, nurturing presence for children during a foundational developmental stage. Emerging research highlights the role of secondary traumatic stress in the lives of educators, describing how teachers may absorb the emotional weight of their students' experiences. This stress is often invisible but deeply felt—especially in early childhood classrooms where educators frequently serve as both caregivers and emotional anchors.

School leaders play a pivotal role in shifting how compassion fatigue is addressed. While promoting self-care is important, it is insufficient on its own. What TK teachers need is systemic support embedded into the culture of the school. By prioritizing systems of care rather than relying solely on individual coping strategies, school leaders can help create environments where TK teachers feel valued, supported, and emotionally sustained—ultimately benefiting both staff and students.

► **Turnover Intention:** Nearly half of TK teachers in our sample (46.16%) reported seriously considering leaving their roles within the past nine months. This high rate of turnover intention signals an urgent need for school leaders to reflect on both immediate working conditions and longer-term structural support for early childhood educators. While turnover is a growing concern across the education sector, it may not be experienced equally by all teachers. Future considerations must examine how identity markers—such as race, ethnicity, gender, and language background—shape both the intention to leave and the pathways into the profession. For example, TK educators of color may face additional burdens such as racialized stress, lack of mentorship, or feeling isolated in predominantly white school environments. These intersecting pressures can intensify feelings of burnout and disconnection, contributing to higher attrition and lower recruitment in underrepresented communities. Addressing turnover intention—especially through an equity lens—requires more than replacing teachers; it requires reimagining the conditions under which educators are recruited, supported, and encouraged to stay.

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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.

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