

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

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Trauma-Informed Practices (TIP)

- Trauma-Informed practices (TIP) aim to create **safe, supportive, and responsive learning environments** for children affected by trauma (SAMHSA, 2014).
- Trauma can disrupt brain development and impair cognitive functioning, leading to academic, social, emotional, and psychosomatic difficulties in children (Perfect et al., 2016; Copeland et al., 2007).
- TIP has gained increasing recognition in early childhood education (Chudzik et al., 2025).



→ However, existing work highlights limited conceptual clarity and a lack of practice-grounded understanding of how TIP is operationalized in classroom settings (Watson & Astor, 2025).

Centrality of Teachers



- Teachers are the primary implementers of TIP in classroom settings (Fondren et al., 2020).
- Their interpretations and experiences shape how TIP is enacted in daily practice.
- Understanding teachers' perspectives is critical for effective and sustainable implementation (L'Estrange & Howard, 2022).

→ A teacher-centered perspective is essential for understanding TIP in practice

Universal Transitional Kindergarten



- California's Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) expands access to publicly funded early education for all four-year-olds (California School Boards Association, 2023)
- UTK operates at the intersection of early childhood education and the K-12 system, creating a distinct instructional and organizational context.

- Expansion brings more diverse student populations, including children with varied developmental needs and potential trauma exposure (Williams et al., 2021).
- Teachers are navigating new structural demands during the early policy implementation (Gallagher, 2023)



→ These conditions shape TIP is understood and implemented in practice.

Purpose & Aims



Examine UTK teachers' experiences of implementing TIP during initial policy rollout



This study addresses two key gaps in TIP research (Watson & Astor, 2025):

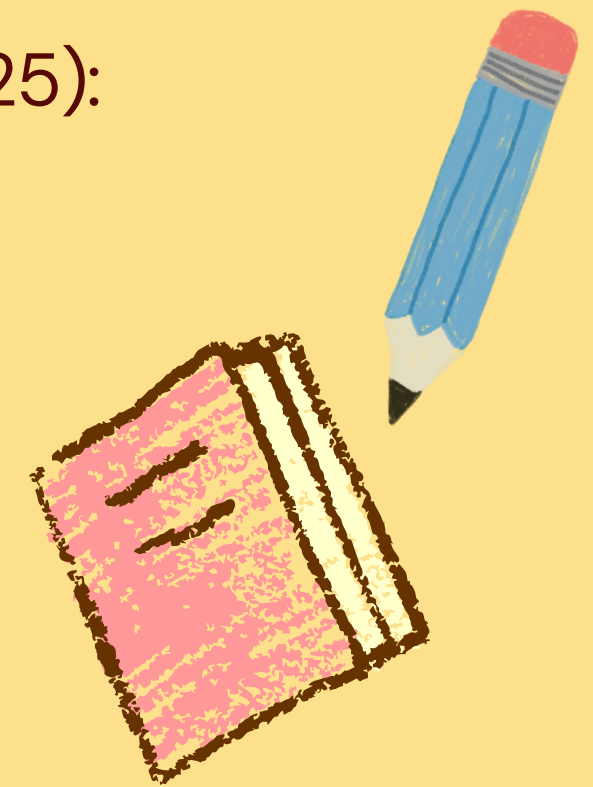
- No unified TIP framework for education
- New UTK demands in early implementation context



Using reflexive thematic analysis, this study explores:

- How teachers enact TIP in daily practice
- What supports & resources are needed

→ Provides practice-grounded evidence to inform TIP application and UTK policy



Demographics.

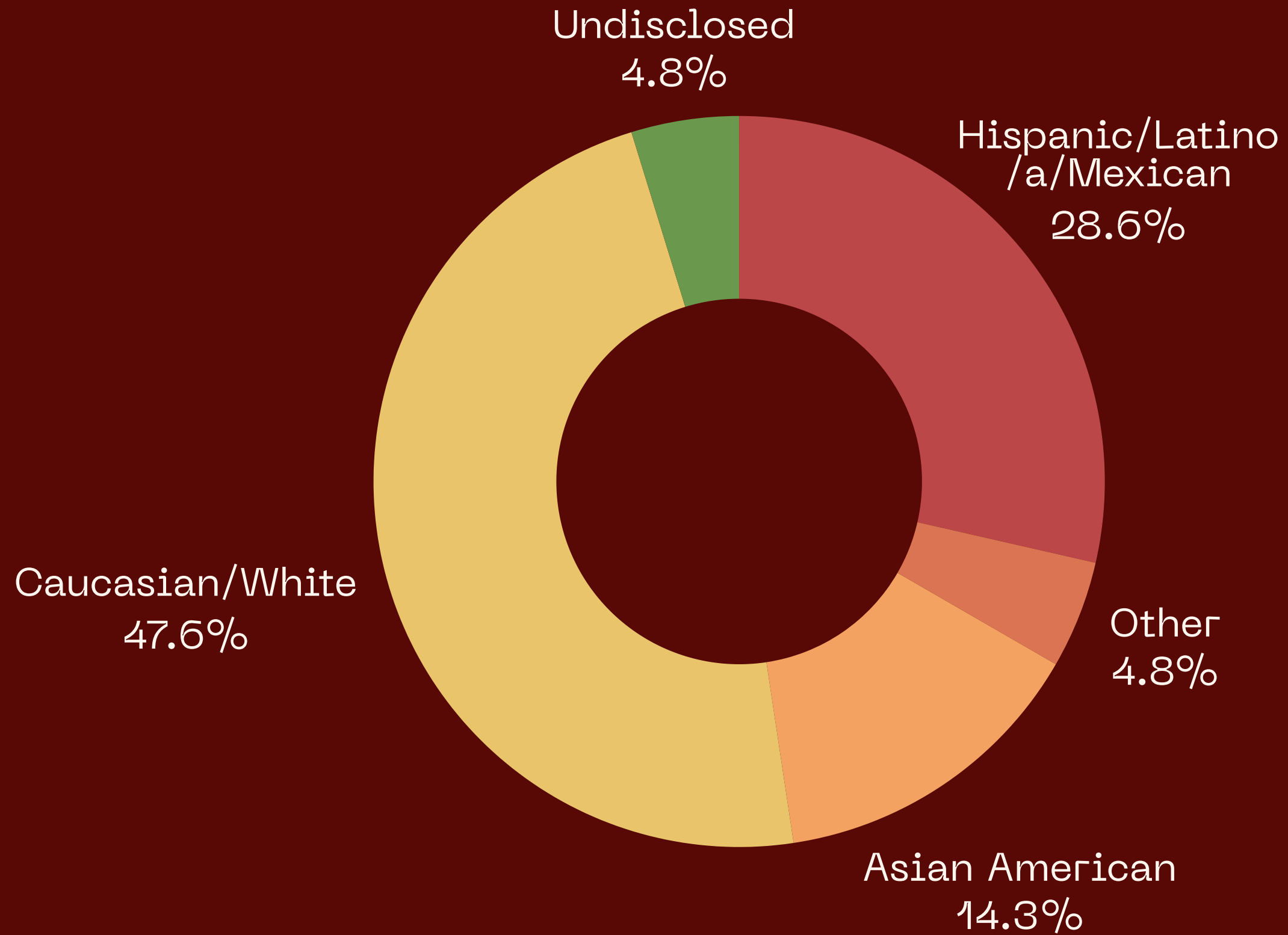


33-67

years of age

[$\bar{x}$ = 47.75yo]

(n= 21)



Demographics.



33.3% Northern
California

38.1% Central
California

28.6% Southern
California



36.8% > 15 years of
PreK–12
experience

57.9% 0–3 years of TK
experience

5.3% > 15 years of TK
experience

(n= 21)

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



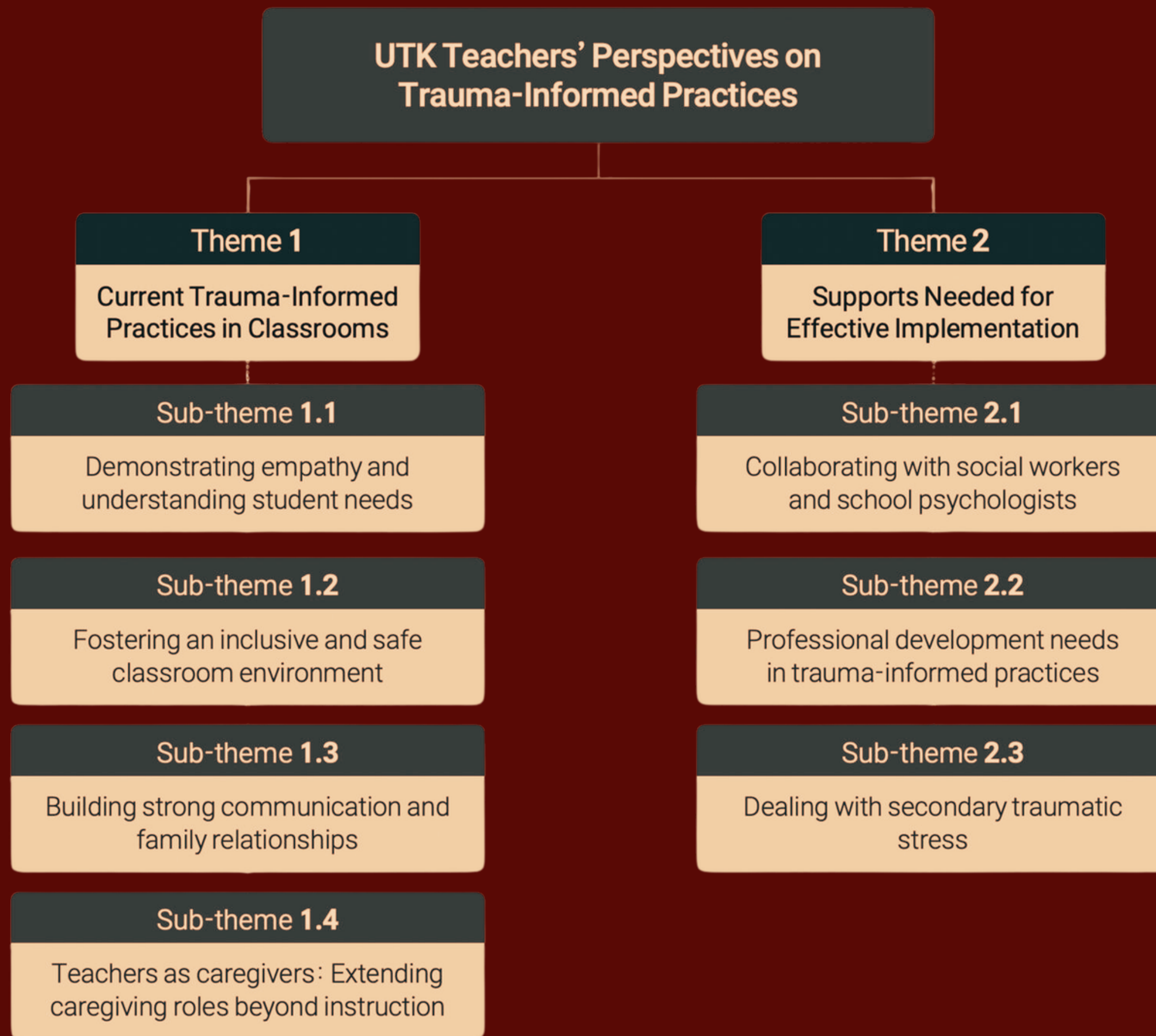
Theme 1:

Current Trauma-Informed Practices in Classrooms



Theme 2:

Supports Needed for Effective Implementation



Theme 1 Quotes.

Current Trauma-Informed Practices in Classrooms



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. Supports Needed for Effective Implementation



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)

Frequency Table

Themes and Sub-themes	Frequency	N (21)	% of N
Theme 1: Current trauma-informed practices in classrooms			
Sub-theme 1.1: Demonstrating empathy and understanding of student needs	74	20	95.2
Sub-theme 1.2: Fostering an inclusive and safe classroom environment	30	16	76.2
Sub-theme 1.3: Building strong communication and family relationships	31	14	66.7
Sub-theme 1.4: Teachers as caregivers: Extending caregiving roles beyond instruction	17	7	33.3
Theme 2: Supports needed for effective implementation			
Sub-theme 2.1: Collaborating with social workers and school psychologists	21	12	57.1
Sub-theme 2.2: Professional development needs in trauma-informed practices	30	13	61.9
Sub-theme 2.3: Dealing with secondary traumatic stress	26	14	66.7

Discussion

- ✖ UTK teachers operationalize trauma-informed practices through empathy, inclusive and emotionally safe classrooms, strong family partnerships, and caregiving roles that extend beyond academics.
- ✖ These practices align with core trauma-informed principles such as safety, trust, and responsiveness to children's emotional needs, particularly given young children's limited ability to express distress.
- ✖ However, findings reveal significant systemic gaps, including limited interdisciplinary collaboration, insufficient and superficial professional development, and a lack of early childhood-specific training.
- ✖ Teachers also experience notable secondary traumatic stress and burnout, highlighting the urgent need for institutional supports that sustain both effective TIP implementation and educator well-being.

Implications



Toward a cohesive TIP framework: Findings provide practice-based evidence on how core TIP principles (e.g., safety, trust, responsiveness) are enacted in early childhood settings, informing a more coherent and educational-specific framework.



Organizational supports matter: Effective TIP requires structured supports, including interdisciplinary collaboration, targeted professional development, and systems to address secondary traumatic stress.



Bridging research and practice: By centering teachers' lived experiences, the study responds to Watson and Astor's (2025) call to better integrate conceptual, empirical, and practice-based knowledge.



Shifting responsibility to systems: Implications emphasise the need to move beyond individual teacher responsibility and embed TIP within coordinated systems of policy, resources, and institutional support.

Thank You!

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