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Teacher Mindset Affects School Culture

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Teacher Mindset Affects School Culture

Sarah Miller

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

TEACHER MINDSET AFFECTS SCHOOL CULTURE

Abstract

Feelhaver Elementary School in northwest central, Iowa, has previously focused their professional learning on academic content which limited its focus on school culture and climate. Due to the limited focus on school culture and climate, there has been a lack of trust, collaboration, and growth mindset within the building. This school improvement plan will be implemented over the course of the next school year. This plan was developed to improve the school culture and climate in the building by increasing opportunities to utilize a growth mindset, build trust, teacher agency, and collective efficacy. Steps taken in implementation include a pre-assessment survey for staff members, differentiated professional learning opportunities, collaboration, and reflection.

Keywords: school culture, professional learning, teacher agency, growth mindset, collective efficacy

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Teacher Mindset Affects School Culture

Schools today are faced with the issues of teacher retention and student achievement. "Teachers' negative beliefs, feelings, and behaviors toward the school affect academic achievement" (Karadag et al, 2014, p.110). Teachers often feel added pressure to accept new policy changes and provide equitable instruction for all students without the training and learning required to do so. This added pressure increases the likelihood of burnout, poor teacher identity, and negative school culture. The school culture in a building can impact the quality of teacher satisfaction and the perception of learning (Karadag et al, 2014). As teachers are preparing to accommodate various student needs, they need to rely on their teacher identity and collective efficacy of the school staff. When there is a lack of trust in a school building, teachers are less likely to collaborate with their colleagues and are less likely to believe their efforts can have a positive impact on their students. Research has been done on the impact of student mindsets and achievement; however, little research has been done on the impact of teacher mindset and student achievement. As the issue of teacher shortages increases, I predict more research will be conducted on how teacher mindset affects school culture and student achievement.

The purpose of the school improvement plan is to create an empowering school culture based on increasing teacher agency and building collective efficacy. The school improvement plan will be developed by using strategies learned from action research and literature reviews that have shown promise in changing teachers' mindset and identity, designing productive professional development, and building teaching agency. "Teacher education and professional development should develop teachers' imagination and ability to visualize alternative futures for themselves and their students" (Li & Ruppap, 2021, p.56). Through school improvement teachers will increase their teacher agency and hold beliefs that they can have the capacity to teach and

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empower all students no matter their home lives. Teachers will seek out the strengths of their colleagues as part of collective efficacy to learn of new strategies and resources.

Resources for this school improvement plan were found using the DeWitt Library of Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. To be included in the literature review, only articles and studies published in the past ten years and from educational peer-reviewed journals were chosen. Studies regarding school culture, teacher agency, growth mindset, professional development methods, teacher identity, motivation, TLC programs, and collective efficacy were used in designing a school improvement plan. These studies were used to understand the background and mental processes that develop positive school cultures and a collaborative environment.

This school improvement plan will create an empowering school culture that will allow for teachers to build trusting relationships and provide opportunities for teachers to share their learning with colleagues. In an empowered school culture, instructional leadership is shared among staff and teachers feel trusted to make decisions as they engage in their work (Zahed-Babelan et al, 2019). Through various professional development methods that encourage engagement from teachers, teachers will begin to see the strengths in their colleagues and trust in their expertise. Different professional development methods include book study groups, sample lessons, case studies, and reflections (Steege & Lambson, 2015). By providing multiple opportunities for teachers to reflect on different mindsets, teachers will begin to examine their teacher identities and how it impacts their students.

In the literature review, important terms will be defined to ensure background knowledge for the rest of the review. Professional development will be examined first as this is the method that the school improvement plan will be presented. School culture will be examined through

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student and staff lenses. Next, teacher agency and collective efficacy will be discussed. Finally, mindset will be defined and examined as this is the variable to be impacted by the school improvement plan.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to provide background knowledge on traditional practices and give information on topics that will be used in this school improvement plan. "A significant force behind schools and classrooms where students are eager and able to learn are inclusive, relevant, meaningful, and potentially transformative approaches to professional learning" (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2019, p.63). First methods of professional development will be examined and topics for professional learning will be addressed. Professional learning will lead to a change in school culture. After discussing school culture, the focus of the literature review will narrow to look at teacher agency and teacher identity. The final section of this literature review will focus on the power of mindset and improving school culture. It is through this research that a school improvement plan will be developed.

Transforming Professional Development

Teachers have been ordered professional development as a top-down strategy to improve practices in the past. However, traditional professional development is not a universal strategy that best aids in teacher improvement. Professional development for the sake of supplying information is not enough. When planning for professional development, there are different options or methods that can make professional learning more relevant, rigorous, and collaborative. Take for example a case study done at Hermosa Elementary: all teachers had to take part in professional development where they had a variety of options to choose from. Teachers attended a whole group mini-lesson or lecture then engaged in a book study,

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demonstration lesson, individual case studies, or "Try its" (Steeg & Lambson, 2015, p. 479). In this example, teachers chose learning that was specific to their needs and interests which added relevance to professional development. The different methods of professional development also brought teachers together to connect with each other and the impact it had in their classrooms.

These methods added rigor to the learning by motivating teachers to act on their learning.

"Because collaborative PD holds the potential to build community, provide contexts that support risk-taking, and foster inquiry, the benefits of this model are significant, creating opportunities for teachers to look closely at their own practices in the company of others" (Steeg & Lambson, 2015, p. 478). Teachers were implementing their learning into their classrooms, reflecting on the impact, and sharing their learning with their colleagues and administrators.

Several studies suggest that trust is a key element to successful professional learning. Where there is a lack of trust, there is a lack of an empowered school culture as well. In research conducted by Carpenter (2015), it was found in two of the three school studied that a "lack of trust and respect for teacher professionalism resulted in a lack of collective inquiry and a severely stunted the collaborative culture" (p. 688). This research shows that building trust and respect should be a priority when facilitating professional development successfully. One article suggests that professional development can be transformed into professional learning, by incorporating equality, choice, voice, reflection, authentic dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity (Stewart, 2014). Looking specifically at praxis and reciprocity, teachers will be able to apply their learning to their individual classrooms and know that their reflections will be met with feedback. These principles aid teachers in creating partnerships that will serve as the foundation for collaborative learning.

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As teachers aim to be more collaborative with their colleagues, there will be times when conflict arises and emotions hinder group work, just as it occurs in the classroom. "When members encounter those they view as different from themselves and have the opportunity to process and explore those differences, they can generalize this learning beyond the group to promote unity on a larger scale" (Guth et al, 2019, p. 12). Teachers would benefit from conflict resolution training not only for the benefit of classroom use but professional learning as well to build a trusting community. Professional development on conflict resolution is a topic that would help teachers develop trust with each other and they would be able to reflect on and implement in their classrooms and learning communities. This practice, along with reflection, would aid in improving school culture.

In a study involving pre-service teachers, researchers were collecting qualitative data on the best teaching methods particularly around resilience and social emotional development. Researchers concluded, "Resilience strategies, such as support groups and meta-processing, contribute to the continuous growth and professional well-being of teachers working in challenging situations" (D'Emidio-Caston, 2019, p. 139). This research addressed the need for and calls for continuous professional development in resilience and social emotional development. Professional learning could be transformed to include support groups and time for processing so that teachers can trust each other and feel supported in an always evolving environment.

Professional development is a necessity in education to ensure teachers are informed of best practices. There are, however, different approaches to professional development including choice, collaboration, and reflective practices. Professional development practices should be used to help improve school culture because they provide opportunities for staff to build trusting

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relationships and give each other feedback on what they have learned. Learning should be shared with one another and discussed to encompass continuous learning in our teaching staff.

School Culture

School culture can be seen and felt in a school building. It is developed by combining the beliefs and values of students, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders. Based on the beliefs and values present in a building, the school culture can be seen as positive or negative. The school culture present in a building affects how students and staff perceive their time and how students see themselves as learners. "Teachers believed that a key characteristic of an effective teacher was recognizing the unique challenges their students faced and creating a space where students felt safe and could learn" (Bower et al, 2016, p. 752). A positive school culture can lead to students and staff feeling safe to grow.

Negative school culture occurs when administrators act from a bureaucratic standpoint instead of from shared leadership (Balkar, 2015). "Teachers do not perceive current school cultures as empowering when they do not believe that school management and their colleagues stand behind the decisions they make when empowered" (Balkar, 2015, p. 213). This research suggests that teachers do not feel as though their voice matters in their school. This feeling can influence their attitudes and beliefs about themselves and their colleagues which will filter down to how students perceive school as well. Negative school culture emulates an environment of fear and disrespect because of the lack of trust among administrators, teachers, and students.

These feelings were mirrored in research conducted by Karadag et al (2014) when they found that "teachers' negative beliefs, behaviors, and emotions about their schools influence their perceptions about teacher collaboration, instructional communication, collaborative leadership,

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trust, unity of purpose, and professional development” (p. 109). As mentioned earlier in this literature review, professional development needs to incorporate building trust amongst staff members. All important aspects of improving the environment include collaboration, trust, and reflection on teacher beliefs and behaviors. Collaboration, communication, leadership, trust, and unity of purpose are crucial to creating a school culture that is open to continuous learning. These qualities can also be modeled for students.

The studies by Robinson et al (2015) and Balkar (2015) agree that a positive school culture is created by a specific leadership style and respectful environment. A positive school culture also creates a positive perception for students. “Perceptions of safety are directly correlated to the belief that teacher and school rules are sincere efforts to create fair and respectful environments” (Robinson et al, 2015, p. 36). Fair and respectful environments create a space of trust which allows all stakeholders to feel safe both emotionally and physically. When administration creates an empowering environment, conditions are ideal for teachers to collaborate and learn from one another. According to Balkar (2015), teachers in an empowering school culture feel encouraged to take risks. “The characteristics of sense of confidence, support for risk-taking, encouraging autonomy, freedom, flexibility, participating in decision-making and non-bureaucratic structure are dominant characteristics of ESC” (Balkar, 2015, p. 212). It is with these characteristics in mind that a change in school culture can begin.

Several methods in the literature are reported in how to address the issue of transforming a negative school culture to an empowering school culture. The transformation according to Karadag (2014) begins with administrators. “School administrations can overcome the negative influence of organizational cynicism in their schools by eliminating distrust within the school, conducting implementations consistent with the school purpose, enabling teachers' participation

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in decision-making processes, and creating a school culture that emphasizes accountability and high moral standards” (Karadag et al, 2014, p. 110). This conclusion prescribes building trust within the building and allowing teachers to have voice in making decisions that align with the schools’ purpose. These methods of changing the culture in a building can be carried out by establishing leaders in the building that can encourage others to participate in decision making and model accountability and high moral standards.

While the methods above address changing school culture as it applies to adults, research by Robinson et al (2015) focuses more on changing school culture for students. “This study also affirms that teachers, or rather the perception of teacher expectations and encouragement as indicated by the survey questions, has an impact on school climate, which impact student perceptions of fairness, culture, and power” (Robinson et al, 2015, p. 40). This study suggests that student perceptions of school culture are reliant on how teachers explain expectations and encourage them. Teachers have the power to make students feel safe, in control, respected, and challenged.

The culture in a school can either be positive or negative. Whichever type of school culture is present in a school, it will impact the way students, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders feel and act. In order to encourage a positive and empowered school culture, it is necessary to build trust with all stakeholders. All stakeholders need to understand the purpose of school and work together to ensure that everyone has a voice and feels safe to take risks.

Developing Identity and Values

School culture is based on the values and beliefs of the stakeholders in a school. It is for that reason that the literature review will now focus on how teachers come to stand by their specific values and beliefs. Teacher beliefs and values begin by developing and adapting their

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teacher identity. Teachers then understand their own learning and develop teacher agency. When teachers rely on and trust their colleagues, collective efficacy begins to develop.

Many studies on preservice teachers have documented that teacher identity is an ongoing process. Teachers first begin to identify as a teacher as they experience life in the classroom. As they gain confidence and learn new strategies, their teacher identity changes. "Teacher identity has been defined as "an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences that may be influenced by personal, social and cognitive factors" (Dassa & Derose, 2017, p. 103). This research suggests that as teachers reflect on their experiences in the classroom, professional development, and collaboration with colleagues their values and teacher identity can change. It also suggests that time and structure are needed to make sense and reinterpret experiences.

In the study of preservice teachers by Dassa and Derose (2017), they found in a survey that the most rewarding experiences included relationships and collaboration with peers, receiving feedback from their professors, and classroom discussions. This data from preservice teachers can be applied to satisfaction of veteran teachers as well. Teachers adapt their teacher identifies as they reflect on relationships with their peers, feedback from administrators and colleagues, as well as discussions from professional development and their personal classrooms. "Teacher education and professional development should develop teachers' imagination and ability to visualize alternative futures for themselves and their students" (Li & Ruppap, 2021, p. 56). As teachers reflect on their previous experiences they may begin to see where they can improve.

Dassa and Derose (2017) had described teacher identity as an ongoing and dynamic process. Similar findings were identified in research done by Noonan (2019) when teacher

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identity was further described as an ongoing process that is socially situated, layered, and active (p.527). Teacher identity can be described as layered because as teacher identities change, teachers are able to hold on to previous identities and add new learning. Past experiences do not disappear with new experiences, they simply help create a larger scale of the teacher's identity. Noonan (2019) described teacher identity as active because it is "emerging out of teachers' sense of agency" (p.527).

Just as teacher identity is formed by teacher agency, teacher agency is shaped by teachers past experiences (Li & Ruppap, 2021). Teachers are considered change agents in education because they are a force of the educational organization that puts curriculum and professional learning into practice. Past experiences in the classroom and school can drive their own professional learning to shape their future practices and experiences. "Promoting teacher agency not only allows teachers to practice a higher level of professional decision making but also to see agency as a key component of teacher professionalism" (Li & Ruppap, 2021, p. 52). Teacher agency is an important factor in improving school culture because teachers will have professional learning to create merit for teachers.

One method of improving teacher agency was studied through the Teacher Leadership and Compensation, TLC, program. The study found that the TLC program, which involved assigning leadership roles, compensating teachers, and providing high quality professional development, improved instruction and the professional environment (Allen, 2018). The TLC program seeks to build educational leaders who can share their learning with others. As teachers seek out professional learning to improve their environment, they are building their teacher agency. "Agency is essential for participating in a school culture in which teachers are rewarded for initiative in pursuing professional development and for collegial collaborations" (Allen, 2018,

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p. 248). The TLC program is a steppingstone to developing teacher agency. Li & Ruppap (2021) studied teacher agency and reported that "teachers' perspectives on the development and use of their own agency are lacking, as are examinations of pre- and in-service teachers' development of agency" (p. 57). This study suggests that professional development needs to allow teachers to examine their own teacher agency and provide experiences for teachers to apply their teacher agency.

As teachers develop their teacher agency, they may gravitate toward professional learning experiences that align to their needs. Noonan (2019) studied professional learning experiences and found that teacher identify can attract teachers to specific learning experiences and content. Professional learning experiences can be aligned with content, facilitation, and collaboration (Noonan, 2019). Some teachers prefer learning experiences that allow them to deeply engage with the content they will be teaching. Others prefer to focus on learning experiences that allow them to experience routines and modeling. Learning from peers and collaboration is another preferred learning experience. Noonan (2019) suggests, "PD designers would do well to attend to individual teachers' learning needs by surveying them on what they most want to learn, offering differentiated choices, and giving them some degree of agency over their PD" (p.535). Differentiated professional learning can help teachers to improve their capacity and build their collective efficacy.

Berebitsky & Salloum (2017) studied the relationship between a school's collective efficacy and its social network. Collective efficacy is a group's belief that they can achieve a goal, despite challenges outside their control. "In schools, collective efficacy can thus be built not just by the success of the individual or group (mastery experience) but by the accomplishments (vicarious experience) and the encouragement (verbal persuasion) of others" (Berebitsky &

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Salloum, 2017, p. 8). This research suggests that group success is not enough to build collective efficacy. A staff needs to seek out others' accomplishments and encourage those who are working to improve. "When more teachers turn to more colleagues for advice regarding instruction, collective efficacy tended to be higher" (Berebitsky & Salloum, 2017, p.8). When teachers turn to each other and to outside sources to improve their instruction they are increasing their social network. It is important for teachers to collaborate so that they may increase their collective efficacy.

Developing teacher identity is an ongoing process that evaluates the values and experiences held by teachers. As teachers build and use their teacher agency, they can continue evolving their teacher identity. Teacher agency allows teachers to actively seek out professional learning experiences that best align to their needs and the needs of their building and students. As teachers continue to learn from professional learning experiences and each other they are building their collective efficacy that they can have a positive impact on the students they teach.

Encouraging Growth Mindset

Oftentimes, teachers are told to encourage a growth mindset in their students. "Mindsets are beliefs that are grounded in a person's worldview and affect the ways in which the person reacts to challenges, obstacles, and criticism" (Allen, 2018, p. 247) Growth mindset is the belief that individuals can learn from challenges because they have unlimited intelligence and abilities. A fixed mindset is the belief that individuals have a set intelligence and limited abilities. As teachers are encouraged to promote growth mindset in students, there is little research to report about the mindsets of teachers. However, many of the same strategies used to encourage growth mindset in students could be used to encourage growth mindset in teachers.

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According to a study done by Gutshall (2013), 61.8% of teachers showed a growth mindset, 12% showed a neutral mindset, and 26% showed a fixed mindset (p.1078). This study used interview data collected on teachers responding to scenarios about students. While this study suggests that the majority of teachers show a growth mindset, the percentage of teachers that show a fixed mindset is unsettling. This data suggests teachers with a fixed mindset believe that some of their students have limited intelligence or abilities that will inhibit them from being successful in their classrooms.

A fixed mindset can be formed by deficit thinking. An example of deficit thinking was found in a study by Alemán et al (2017). "Some educators explained that students would have limited college access because their parents lacked education, financial ability, appropriate culture, and/or the ability to make appropriate decisions for their children" (p. 868). When a teacher has a fixed mindset about their students, they are focusing on challenges that are beyond their control. Fixed mindset and deficit thinking are also often reinforced by looking only at numeric data of low performing students (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2019). Students can overcome challenges with a staff of teachers year after year that work with a growth mindset and encourage a growth mindset in their students.

To begin transforming fixed mindsets to growth mindsets, several studies suggest beginning with school leadership and challenging assumptions. "School leadership and resisting deficit-based explanations of students living in poverty depends on the quality of leadership present in schools" (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2017, p.17). Leadership in a building can include administrators, teachers, and support staff. The leadership in the building should be encouraging growth mindset and changing the narrative for our students by focusing on what they can do instead of what attributes are against them. "Experimental studies with low-achieving middle and

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high school students have found that interventions designed to teach students to develop growth mindsets have improved students' behavior and academic achievement " (Garwood & Ampuja, 2019, p.47). This research raises the question if interventions could be used to encourage growth mindset in adults. Leaders in the building should be viewing other staff members through a growth mindset and encouraging staff members to also focus on how they can use their challenges to improve.

Multiple studies have suggested that changing mindsets is not a simple task. "Although reform models that emphasize culture may be an inviting and convenient way for schools to broach change, they cannot be successful if the proposed aims and philosophy do not align with teachers' collective and individual identities" (Bower et al, 2016, p. 758). The finding indicates that it is important to understand the teacher identities that are present in a building to better align professional development and changes. Another challenge to changing mindsets is shifting assumptions about students and their motivation. Researchers Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2019) give the example of moving our emphasis from fixing students to using their strengths as potential (p. 63).

Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2019) provided a framework in their research to improve motivational conditions. The motivational conditions include establishing inclusion, developing a positive attitude, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence (p.58). While this framework is meant to improve student and teacher relationships and motivation, it could also be used to motivate teachers to focus on a growth mindset. By establishing inclusion, the school becomes an environment where teachers feel respected by one another. Building leadership can develop a positive attitude by providing teachers with choice in their learning and involving them in decision making. To enhance meaning in professional development, time can be scheduled to

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allow teachers to voice their perspectives. Teachers can modify their mindset by reflecting on how their learning has allowed them to overcome challenges in their teaching.

Encouraging teachers to change their mindset is a challenging task but it is necessary to improve the culture in a building. A fixed mindset implies that there is no chance for improvement while a growth mindset implies that there are no limits to the growth and improvement that can be achieved. A positive school culture can be achieved if all stakeholders believe in a growth mindset for their students and themselves. With a growth mindset, teachers will be strengthened by their mistakes as they learn from them and seek new strategies to improve.

This literature review has provided background knowledge on traditional practices and methods for change that will be used in this school improvement plan. Research on professional development practices showed that trust building is a necessary first step and that time needs to be allocated for teachers to reflect and discuss the learning with colleagues. A positive and empowered school culture is built on trust among all stakeholders and can have a lasting impact on how students and staff feel about school. Developing teacher identity is an ongoing process that is built by learning and reflecting. A growth mindset is needed to continue modifying teacher agency and to continue building trusting relationships among students and staff. It is through this research that this school improvement plan was developed.

School Profile

School Characteristics

Feelhaver Elementary School is one of the five elementary schools in the Fort Dodge Community School District in Fort Dodge, Iowa. The school enrolls 220 students from first through fifth grade, with two sections of each grade. Along with our ten general education

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teachers, Feelhaver Elementary has one special education teacher, one full time and one half time Title I reading teachers, a guidance counselor, a talented and gifted teacher, and four paraeducators. Our building shares our music, art, and P.E. teachers with another building in the district. Feelhaver Elementary is made up of 93% female staff members and 7% male staff. Feelhaver is made up of 96% white and 4% Asian staff members. All teachers in our building have had two or more years of experience in the classroom.

Student Performance

Students at Feelhaver Elementary are assessed three times a year in reading and math using the FASTBridge Assessments. Third grade through fifth grade students are also given the ISASP assessments in the spring. According to FASTBridge, Feelhaver outperformed the district on the aReading assessment in the spring of 2022. 62% of students at Feelhaver scored at their specific grade level benchmark while the district data showed 48% of students in the district were proficient in reading on the same assessments. In math, Feelhaver outperformed the district on the FASTBridge assessment. Feelhaver was 59% proficient while the district was 43% proficient. Feelhaver is a school targeted by ESSA due to an achievement gap of students on free/reduced lunch on the ISASP assessments. An achievement gap is when data shows that a certain subgroup outperforms other subgroups. The Iowa Department of Education (2021) shows all students have an index point of 46.77 while students from low economic status or free/reduced lunch have an index point of 39.62.

Student and Community Characteristics

Fort Dodge, Iowa has a population of 24,871 and covers 16 square miles. The poverty rate in Fort Dodge is 17%. The demographics of Fort Dodge consist of 82% white, 7% Hispanic or Latino, 6% black or African American, 3% of two or more races, and 1.9% Asian (United

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States Census Bureau, n.d). According to the Iowa Department of Education (2021), Feelhaver Elementary is made up of 82% white students, 7% multi-racial, 5.5% Hispanic, 3% Black/African American, 1% Native American, and 1% Asian. Thirty-seven percent of students are from low socioeconomic status which makes Feelhaver the least socioeconomically diverse school in the district. Twelve percent of students in the building have an IEP. The school also has 53% male students and 47% female students (Iowa Department of Education, 2021).

Parent Involvement

Parents are involved at Feelhaver Elementary by attending conferences and family engagement events held throughout the school year. At family engagement events, teachers share data with families and teach them an activity they can do with their children at home. Families and students get to engage in the activity in their classrooms and showcase their learning. Students showcase their learning by presenting their performance tasks and showing their work to families.

Feelhaver Elementary has a booster club that meets once a month throughout the school year. There are six members made up of parents and our principal that consistently engage in the booster club. The booster club helps fundraise and plan field trips for our school. Parents on the booster club provide food for the staff at conferences and family engagement nights. Our scholastic book fair is also run by the booster club.

School Mission & Vision

The Fort Dodge Community School District's mission "is to provide quality learning experiences and build relationships that develop productive citizens ready for their futures" (Fort Dodge Community School District, 2022). At Feelhaver Elementary the district's mission is reviewed at the beginning of meetings in our aligned phrasing of the mission. At Feelhaver our

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mission is to act as a community, dream big, and push our students to be the best that they can be both in the present and in the future. The vision of the Fort Dodge Community School District is to be “an innovative school community that exceeds expectations, builds meaningful relationships and creates the foundation for all learners to excel” (Fort Dodge Community School District, 2022). At Feelhaver we envision an inclusive and safe space built on relationships where students, teachers, and families are challenged, supported, valued, and loved.

Current Student Learning Goals

Our district’s goals for student learning focus on bridging achievement gaps and preparing students for the next grade level and life after school. One goal is for students to perform at or above grade level. Another goal is to eliminate achievement gaps from all student subgroups. Our district also has the goal to prepare students to graduate ready for college, career and life in a globally competitive economy (Fort Dodge Community School District, 2022). Our district has also adopted Leader in Me to help our students develop habits that will allow them to be successful as leaders today and in the future.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Our district has adopted new curricula for elementary grades in the past five years. The reading curriculum adopted for our elementary schools is EL Education Language Arts Curriculum which includes a content-based literacy and a reading foundation skills block. The math curriculum adopted for our elementary schools is Illustrative Math. Our science curriculum is ASSIST (Argument Based Strategies for STEM Infused Science Teaching). Our curricula offer scripted lesson plans with suggested instructional practices and routines, checks for understanding, mid unit assessments, and unit assessments. Our reading foundational skills block curriculum also offers benchmark assessments that are used three times a year. Our teachers use

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various forms of instruction including whole class and small group instruction. Teachers receive Title I reading support to instruct small group reading skills to differentiate for student needs.

Teacher Work and Professional Development

Professional learning and collaboration are important to our district. Once a month our teachers and staff engage in professional development that is created and led by our instructional coaches, curriculum director, and administrators. The focus of previous work was identifying priority standards, checking for vertical alignment in the standards, and developing consistency among our elementary schools by designing common formative assessments to be used district wide. Our previous work had a larger focus on literacy; however, the focus has shifted to mathematics and social studies this past school year. Our professional development has been designed to focus on teaching skills and content as we learn new curriculum. The Fort Dodge Community School District is also a PLC community where grade level teams meet on Wednesdays after school to discuss priority standards, develop SMART goals based on pre-assessments, and discuss instructional practices teachers will use.

Needs Assessment

Professional learning and collaboration are important to our district, which is why our focus has been on building the capacity of our staff. As a district this professional learning aligns with our goals. However, as a building this has left little focus on improving the school culture and climate. Our staff consists of many veteran teachers who are knowledgeable of the content and the traditions of our school. However, education is evolving, and our students are coming with different needs than in the past. We need to address the challenges that have presented themselves including mindset around students of low socioeconomic status, the collaboration among teachers, and the feelings of trust among our staff.

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Feelhaver Elementary has traditionally been the elementary school in our district where families are from higher socioeconomic status. As our veteran teachers are experiencing a shift in socioeconomic status among our students, their approach to addressing the needs of students from lower socioeconomic status has remained the same. Some teachers do not feel they need to adjust their instructional practices to best meet the needs of diverse students. Teachers want to continue teaching the way they traditionally have, which is creating barriers for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

As stated earlier, our district has a focus on collaboration. We have PLC meetings weekly to collaborate on priority standards, our instruction, and creating assessments. With our building being one of the smallest elementary buildings, our teachers join another elementary school in our district for PLC. This allows our teachers with more teachers from their grade level in which to collaborate. While this allows for greater numbers in which to collaborate, the differences between the students in each school seem to create a barrier. While collaboration happens, it feels forced and scripted. In our building, teachers rarely have time to collaborate with other teachers in our building that work with the same students.

This lack of collaboration in the building may also contribute to the lack of trust among staff members, administration, and students. The trust among staff members seems limited to grade level or by how long teachers have been in the building. As new teachers are moving to the building, there is little being done to promote collaboration among new and veteran staff. When behaviors occur in the classroom, teachers send students out of the classroom where a resolution is formed usually with our principal. This forms a trusting relationship between students and the principal but not between the student and teacher. This also creates a barrier between the principal and teacher if the teacher does not like how a problem was resolved.

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Based on our school profile, professional development and staff capacity have been the focus which has limited the focus of school climate and culture as our school's priority. Our school climate and culture are in need of improvement. We need to address the challenges socioeconomic status, collaboration, and trust have brought to our school. If these challenges to school climate and culture are addressed, our school culture will begin to improve.

Data Analysis

Collecting data is necessary to show areas in need of improvement and to show growth from a starting point. Data that was used to show areas needing improvement include Iowa School Performance Profiles from the Department of Education, Panorama data from Conditions for Learning Surveys, and survey results about developing building goals. Our school culture impacts the way students feel about school and their learning. By looking at data of specific subgroups, gaps in our school culture can be identified. The following data shows some areas that need improvement.

One subgroup that stood out in our school profile was students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the Iowa Department of Education (2021), in 2018 48.1% of our students were designated as low socioeconomic status whereas in 2021 37.3% of students held that designation. This data shows that over the past four years our percentages of students on free/reduced lunch have decreased. Even though the percentage of students from low socioeconomic status decreased, the achievement gaps of students from low socioeconomic status have increased. In 2019, the achievement gap was $-.48$ while in 2021 the gap was -4.33 (Iowa Department of Education, 2021). If our students from low socioeconomic status have learning gaps this suggests that they are being negatively impacted by our school culture. These students may not feel empowered or included in their classrooms nor see themselves in the

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curriculum. This data suggests that our teachers need to change their mindsets and improve their instructional practices with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

In the spring of 2022, students completed a Conditions for Learning survey that asked students to reflect on adult-student relationships, boundaries and expectations, emotional safety, physical safety, and student-student relationships. Compared to results from the 2021 survey, all areas improved except for boundaries and expectations which decreased. The data from this survey indicates that while students typically have a positive view of adult-student relationships there is a less positive view of consistent boundaries and expectations. Another alarming result from this survey was that only 13% of students feel emotional safe from teasing, exclusion, and verbal abuse (Panorama Education, 2022). If students are not feeling emotionally safe it may limit their ability to focus on learning.

Table 1

Results from 2021 and 2022 Conditions for Learning Survey

	Adult-Student Relationships	Boundaries and Expectations	Emotional Safety	Physical Safety	Student-Student Relationships
2021	72%	73%	11%	40%	71%
2022	80%	69%	13%	46%	79%

When results from the Conditions for Learning survey are narrowed to view data from students on free/reduced lunch it becomes clear that adult and student relationships as well as physical safety are perceived less positively. Only 70% of students on free/reduced lunch viewed adult-student relationships positively. 34% felt physically safe at school and 66% felt that student-student relationships were positive (Panorama Education, 2022). When looking at

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behavior data in our building, students on free/reduced lunch received twice as many referrals for defiance and non-compliance than students not on free/reduced lunch. This data shows a lack of an empowered school culture, teacher agency and collective efficacy. As part of building teacher agency, teachers need to seek instructional practices that empower their challenging students. If teachers genuinely believed in collective efficacy, they would be seeking strategies from their colleagues to find solutions to their challenges. This data shows that teachers need a variety of tools to respond to students who are non-compliant and to build relationships with these students to prevent this behavior from occurring which will help positively impact school culture.

Our school has little data on teacher beliefs on collaboration and trust. The data we have collected is less official than the surveys collected from students. A Google Forms survey that was completed by teachers in the 2021-2022 school year for the purpose of determining a school goal shows a small view of the current mindset of our teachers. In the survey, teachers were to select if they wanted our school goal to focus on supporting students' whole group social emotional learning needs, individual student needs, or adult learning on collective beliefs, mindsets, and capacity building. The results showed that 52.2% of teachers wanted to focus on adult learning, 26.1% on whole group student learning, and 21.7% on individual student needs.

More data needs to be collected to gather staff beliefs on trust and collaboration in the building. As stated earlier, data can be used to show areas of improvement and growth. Currently, our school does not have data on how teachers view their teacher agency, collective efficacy, or even professional learning preferences. We also do not have data on how teachers feel about their professional role and status in our building which could help determine the level of empowerment teachers feel. This data would be crucial to monitoring improvement of the school culture. This data could be gathered through surveys or short answer responses.

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Based on the data collected by our building, our school is showing that many areas in the Conditions for Learning survey have improved from the previous year, which is a strength for our building. Another strength is that our teachers know there are areas we need to improve on for our building goal. Our building needs to improve adult and student relationships with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Our data shows weaknesses academically and socially with this subgroup of students. Another weakness that was indicated by our data is there is a lack of data on teacher beliefs and mindsets. This shows that an assessment or survey for teachers on the climate and culture in the building would be necessary.

Action Plan

When working to improve the school climate and culture in our building, it will be important to establish baseline data and provide teachers with an environment that will be empowering and collaborative. This action plan is based on findings from research in the literature review. This plan is designed to include professional learning practices, building trust and teacher agency, and reflection. The strategies addressed in this action plan will provide experiences for staff members to promote growth mindset in teachers and to produce a positive school culture.

Pre-Assessment Survey

As mentioned in the data analysis, our building does not have much data on how teachers view their mindset, teacher agency, collective efficacy, or professional learning preferences. This is an important first step in the school improvement plan. This first step will be met by conducting a survey for teachers based on these specific perceptions. This survey will not only give baseline data for the school improvement plan but can also help determine the type of professional learning that should be utilized.

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Building Trust

Research showed that trust is a key element to changing the school culture and climate. The next step to improving the climate and culture in our school is to build a foundation of trust. Many of the teachers in our building are veteran teachers and have established relationships with other veteran teachers in our building. The relationships can be isolating and limit further relationships with new teachers. To expand the trust and social network within our building, teachers will be randomly paired with other teachers in the building to reflect and discuss their learning from professional development. This will allow teachers to collaborate with teachers they may not typically seek out.

In the past little time has been available to explore the expertise our colleagues possess. To address this problem and promote conversation among the staff, there will be a space available in the teachers' lounge where staff can post topics they are interested in learning about or strategies and tools they have had experience with. This process will begin during a professional development meeting so that every staff member is represented. Staff will be encouraged to add to the wall throughout the year and at the beginning of professional development meetings. This will allow teachers to reach out to others who have used tools or strategies they wish to use or even open the possibility for teachers to learn together. Berebitsky and Salloum (2017) found that as teachers turn to their colleagues for advice the collective efficacy in a building is higher. Teachers may also begin to see value in their colleagues and provide encouragement for teachers to continue their learning.

Empowerment in Professional Learning

At the beginning of the school year, a new approach to professional learning will be introduced to the staff. Staff members will be given a choice in how they participate in

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professional learning. By having a choice in their professional learning, staff members will begin to feel empowered. In their research, Steeg and Lambson (2015) found that collaborative professional development has many benefits including community building, risk-taking, and inquiry. These benefits can help teachers look at their own practices and reflect with others. Our professional development needs to provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their learning needs and choose topics and strategies that will help them grow in their skills. To help teachers grow in their skills, they will have opportunities to participate in book studies, webinars, and/or observation experiences.

After teachers participate in professional learning there will be a collaborative piece where teachers will share their learning and reflections with other staff members. Teachers will also plan to implement new learning and reflect on how the implementation went. After teachers have implemented new learning and personally reflected, they will, then, discuss their learning with another teacher and receive feedback from their partner. This cycle of learning, implementing, reflecting, and sharing will allow teachers to continue developing their teacher identities and teacher agency.

Reflection Opportunities

A strategy that was mentioned several times in research from the literature review was reflection. There will be time for reflection at the beginning and end of every professional learning opportunity. Reflection gives purpose to learning and gives teachers the opportunity to adapt their teacher identity and mindset. Teachers need to reflect on their past experiences as they connect to their new professional learning and how it changed them or their instruction. Specific topics that will be reflected on through professional development include teacher identity, teacher mindset, and overcoming challenges. After teachers have reflected on their

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learning, they will share their learning experiences and parts of their reflections with another teacher. Collective efficacy is built by sharing learning experiences and reflections with others (Berebitsky & Salloum, 2017). It will help to build trusting relationships and provide opportunities for valued feedback.

TLC Action Teams

Our building has teachers that are part of our districts' TLC program. The teachers participating in the TLC program will be developing and facilitating professional development throughout the school year. In our building, these teachers can also help encourage teacher agency and collective efficacy among our staff. They can lead discussions and guide teachers in their reflections. Not all grade level teachers are represented on the action teams in our building so it will be important for the action team members and facilitators to encourage leadership and growth mindset in all staff members.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

Timeline

The timeline to implement the school improvement plan will need to begin before the beginning of the school year to adequately prepare for future steps. It will be important for the principal and TLC Action Team to work together in preparing survey questions and professional development choices. Physical changes to the teachers' lounge will need to be prepared before the beginning of the school year and before the first professional development so that teachers can begin sharing their learning and expertise immediately. The timeline will also have several steps that repeat throughout the school year including completing the survey to track progress, participating in professional learning, and reflecting on their learning.

Table 2

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School Improvement Plan Timeline

Step	Timeline	Responsible Staff
Pre-Assessment Survey Questions	ASAP	Principal and TLC Action Team Staff
Professional Learning Choices/ Resources	Before School Starts	Principal and TLC Action Team Staff
Lounge Space Design	Before School Starts	TLC Action Team Staff
Take the Pre-Assessment Survey	August January May	All Staff
Lounge Space/Social Network	Beginning of the School Year Throughout the Year	Principal, TLC Action Team Staff, Teachers
Assign Reflection Partners and Questions	Beginning of School Year	Principal and TLC Action Team Staff
Professional Development Experiences	Monthly	All Staff

Resources

In order to be successful at implementing this school improvement plan a few resources will be necessary. One resource that will be necessary is time. The principal and TLC Action Team will need time to collaborate, create the survey, and plan for differentiated professional learning. Other resources needed include access to books for book studies and webinars. One webinar resource that will be examined is the edWebinar site which will allow teachers to search

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for specific topics. Some professional development resources to differentiate may be found through the local AEA.

Monitoring the Plan

Monitoring this school improvement plan will be the responsibility of the principal and TLC Action Team. The pre-assessment survey, Table 3 below, will give baseline data for how our school is currently operating and the mindset of our staff. The survey will be given at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. The results of the survey will show how successful the plan was at improving the school culture. If the middle of the year survey indicates that little has changed or highlights a specific area needing improvement, the principal and TLC Action Team can work together to make adjustments to the professional learning experiences.

Table 3

Pre-Assessment Survey Questions for Teachers

Factor	Survey Questions
Mindset	How likely are you to give students multiple chances per subject to fix their behavior before writing a referral? What steps do you take when a student is blurting? What steps do you take when a student does not want to do their work/participate?
Agency	How likely are you to research strategies to try with challenging students? "In what areas can I continue to be a learner? What am I personally and professionally interested in? How can my professional learning

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	<p>opportunities be more relevant to my own needs as a learner?" (Lathram, 2015).</p> <p>"What's the connection between what I am currently learning and my role as an educator?" (Lathram, 2015)</p>
Collective Efficacy	<p>"How effectively does the staff meet to create a strong sense of community?"</p> <p>Is each staff member valued as a learner and a contributor to the overall mission of the school/organization?" (Lathram, 2015)</p> <p>How often do you discuss teaching with staff members in the building?</p> <p>How likely are you to brainstorm strategies to try with your grade level teammate on academic challenges? Behavioral challenges?</p> <p>How likely are you to brainstorm strategies to try with a staff member (not same grade level) on academic challenges? Behavioral challenges?</p>
Professional Learning	<p>Which method of professional learning do you prefer? book study, webinars, content, curriculum, observations, lesson reviews/reflection</p> <p>What areas do you feel you need to improve as a teacher?- management, mindset, content, instructional practices, collaboration, agency</p>
Trust	<p>How often do you connect with staff in the building to build relationships?</p> <p>How comfortable would you feel having a difficult conversation with other staff members?</p> <p>How welcome do you feel in the school?</p> <p>How valued do you feel in the school?</p>
Empowerment	<p>What makes you feel empowered?</p>

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Potential Barriers

As with any well intended plan, there are potential challenges and barriers that can get in the way of success. One potential challenge is that some of our professional development is required by our school district. This may hinder the plan to empower teachers with choice in their professional learning. Our principal and TLC Action Team may need to adjust the plan to include other ways to empower our teachers if we cannot find ways to differentiate our professional development. Another potential barrier is that the staff may push back that their learning load is too much. Staff may feel that they do not have enough time to implement professional development required by the district and the professional learning from this school improvement plan. To address this potential barrier, the principal and TLC Action Team may need to collect data based on conversations with staff to decide how to arrange the workload so that teachers can focus on feeling empowered in their workload and use a growth mindset in their work.

Conclusion

School culture can have a major impact on how teachers, students, and stakeholders view their time and learning experiences. School culture can be improved by empowering teachers with differentiated professional learning to build their teacher agency and change their teacher identities and mindsets. As teachers learn from and collaborate with other staff members, they can build the schools' collective efficacy and believe they truly can make a positive impact on all students (Berebitsky & Salloum 2017). Our building can improve our school culture by building trusting relationships throughout the school and using our collective efficacy to collaborate with each other. The research in this school improvement plan focuses on empowering approaches to professional learning, sharing, and reflection. It is with these findings that our school

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improvement plan was created, and it is with this plan that the school culture at Feelhaver Elementary will improve.

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