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Not the Desired Outcome: Groupthink Undermines the Work of a Literacy Council

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Abstract

A history of school reform failure has prompted concern among literacy researchers and practitioners alike. This article considers the case of a school Literacy Council and its unsuccessful efforts to improve the school's literacy environment. Mobilizing Janis's notion of groupthink, I examine discourse among group members and suggest that characteristics of groupthink—problematic antecedents cultivating troubling decision-making symptoms—led to unsuccessful outcomes. During times of low stress, Literacy Council members collaborated effectively, but when the principal's unilateral curricular decision raised stress levels, the group succumbed to groupthink and experienced failure. This study offers implications for other groups which are shaken by a late-emerging threat. I argue that groupthink theory shines light on problems with group interaction. An awareness of precursors to and symptoms of groupthink may support work teams as they propose and enact important change.

Keywords

case study, decision making, groupthink, meetings, teachers

It is the rare day that a teachers' group tasked with enriching their school's literacy climate is compared with a U.S. president's cabinet or a street gang. Nevertheless, the groups share key attributes. The practices of each of these

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groups are characterized by problematic antecedents (e.g., leaders with a history of neglecting member ideas) which cultivate troubling decision-making (e.g., rejecting or ignoring dissenting opinions), and lead to less-than-positive outcomes. As Janis (1983) noted, prior to the Bay of Pigs debacle, President John F. Kennedy's advisors failed to recognize the risks of this operation because they were focused on maintaining a sense of cohesion. Likewise, gang members who dare to speak out against plans proposed by leaders are dealt with severely and, thus, it is less likely that they will object in the future (Caya, 2015). These attributes result in a group's focus on maintaining consensus, rather than producing a valuable result. Janis (1983) termed this phenomenon *groupthink*, which he defined as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group when the members' strivings for unanimity over-ride their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (p. 9). In this article, I examine *groupthink* in the context of an elementary school committee called a Literacy Council.

Literacy Councils

Literacy Councils (LC) are designed to plan for and facilitate the process of enriching the school literacy environment. Members conduct a needs assessment, set tentative priorities based on that assessment, and share these priorities with the rest of the school. With staff input, the LC finalizes goals and compiles a list of tasks. Members may take on these tasks themselves or they may distribute them among school staff. The tasks include monitoring progress toward set goals (Anders, 1998).

As an example, a LC undertakes a needs assessment related to parent involvement. Teacher interviews and sign-in data support the claim that fewer parents come in to listen to children read. At the LC's recommendation, teachers speak with parents. Two major factors appear to have influenced parents' behavior: They feel the camaraderie among volunteering parents is weaker than it once was and finding transportation to the school is a challenge for them. Teachers brainstorm ways to nourish relationships among parents, and the principal commits to sending a van through the neighborhood each day to transport parents to school. The LC has facilitated the process of seeking problems, generating options, and implementing chosen solutions in ways that are likely more effective and efficient than if the full faculty had been charged with this task; nevertheless, the views of all major stakeholders are considered.

The Current Study

To better understand the ways groupthink seemed to affect the LC described here, this study addresses the following research question:

> **RQ:** In what ways, if any, did antecedents and emerging symptoms of the groupthink model play out in LC decision-making and outcomes?

This research is important for two major reasons. First, it highlights the emergence of groupthink in what Scribner et al. (2007) term "ordinary" groups: that is, groups dealing with day-to-day, rather than extreme, circumstances. Second, this study is novel in the groupthink literature as I investigate group interactions before and after an increasing external threat; findings are likely to apply to other groups experiencing unexpected challenges. For example, a town council that collaborates effectively as it addresses relatively simple problems may exhibit few groupthink symptoms. Nevertheless, when faced with a major threat (e.g., the discovery of an industrial waste site outside the town limits), the group may feel pressured to make rapid decisions, and, as a result, fall into a groupthink pattern in its efforts to deal with the crisis. This behavior may well lead to the less-than-optimum outcomes Janis described.

Theoretical Framework

Janis first proposed the concept of groupthink in his 1972 book *Victims of Groupthink.* In a revised version of the text, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (1983), he described challenges faced by U.S. presidents and looked for characteristics common to the interaction of groups charged with advising presidents as they made decisions resulting in fiascoes. Contrasting with positive outcome situations, Janis found that negative cases evolved from certain types of antecedents. Primary among these was group cohesiveness (a history of working together that is characterized by collegiality and ease). Cohesion was supplemented by structural faults such as lack of impartial leadership, and contextual factors including members' low self-esteem due to past failures. Janis argued that groupthink symptoms (e.g., close-mindedness and pressures toward uniformity) emerged from these antecedents. These factors, Janis suggested, typically led to defective decision-making processes: group members did not establish objectives, collect/consider necessary information, and plan effectively.

Because evidence of groupthink emerged in the context that is the focus of this study only after a midcourse appearance of external threat—and the high

levels of stress related to it—the theory of threat rigidity (Staw et al., 1981) serves as a supplement to Janis's (1983) model. The theory suggests that, when under stress, people are less flexible in their problem-solving, and threatened individuals may "freeze up" in ways that undermine planning and action. Both concepts—groupthink and threat rigidity—appear within the reviewed literature.

Literature Review

Literature was accessed using the search terms *groupthink* AND *school* or *groupthink* AND *teacher* within the Summon database.

Janis's Study of the Bay of Pigs Fiasco and Related Follow-Up Studies

Janis's (1983) first groupthink example is the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Early in his presidency, John F. Kennedy met with a group of advisors including the Attorney General (also his brother), the director of the CIA, Secretaries of State and Defense, and three of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He charged the group to consider a plan to overthrow the Castro government by siding with Cuban rebels. In coming to a decision, the group believed that no one would know about U.S. involvement, Castro's air force and army were inadequate, Cuban exiles were confident and skilled, their success would draw others into the fight, and, if the initial campaign proved unsuccessful, the exiles could retreat and reinforce as needed. These assumptions turned out to be false and the attack failed. Those who offered official descriptions of the incident claimed that individuals' desire to maintain their status and difficulties of a new administration operating within an old organizational framework explained the defeat. Janis (1983) argued, however, that these explanations were incomplete. He suggested that the decision which led to a disastrous conclusion was motivated by the lack of a tradition of impartial leadership (the leader being overly directive), the illusion of invulnerability (overconfidence), suppression of dissent by so-called mindguards (members who kept their peers "in line"), and member self-censorship.

Janis's model supported a range of studies by researchers who followed him. These included case studies of the Challenger disaster (Moorhead et al., 1991), the 1999 baseball umpire strike (Koerber & Neck, 2003), and the Worldcom accounting fraud scandal (Scharff, 2005). Flowers (1977) conducted experiments related to groupthink, but failed to confirm key antecedents, most importantly the precondition of cohesiveness, likely due to lack of fidelity within the experiment. Other researchers recommended jettisoning

Janis's theory entirely (Fuller & Aldag, 1998) and still others advocated for removing some factors (Flowers, 1977) and adding others (Aldag & Fuller, 1993).

A School-Based Groupthink Study

Several authors who describe research set in school environments mention groupthink in passing, but only one study uses groupthink as an analytical framework. Leithwood et al. (1997) studied six teacher teams from five high schools. At the end of the year, researchers conducted focus group interviews and collected individual surveys. For both types of data, teachers were asked to reflect on the year's activities and interactions. Three teams exhibited beliefs and behaviors that were most likely to lead to groupthink (e.g., suppression of dissent); the other three teams did not. Of interest, members of the team with highest social cohesion (Bernthal & Insko, 1993) exhibited the greatest level of happiness with their work and the most groupthink tendencies.

School-Based Research that Surfaced Threat Rigidity

Other scholars have conducted school-based studies describing threat rigidity. Olsen and Sexton (2009) posit that this phenomenon occurs when teachers face external threat and believe themselves to be under attack by another person or group. This is particularly true when they experience strong pressure to conform to policy mandates. Effects of threat rigidity include "psychological stress, intergroup and intragroup difficulties, defensiveness/resentment, a desire to hide one's practice" (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 14). These effects then undermine teachers' ability to manage unfamiliar information (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). In such a situation, they are more likely to respond in ways that are "well-learned and dominant" (Conley & Glasman, 2008, p. 72) rather than flexible and creative.

In the grip of threat rigidity, a group's discussions exhibit a range of characteristics. Members spend most of their time identifying and reidentifying the problems they face, instead of moving productively toward solution options (Scribner et al., 2007). Their discussions focus on facts and feelings, rather than other speech acts such as commitments to action (Searle, 1976). As a result, the team fails to engage in substantive activity. Ohlsson (2013) described the feeling tone of such discussions; it "manifests a spirit of agreement: friendly utterances met by confirming comments" (p. 303). As Janis (1983) noted, group members grow more dependent on each other for social support when threatened.

Method

Research Site and Participants

The research site for this study was an elementary school in a large urban district in a southwestern state that enrolled 658 students in grades prekindergarten through five. Of these students, 88% were Latino, 4% European American, 4% Native American, and 4% other ethnicities; 83% of students qualified for free or reduced-price meals. Pseudonyms were used for the school and participants.

My colleague Patty and I were approached by Thomas, the recently appointed principal of Garcia School. Prior to his arrival, Garcia suffered from low achievement on standardized tests and the attendant lack of respect across the district. The school also had a history of significant teacher turnover, and the district made changes to curriculum on a regular basis. As a result, little coherence existed among personnel or instructional focus. Thomas agreed to implement an LC at the school, the purpose of which was to explore ways of creating a stronger literacy culture. In addition, the district had recently instituted the Daily 5 reading/writing workshop program (Boushey & Moser, 2014) and another focus of our work was to support faculty as they learned to teach from a mini-lesson structure as proposed in this program.

By the third week of the fall semester, five teachers had volunteered to join the LC: Andrea (first/second), Carla (second), Chris (third), Samantha (fifth), and Lilly (a special education resource teacher). The LC met for the first time during the fourth week of school. By the third meeting, Lilly had left due to other commitments and two new members joined: a fourth-grade teacher (Diana) and an additional second-grade teacher (Jan). Thomas did not attend meetings unless asked so teachers would be more likely to speak freely.

I was positioned as an observer-participant and most certainly missed some of the nuance and detail that a researcher in an observer-only role might have captured. Audio-recording and transcribing mitigated, although failed to fully eliminate, this disadvantage. While this situation was not ideal, I made every effort to remain impartial during data collection, analyses, and interpretation.

Procedure and Data Collection

The group met 25 times over the course of the school year from August through May, most every Monday when classes were in session. Once all members had signed consent forms, each session was audio-recorded. Audiofiles were sent to a third party for a simple word-for-word transcription.

Cameron (2001) recommends that researchers select a transcription method that supports the purposes of data collection. The content of the teachers' interactions was the primary focus, so Johnstone's (2002) advice that markings for other aspects of language such as pauses and tonality, might distract readers as they explored the content of the exchanges was applicable here. Skimming through the transcripts as they arrived helped me to keep up with the flow of information. After each 1-hr meeting, I wrote field notes and a research memo about the experience. These memos provided an opportunity to reflect on the most important conversations that occurred during the LC meetings and the actions resulting from those conversations. In early spring, LC members took Kucer's (2014) Literacy Beliefs Survey, intended to surface their philosophy of literacy instruction.

Council members were not interviewed about their experiences at the end of the study for two reasons. First, like Havnes (2009), the focus in the current study was not on "what teachers say *about* teams but on what they say *in* teams" (p. 155). In addition, at the end of the semester the group appeared overwhelmed by end-of-the-year tasks and somewhat demoralized by their unsuccessful second semester work. As a result, it seemed likely that their comments would have been skewed negatively toward the spring semester's failures rather than the LC experience as a whole. It is possible, however, that adding the council members' perspectives might have provided a more nuanced view of the situation.

Data Analysis

Prior to formal data analysis, all 886 transcripts, field notes, and research memos were organized by date collected to create a more coherent, chronological account. During an open-coding process, examples of groupthink antecedents and symptoms were evident (Janis, 1983). These files were then read to create a condensed, 50-page data summary including quotes and other information from transcripts, field notes, and research memos. These readings surfaced theory elements which led to code creation and a concept-driven coding process (Gibbs, 2007).

Code development. A hierarchy of codes was developed from groupthink readings (Aldag & Fuller, 1993; Baron, 2005; Bernthal & Insko, 1993; Janis, 1983; Neck & Moorhead, 1995) and the data summary. In constructing this hierarchy, some of Janis's codes were deleted or revised and others were added from the research literature (see Table 1).

It was not my intention to prove or disprove Janis's theory but rather to explore it, so coding adjustments are appropriate. Beginning a study with a

Table 1. Codes Applied in Analysis.

Code	Definition	Status	Reason for change
Cohesion	Group members share collegial working relationships	Revised: divided into *task cohesion* (collaborative & effective work toward task completion) and *social cohesion* (amiable relationships with other members)	Bernthal & Insko (1993) found that, of the two, only social cohesion promoted groupthink
Group insulation	Group members are largely disconnected from nonmembers	Deleted	LC members met regularly with other staff
No tradition of impartial leadership	Top-down leadership practices dominate	Revised: *too much outcome directiveness*	Neck & Moorhead (1995) found this to be a more specific factor in groupthink
Few methodical procedures	Group discussions are unfocused	Revised: *too little process directiveness*	Aldag & Fuller (1993) found this to be a more specific factor in groupthink
Homogeneous membership	Members are similar in terms of social background & ideology	Included	No change
High stress from external threat	Pressure from challenges from outside the group	Included	No change
Low self-esteem due to recent failures	Morale is low	Revised: *weak self-efficacy* (lack of confidence in ability to carry out a task) due to unsuccessful prior outcomes & moral dilemmas	Recommended by Baron (2005) as more relevant, focusing on cognitive rather than affective factors
Unhelpful organizational norms (Aldag & Fuller, 1993)	Those historical & current practices that make the institution less effective	Detail added: disorganization, poor communication, constrained teacher power, lack of professional support, reluctance to question long-held beliefs, high teacher turnover, high curriculum turnover (Jaeger, current article)	Added for specificity

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Code	Definition	Status	Reason for change
Problems due to excessive current difficulties	Members struggle to work together toward shared goals	Revised: divided into (a) *inadequate or inappropriate response to difficulty*—unwillingness to consider substantive change, breakdown of norms, talk without action, "woe is me" talk, focus on lesser problems, lack of follow-through, passive resistance, and "caving in"—and (b) *ineffective decision-making process*—failure to define the problem & the goal (Aldag & Fuller, 1993), inadequate search for & processing of information (Jaeger, this article), issues with low quantity (Fodor & Smith, 1982), & low quality of (Aldag & Fuller, 1993) of alternatives	Added for specificity
Overestimation of the group & closed-mindedness	Groups belief in its superiority & reluctance to accept advice from others	Deleted	LC members regularly requested feedback from other staff
Pressures toward uniformity	Self-censorship leading to the belief that all agree & pressure on dissenters	Included	No change
Defective decision-making	Including: incomplete survey of alternatives & objectives, failure to examine risks of preferred choice, quick rejection of other options, poor information search & processing, failure to plan for contingencies	Revised to include *lack of detail in plans and timeline for action* (Jaeger, this article), *lack of plans for monitoring progress* (Aldag & Fuller, 1993)	Additional factors evident
Low probability of successful outcome	Results are likely to be ineffective	Revised: divided to include *quality of outcome* & *level of acceptance by those affected*	Found relevant by Aldag & Fuller (1993)

Note. Codes were first proposed by Janis unless otherwise specified. LC = Literacy Councils.

strong theoretical frame is a key step, but it is even more important to recognize that adjustments to the original model allow for a more reflective analysis of the situation and its participants. Codes and categories were justified in three of the ways delineated by Constas (1992): (a) having a logical, usually hierarchical, relationship, (b) employed by other researchers, and (c) exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

Patty did not participate in the formal coding. In retrospect, including her in this process would have brought an additional viewpoint to the analysis. We did engage in ongoing dialogue over the course of the project, including comparing perspectives on events as they occurred. Patty also read the initial draft of this article and provided feedback.

Coding and organization of data. Beginning with the data summary, the code scheme was applied systematically and data reorganized by the antecedent and emerging characteristic codes with dates noted. The appendix provides a segment of this document which facilitated the writing of the research findings. Only claims including two or more pieces of evidence from transcripts, field notes, memos were included. The study exhibited both consequential and catalytic validity (Lather, 1986).

Findings

In this section, I describe the LC's work during the fall semester, then examine members' interactions during the spring after the principal's unilateral decision to dramatically alter the focus of curriculum and instruction, and, finally, how those interactions resulted in inadequate outcomes. I address the proposed research question: In what ways, if any, did antecedents and emerging symptoms of the groupthink model play out in LC decision-making and outcomes?

Garcia Literacy Council: Fall Semester

As is commonly the case for a newly formed team, not everything went smoothly and productively from the beginning. Nevertheless, positive antecedents predicted the ability of the team to avoid groupthink symptoms and, as a result, to produce effective outcomes.

Fall interactions and projects. At the LC's first meeting, norms were established (e.g., valuing all ideas). To build rapport, we also talked about our personal and professional strengths. Prior to the next meeting, LC members collected data from their grade-level teams by asking their peers to reflect on

what they believed to be Garcia's literacy strengths and challenges. Teachers noted strengths such as the Daily 5 curriculum, a new literacy assessment, and an influx of classroom books. Related challenges included lack of professional development for curriculum and assessment, and lack of teacher participation in the selection of books. I also requested that teachers complete Kucer's (2014) Literacy Beliefs Inventory. Teachers balked at the task; they objected vehemently to the format which required those completing it to select Likert-type-scale answers to questions such as "All texts, even fictional stories, reflect particular beliefs or ideologies." As Andrea stated, "It wasn't a very liked survey . . . Too long. Too confusing. Didn't make sense. A contradiction." The survey caused members to reflect on, if not question, their literacy beliefs; given that the council spent time talking about items from the survey only once—and at my behest—it is possible this reflection process may have created discomfort.

During our fourth meeting, the group began to share literacy successes and challenges that had arisen over the previous week and, if appropriate, others suggested potential solutions to help their peers. By this point, the group better understood the literacy "lay of the land," having a stronger grasp of relevant issues. In early October, Diana asserted that it was time for us to select an initial project which would provide tangible evidence of the council's work: that is, a "quick win." She suggested this project be one that "no one would disagree with" and convey to teachers that "things are going to get accomplished. Otherwise people are going to think . . . Just another meeting that people are going to." Members agreed that this was a wise move.

The council decided to focus on two projects: improving the layout and accessibility of the library and scheduling professional development for instructional and assessment practices. Throughout the fall, members completed a range of library-related tasks. These tasks included producing new signage, reorganizing text placement so books used by teachers were separate from children's books and investigating the digital card catalog to see if it needed updating. Professional development sessions addressed administering an informal reading inventory and teaching with mini-lessons.

Presence/absence of groupthink in the fall. Few groupthink characteristics surfaced during the fall semester. Worrisome antecedents were largely absent, few groupthink symptoms emerged, and outcomes were positive.

Groupthink antecedents. Entering the site with an open mind rather than coming with ideas I intended to impose on the council, I generally withheld my own views as the group analyzed the information they obtained and decided on a course of action. At no point leading up to the decision to focus

on the library project, for example, did I suggest that the group had chosen wisely or unwisely.

We began with a brainstorm of potential areas of for action. I focused on getting all members to participate and keeping the discussion moving forward productively. After meetings, I distributed minutes via email; these notes were intended to remind members—those who had been present and, especially, any who were absent—of decisions made and tasks assigned; generally speaking, teachers followed through with the tasks they had volunteered to complete, especially when the notes included task charts specifying who was responsible for what. Although group interactions were sometimes unfocused, there was steady, if somewhat slow, progress toward our goals.

In some ways, the council was relatively homogeneous. All members were White women, despite numerous attempts to convince an enthusiastic Latina kindergarten teacher to join the council. Most of the members had 5 to 20 years of teaching experience, many of those at Garcia. All but Chris and Samantha had worked together on previous projects and weathered district-initiated curricular "storms" which disrupted their teaching and created great confusion (e.g., a proposed change to a new math program in midyear). The tendency to talk over each other and to difficulty staying on topic was likely related to social cohesion born of familiarity. Once the group decided to work on the library project, task cohesion was more evident (Bernthal & Insko, 1993).

Ideologically, however, members differed. The literacy beliefs survey evidenced theoretical differences; some teachers, particularly those from the primary grades, exhibited code-focused beliefs about, and approaches to, reading and writing instruction, while others assumed a more meaning-oriented stance. For example, responses to the statement, "The perception of individual letters within words is a significant part of reading and writing" ranged from strongly agree (Andrea: first/second grade) to strongly disagree (Chris: third grade). In addition, there was, at times, clear disagreement between my view and theirs. For example, when discussing the statement "Learning how to read and write in the home supports learning and knowing how to read and write in school," I pushed Andrea four times to talk about what children learn at *home* and how it might transfer to school. Nevertheless, she continued to focus on telling parents what to do so their children would achieve in school, suggesting to me that she believed that teachers "communicate with the parents more for them to support us [the teachers]" and viewing parents from a deficit perspective. I reflected on my concern in the day's memo; and asked the question: "How might I help council members to consider more deeply the implications of their beliefs?"

In our neoliberal environment, educators—especially those who teach in schools with low test scores—experience a range of pressures. These

pressures are exacerbated when teachers need to understand and respond to a relatively new principal. Nonetheless, there appeared to be no evident pressures on LC members relative to the role of the council within the school context. All chose to join the group and they experienced free reign to move in whatever direction seemed appropriate. They saw problems in the school (e.g., lack of professional development for implementing a new assessment) but felt confident that they could solve these problems (in this case, requesting an in-service session on test protocols and data use). Teachers who had been at Garcia for some time had experienced success in gaining needed resources (e.g., books for classroom libraries) and supporting each other in planning all-school events. Members did not appear plagued by the type of moral dilemmas that undermine decision-making; once they began work on the library—a project fully embraced by everyone—members moved steadily forward.

The one groupthink antecedent that may have played a role at this stage involved organizational norms that undermine group effectiveness. Issues with communication surfaced immediately. Even before school started, I wrote in a memo, “Thomas has been less than fully communicative since we initially spoke (e.g., getting me the literacy instruction schedule).” Teachers received the new literacy assessment with no guidance on how to use it and Andrea noted a month and a half after the start of school that “there is absolutely no training in Words Their Way [a word study assessment and instructional program], so some people have not even started it.” Lack of communication also undermined meetings, curricular and classroom management mandates, and expectations for grade-level teamwork. Jan explained problems with communication within the school’s Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) structure: “Last year was the first year of the MTSS and I referred four kids and I never heard one word [from the MTSS team].”

In addition, there was a history within the school of limits on teacher agency. Thomas often provided what teachers requested, but rarely allowed them to participate in important decisions. As Carla stated, “He listens to us but then does what he was planning to do all along.” The school district and this school, in particular, suffered from high teacher and administrator turnover and, as a result, there existed the pervasive sense that, as Jan suggested, adopting new ideas and practices would prove fruitless. Issues with organizational norms—beginning long prior to the advent of this study—had far-reaching and long-term impact.

Emergent groupthink symptoms. Whereas Janis (1983) focused on weak self-esteem due to current problems as a key antecedent, in this study, a related groupthink symptom—limited self-efficacy due to inadequate or inappropriate responses to difficulties—appeared more relevant. There was some

evidence (e.g., reluctance to complete the literacy beliefs survey) that group members felt uncomfortable considering substantive revisions to practice. They did begin to integrate mini-lessons in their classroom routines when this instructional strategy was modeled for them, but no council members seemed to see themselves as agents of change. Andrea, for example, worried that other teachers would see her as pushy. Other responses to difficulty included breakdown of the norm that only one person spoke at a time, and a tendency—exemplified by the initial decision to tackle a small-win project—to focus on minor problems even as major ones loomed.

The group exhibited an effective decision-making process. Members clearly understood the various library-related problems and the impact of those problems on students and teachers. They visited the library on several occasions to collect information and specify needs and potential solutions. Members suggested a wide variety of both major and minor changes, from updating the card catalog to bringing in a rug for students to sit on. Without exception, these alternatives—strong in both quantity and quality—were accepted respectfully and most were seriously considered. Once the team made decisions, they formulated detailed plans (e.g., Samantha would talk with the library aide about integrating new multicultural books with the rest of the collection), established a timeline for completion, and began to work on specific tasks. Recognizing early on that sustainability might be an issue, members monitored the changes we had made when they visited the library with their classes and tried out alternatives, as needed. For example, when labels on bookshelves peeled away after minimal use, they were replaced with signs encased in plastic frames and mounted on top of the bookshelves.

Outcomes. Garcia teachers appreciated what the council accomplished in the library. Accessing teacher materials proved easier and students found the books they wanted with less adult assistance. Professional development sessions were well attended and appreciated. It is not my intent to valorize these projects. They were straightforward and finite, dependent on diligent follow-through, rather than an exploration of bigger literacy ideas leading to transformative change. Nevertheless, these successes proved to be a confidence builder for the team and, it seemed, boded well for future work. There was little evidence of groupthink during the fall semester.

Midyear Upheaval

Teachers returned from winter break to find that Thomas had reversed his commitment to meaning-focused instruction. He charged grade-level teams with the tasks of examining items on the upcoming benchmark test and developing lessons to better prepare their students for that test.

The mini-lesson format we employed during the fall semester included a consciousness-raising question (e.g., How many of you have ever had trouble remembering what you read?), brief modeling, application in their self-selected texts, and sharing out. Now Thomas required weekly tests based on the test-prep instruction, crafted in multiple choice format; the results of these tests were to be submitted for review on Fridays.

The LC met on the third Monday of the semester. The issue of Thomas's dramatic change in curriculum surfaced early on. After a brief discussion of a planned professional development session, there was a long (10 s) pause. Carla said, "Now we are using our mini-lesson time to prep for [the online benchmark assessment]." Diana explained that the change had come after the school had scored very poorly on the previous quarter's test.

Members believed their instruction had been negatively affected by this turn of events, feeling dismayed and under tremendous pressure to comply with Thomas's mandate. They explained that virtually all their grade-level team meeting time—and much of their personal planning time—was now devoted to test-prep lesson construction. Chris described meeting with her team well into the evening to accomplish their work. Members were confused about what influence, if any, the LC retained. Andrea summed up the council's sense that they no longer held any potential for impact, saying, "[Questions about instruction have been] answered: by teaching to the test." Their fall semester activities reorganizing the library and facilitating professional development sessions were points of pride, but even these successes failed to mitigate this "deer in the headlights" feeling.

My frustration also grew. In an end-of-January memo I listed current concerns: the disconnect between Thomas's original focus on rich instruction and his current plan; information we needed such as who had decided that benchmark items for the quarter would not match standards to be taught and why; and asking Thomas to promise to avoid "drop[ping] any more bombs" on the staff without at least informing the council in advance. To add to our frustration, Thomas was unresponsive; I noted that "he hasn't provided any of the data I've requested, nor has he responded to questions from the LC minutes [he had been given]." I requested a meeting with Thomas to express my concern. In the meeting, he offered no explanation for the changes he had made and told me directly that we were to desist from discussions of test items because this topic was not the prerogative of the LC. As I recorded, "I think [Thomas] believed we would just do nice projects around the school and, as members seem on the verge of discussing real change in teaching (thereby questioning his decisions), he panics and wants to take the reins." The LC did not exhibit full-blown groupthink during this transitional time period, but the increase in external threat set the stage for what was to come.

Garcia Literacy Council: Spring Semester

This change fundamentally altered the process and product of LC endeavors. It created the external threat Janis (1983) lists among the antecedents that produce symptoms of groupthink and resulting failed outcomes.

Groupthink antecedents. In the weeks that followed, I listened attentively to members' anxieties and initially chose not to intervene in directing outcomes. The team complained, acquiesced, and, as is common in these situations, rehashed areas of agreement (Baron, 2005). Members focused on sympathizing with each other and with Garcia teachers as a whole. As Cartwright (1968) argued, this outcome is most likely when a threat appears arbitrary and is imposed from outside the group.

Members' opinions about the change vacillated over time. In late January, Jan spoke in mixed metaphors. Even prior to Thomas's mandate, teachers were "already kind of drowning," she said, and now they were "putting out fires." By mid-February, she commented positively: "My kids kind of like doing the little [test-prep-based] mini-lessons . . . I like knowing exactly what I'm doing." But in early April, she sang a different tune, noting, "Our focus is no longer on literacy. It's on passing those darned tests . . . Teaching to the test is not what we went to school for." These ever-changing comments reflected the dis-ease teachers felt in this altered environment.

As members considered taking a stand against Thomas's mandate, they surfaced a moral dilemma: Were they to do what they believed to be right by opposing the change or, rather, what they felt they could handle by adapting? For the first time—and in response to an administrative directive that undermined the council's work—I gently began to encourage steps toward a particular outcome: principled opposition or, at least, figuring out a way to mitigate the negative effects on students. As Kanpol (1991) argued, group resistance can be enacted only if teachers articulate shared ethical standards; this type of discussion never occurred. Threat rigidity was certainly at play here; members behaved as if paralyzed and stuck in a "woe is me" mode which they themselves recognized. "That's why we bitch here in Literacy Council," Jan admitted. "You guys listen to us." At no point in time did the deep critical reflection recommended by Ohlsson (2013) occur. As Turner and Pratkanis (1998) explained, once a group perceives a threat, its objective changes to dealing with that threat rather than the original goal; this claim appeared to apply to the Garcia situation.

Once members recovered somewhat from the shock of Thomas's about-face, I tried more diligently to create and maintain a strong sense of order during discussion by using more structuring statements (e.g., It seems that

we've decided to . . .). The success of these efforts varied within and across sessions as interactions reflected social cohesion rather than task cohesion.

During this time, unhelpful organizational norms resurfaced. Members regularly mentioned their concern about poor communication. The group decided that we would attend to conversations we witnessed and participated in, hoping to change the dynamic. Several members faithfully followed through with the plan; Chris, for example, encouraged her students to use I-messages when distressed. But there was never enough momentum to affect the whole system. When members explained that there was no time in faculty meetings for deep conversations, I reflected in a memo, "It seems major issues are being 'swept under the rug.'" Goals set the previous semester—for example, a book distribution plan seeking to ensure that classroom libraries reflected student needs—fell apart. Thomas chose not to facilitate the completion of a teacher survey intended to evaluate the work of the LC to date, and no council members stepped up to make it happen. At this point, it might have been wise to focus on improving administrator/staff communication, delaying literacy work until later. This was, in my mind, a missed opportunity; our failure to recognize the seriousness of the problem and prioritize it proved to be a major mistake. Other stress-inducing organizational norms loomed: There was the anticipation of a requirement for the next year to develop test-prep-like lessons in math as they had for reading, as well as the annual exodus of teachers and subsequent realignment of grade-level teams.

Emergent groupthink symptoms. Council members seemed overwhelmed and incapable of responding appropriately and adequately to the difficulties they faced. During discussion, they regularly talked over each other (even when I introduced a Talking Rock to facilitate turn-taking); they strayed from whatever topic happened to be on the table at a given time; and their talk rarely led to plan-making. When the group did form plans, follow-through became an issue. Members looked to each other for moral support via expressions of sympathy, as when the second-grade teachers—Carla and Jan—comforted Chris who was struggling with third-grade students she had "inherited" from them. At times, they appeared to regroup when focusing on the needs of individual students: the smaller-scale more tangible concerns Cartwright and Zander (1968) observed.

Also evident were examples of passive resistance. In an early April meeting, Diana noted that, because administrators had visited her room a total of 30 min all year, she varied her instruction considerably from the new curricular focus and "turned in what looks like what they want"; once the fighter in the group, even Diana had given up working for all-school change. I noted in

a memo my belief that "you can never really 'do what you need to do' if you need to 'hide' from admins," but certainly understood their decisions.

More often, however, teachers simply caved in to Thomas's demands, rationalizing that the focus on testing was good for their students. Early on Samantha, comparing the vision described to her when she took her position to what had recently occurred, could not comprehend the change, and opposed it. By late February, however, she said that she was feeling better about the situation because—using Thomas's language—"tests are my students' reality" and she needed to prepare them. As I asked myself, was there "*anything* council members would refuse to do?"

The team repeatedly expressed the problems they saw with the tests and related instruction, but no clear goals emerged from the discussion. Attempting a systematic evaluation of test items, we selected a single standard (point of view) at a single grade level (second) for analysis. Members differed in their definition of the term "point of view" and most of these definitions did not reflect the focus of the standard at that grade level. Between meetings, I examined the relevant test items and found that only half the items matched the second-grade standard; many reflected the first-grade standard, and a few did not relate to any standard, K–5. When I presented this information the following week, members understood and expressed interest in the analysis; Chris noted that "mine [the third-grade test items], I don't feel have anything to do with mine [the third-grade standards]," exemplifying the test-standards disconnect. In the end, however, they chose not to complete the analysis with other standards.

The team also demonstrated a move toward the artificial consensus characteristic of groupthink, although sometimes members expressed dissent. In early March, Chris reflected on the minimal growth of 3% her students had made on the benchmark test, saying, "It was supposed to be such BIG growth by doing this . . . Did I waste all those hours and hours and hours making those dumb lesson plans? Sorry." Her comment was met with wry laughter, but members immediately abandoned the topic. Those who suggested some form of "rebellion" against Thomas's decision failed to reiterate or further explain their recommendation, a form of self-censorship. Not until 2 weeks prior to the end of the semester, when we discussed whether the group wanted to continue the following year, did members "come to." They chose not to undertake a systematic evaluation of the pros and cons of that decision but, having spent 10 weeks unable to set or make progress toward any goal, they jumped at the chance to brainstorm and plan.

Outcomes. LC members were, in the end, disheartened and spoke of questions from suspicious colleagues such as, "What has the Literacy Council

done?” Other than anticipating what projects they might take on the following year, there were no tangible spring outcomes. I was encouraged by their desire to look ahead and reflected in a memo, “Wouldn’t it be interesting if they end up getting more accomplished on their own?” But members failed to sustain this desire into the next year, for reasons to which I was never privy. It is possible that, during our work together, members learned something about what they could do as individuals and as a group. Of greatest import, they learned that their agency was deeply constrained. During the spring semester, antecedents and emerging symptoms of the groupthink model played out in full in LC decision-making and outcomes.

An Alternative Explanation

It would be remiss of me not to consider an alternate explanation. It could be argued that troubling organizational norms (e.g., ineffective communication), evident from the beginning of the study, were never resolved and, as a result, the spring semester’s unsuccessful outcomes were inevitable and groupthink symptoms played no mediating role. There were, however, far greater numbers of groupthink antecedents (4 vs.1) and groupthink symptoms (17 vs. 1) in the spring. The LC accomplished far more in the fall than in the spring; both outcome characteristics—quality of decision and acceptance by those affected—were stronger in fall. This lends credence to the theory that groupthink—especially the felt increase in external threat—played a major role in the evolution of the LC’s work.

Implications

In some ways, the Garcia LC was a unique entity. As such, findings from this research cannot be directly generalized to other contexts. Nevertheless, the study has implications for theory/research, and practice.

Implications for Theory and Research

Once a theorist offers a potent model, a common trajectory plays out over time. First, other theorists (e.g., Fuller & Aldag, 1998; Moorhead et al., 1991) recommend variations on the model emerging from their analysis of additional case studies. Then researchers (e.g., Flowers, 1977) conduct experiments in an effort to “prove” the theory. Laboratory conditions are, however, somewhat artificial and, at least in the case of groupthink theory, researchers rarely test the complete model.

Janis (1983) proposed his theory over 35 years ago and, over time, fewer and fewer studies have employed it. It seems the desire to test the theory—suggesting that it is or is not true—has run its course. Researchers can most fruitfully utilize the theory as a tool to *explore* the ways in which it holds explanatory power within a variety of contexts, rather than attempting to prove that the theory is (in)correct.

Implications for Practice

This study offers two primary implications for practice: one for administrators and one for small groups. Midlevel leaders, such as principals, enjoy limited power; that is, they strongly influence actions at their site but are, in turn, controlled by their superiors (Scribner et al., 2007). When directed to make changes—changes they feel run counter to plans already in place—these leaders have two primary options. They can comply with the mandate, as Thomas chose to do, or they can sit with groups of team members, explain the situation, and work collaboratively and creatively to implement the directive in ways that pose the least harm to those affected: in this case, students and school staff (Scribner et al., 2007). In a later interview, Thomas stated that he had, in fact, been afforded two choices: focus on test items or focus on standards. He could have selected the latter, a move that teachers would likely have supported, but he did not.

Small groups with constrained power must learn to deal effectively with each other and with external mandates and unexpected changes. Before team meetings begin, bringing in a consultant to assist members to better understand theories of group dynamics and develop strong group-process skills should be considered (Collinson et al., 2006). Unfortunately, in the Garcia context, this suggestion found little support and was never enacted. In hindsight, this may have been a missed opportunity, one that might have had far-reaching effects down the line. A group might also attend to building the resilience necessary to respond to major disruptions, such as that caused by Thomas's unilateral directive. In addition, group members can be trained to recognize and fully understand the antecedents and symptoms of groupthink and threat rigidity, and the potentially debilitating effects these elements might cause. In this case, lack of awareness undermined the LC's potential.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to address the research question: In what ways, if any, did antecedents and consequences of groupthink emerge in LC decision-making and outcomes? The LC collaborated effectively during the

fall semester, but stress from external threat increased during the spring semester due to the principal's decision to impose a test-prep curriculum that undermined progress in literacy instruction. As a result, groupthink symptoms increased, leading to unsuccessful outcomes. This claim is well supported by evidence from transcripts of LC meetings and reaffirmed by researcher field notes and memos.

Most negative groupthink factors were absent in fall. I felt little need to intervene in the group's process, and members exhibited comfort and a high level of self-efficacy. The council engaged in an inclusive, well-planned, and productive decision-making process. After Thomas's reversal, however, members fell into rambling, unfocused conversations. With the onset of test prep-oriented curriculum, as well as the need to develop lesson upon lesson required for that instruction, stress levels rose dramatically. By spring, members were mired in a cycle of complaint and compliance. The mood during meetings varied from downhearted to rebellious (sans action) to a sort of sarcastic humor. When we talked about principals regularly transferring in and out, Jan quipped, "We are flexible, and we will be here when they are gone."

Given important differences between semesters, particularly a rise in perceived external threat and the emergence of groupthink symptoms in the spring, outcomes were not unexpected. Reorganizing the library and accessing needed professional development, although relatively minor accomplishments, could have served as a foundation for subsequent large-scale success. The group's reluctance to address beliefs about literacy theory and practice might inhibit further work, but at least there remained the possibility of deeper change.

In addition to an immediate application to LCs, findings extend Janis's theory to what Baron (2005) has referred to as "ordinary" groups: that is, groups whose efforts are directed toward day-to-day events and protocols rather than crisis situations. The merit of this research lies in its approach to examining the decision-making process of a committee from a groupthink perspective. This study is novel in its investigation of group interactions both before and after an external decision that posed a heightened threat. Therefore, findings may apply in other situations in which a new threat appears.

The findings from this study support the theory of groupthink proposed by Janis (1983) and revised by others. During the spring semester, troubling antecedents emerged, groupthink symptoms appeared, and outcomes were inadequate to meet the school's challenges. Members of the Garcia LC failed to enact lasting change in their school. In circumstances where initial progress is undermined by an external threat, the ground is ripe for groupthink and for outcomes which reflect the limitations of those unfortunate circumstances, rather than the skill and good intentions of group members.

Appendix

Data by Code, Then by Date

Unwilling to consider substantive change

- 2/1/16: 7 comments designed to get them to consider a pro-active response to curriculum change; all ignored
- 4/1/6: members seem to want to hide from, rather than confront, negative change

Breakdown of norms

- 2/1/16: people talked over each other
- 2/8/16: members begin to focus on personal, rather than professional, challenges
- 5/2/16: members could not stay on topic to save their lives

Lack of follow-through

- 2/1/16: on researching technology, on book distribution, on survey completion

"Woe is me" talk

- 2/1/16: "We feel like we are always putting out fires."—Jan
- 2/22/16: "It was supposed to be such big growth by doing this and it is almost like I waste all these hours and hours making these dumb lesson plans."—Chris
- 4/4/16: Told another noncouncil teacher, "We gripe a lot."—Jan

Passive resistance

- 2/1/16: due to weak communication, "We just go with what we know—what we have always done."—Jan
- 4/4/16: "I turn in what looks like what they want."—Diana
- 4/18/16: stops turning in results of weekly tests and no one seems to notice—Diana

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