MAKING SENSE OF AN UNCOORDINATED APPROACH TO CURRICULAR TRANSITIONS AND STANDARDISATION BETWEEN TWO MODERN LANGUAGES DEPARTMENTS, A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This case study begins by identifying a need for empirical studies in the field of psychodynamics, namely empirical studies on basic-assumption behaviour in schools. It proceeds to explore the causes behind an uncoordinated approach to curricular transitions and standardisation practices between two modern language departments using a psychodynamic approach. By drawing on data provided by focus groups, evidence is provided for the existence of basic-assumption behaviour, which stifles cooperation and effective curricular transitions across two divisions. A range of affective containment strategies are suggested to address the basic-assumption behaviour and change the organisational culture.

Keywords: Curricular transitions, Tavistock approach, Psychodynamics; Basic-assumption behaviour, Affective containment

1. Introduction

One of the roles of educational organisations is that of managing or *smoothening* transitions; Others may even suggest that this is indeed their primary task, as suggested by the popular adage that schools should *prepare students for university and real life*.

From a social interactionist lens, the many transitions of young learners across their educational trajectories constitute a very complex subject as personal agency, biographical elements, and ethnic and socioeconomic realities interface with societal, institutional, and cultural factors (Cuconato & Walther, 2015, p. 286). In the European context, ample research exists on this subject as many in the field of Educational Research recognise the importance of transitions to ward off against loss of motivation (Pohl & Walther, 2007; Walther, 2009 as cited by Cuconato and Walther).

In the age of lifelong learning, with many young learners and adults prolonging their academic journeys in response to a progressively more competitive job market (Tang, Zhang, & Youyi, 2023, p. 18), the role of effective transitions becomes paramount. This is especially true regarding the transition between middle school and high school; customarily, when more accountability is placed upon students while it is also expected that students take ownership of their learning process.

Careful planning should thus go into transitions, especially between middle school and high school, as these are critical periods that can forever alter the course of a student's life. Such a transition can be defined as "[a] passage [which] confronts young people with new [adult] expectations, status, and practices, and contributes to their positioning in a segmented labour market and an unequal society." (Cuconato & Walther, 2015, p. 286)

Although this study does focus on individual student trajectories, it preoccupies itself with the role that organisational cultures and the underlying group dynamics can encourage or stifle meaningful organisational change. In its forty years of existence, the international school that is the object of study has not fully smoothened curricular transitions between its three divisions

and many departmental iterations. The reasons behind such incoordination will be theorised by critically analysing the unconscious responses and defences within two of their most well-established workgroups, the high school (HS) and middle school (MS) modern languages departments.

A Tavistock/psychodynamic approach is the foremost methodology for analysing unconscious processes within workgroups. Clinicians and scholars within this field have produced voluminous literature revealing that organisations and the groups that constitute them operate within conscious and unconscious realms that negatively influence their constituents' stress and happiness levels (Obholzer & Roberts, 2019, p. 17).

We begin by providing a contextual basis for this study, followed by a literature review on the main tenants and methodological tools of psychodynamics and important ontological considerations. Finally, the data gathered from two focus group sessions across both modern language departments are critically analysed, followed by the final section, which preoccupies itself with providing affective containment (Bion,1961) strategies and opportunities for further research.

2. The Case

2.1 One School Three Divisions

The international school in question is in central Europe in a German-speaking country. It caters to upper-class and upper-middle-class children and the children of foreign nationals with international postings. The school has three divisions: the middle school shares a building with the high school, and the elementary school operates in a separate building. One director oversees three vice-principals, each being the *de facto* leader of their respective division, operating relatively independently from each other. The senior leadership team, including the director, answers to a board of governors formed by parents of students or notable alumni.
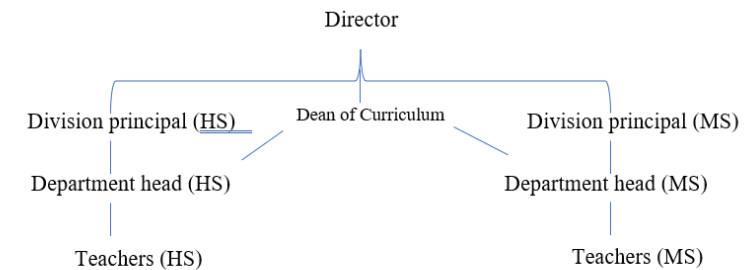
2.2. Hierarchy

Figure 1, the school's hierarchy, own work.

Although this study focusses on the group dynamics of two modern languages departments, it is crucial to contextualise how the school's hierarchy and power dynamics might have led to the lack of communication between divisions.

The departure of the previous, former Dean of Curriculum is of particular interest to this study insofar as she acted as the *de facto* head of the (HS) modern languages department for two years. Merksy (1998) points out that during transitions at a managerial level, feelings of *abandonment* stemming from the institutional feelings that the departing manager represents often lead to unresolved organisational problems being felt more intensely.

Setting a different course from her predecessor, who prioritised bureaucratic aspects including curriculum, the newly appointed Dean of Curriculum sought to bridge the gaps between divisions and department areas and establish a more comprehensive collaboration agenda as well as standardisation and moderation habits. Some faculty perceived this new appointment as an alteration to the organisation's external sphere. The conditions were set for anxiety and fear to take hold, emotions known to lead to basic assumption behaviour, a counter-productive form of group behaviour which stifles productivity (Dale & James, 2015, p. 43). The new Dean of Curriculum was given the post as an internal hire, widely regarded by faculty members as highly competent during her tenure at the helm of the International Baccalaureate (I.B.) department. In two years, she had

created the conditions for the school to reap the best IB results to date. It was evident that the organisation was about to experience significant change.

2.3. Two Modern Languages Departments and Transitions

In the Middle School (MS) MFL department, schemes of work and unit plans are based on the progress indicators of the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages* (ACTFL). These indicators place a higher emphasis on the ability of learners to set individual targets for themselves based on a variety of descriptors. On the other hand, the High School (HS) modern languages department draws from the European Common Framework for Languages (ECFL), highlighting the importance of language learning to promote tolerance and democracy while providing authentic experiences in language learning. The ECFL also comes with its own assessment requirements and level descriptors. Two sets of standards used separately by both departments translate into different assessment criteria and grade descriptors. Consequently, some students raised concerns at the beginning of the school year that there existed a significant disparity between their middle school criteria grades (Extending to Insufficient) and the high school letter grades (Traditional American grade scale A+ to F). Further concerns were raised, including that the content of language courses often overlaps (and is even repeated) or that the difficulty between levels is overly accentuated, an essential symptom of poor communication and collaboration across departmental divisions.

The differences between departments are also prevalent as concerns assessment policies that, especially in the High School, create acrimony during the transition from grade eight to grade nine. Traditional American grading boundaries (e.g., A+, 100%-97%) are used simultaneously with the grade boundaries of the International Baccalaureate, which rely on significantly lower grade boundary percentiles (e.g., 7- 100% - 84%). Due to the grading software adopted, high school teachers cannot adjust grade boundaries to individual assignments. Anecdotally, teachers have reported

frustration with the grading software (which is used differently by teachers even within the same division). It is no wonder that this instigates confusion and frustration among students and parents, especially those transitioning from grade 8 (MS) to grade 9 (HS) language courses.

3. Psychodynamics as a Methodology

Psychodynamics offers unique insight into some of the unconscious reasons underlying decision-making. For instance, in the case of political leaders, when decisions are taken in which consequences are clear, authors such as Beisel (2003 as cited by Meyer, 2015, p. 50) argue that this reveals an inner desire from the leader to see such consequences being exacted.

The role of the psychodynamic researcher is to challenge assumptions including bureaucratic positions and organisational rituals while promoting positive, meaningful mindsets that promote rather than stifle optimal mental health (Bion, 1961). Similarly, for meaningful change to occur at an organisational level, researchers should intersect social analysis with psychodynamic research and draw generalisations from their findings (Obhlozer & Roberts, 1994) while also considering how racism, homophobia, and chauvinism may influence the outcome of the research.

One of the main critiques against clinicians employing the psychodynamic method is a tendency to fixate on falsifiability, testability, and validity whilst disregarding the importance of reflexivity, and the aforementioned systemic elements and how these may affect research findings (Meyers, 2015, p. 18). Psychodynamics offers a platform by which researchers can access the unconscious world where time does not exist and irrational actions, paradoxical elements, and contradictory behaviours are better understood. Thus, subjectivity and openness to disconformity testing are essential to the researcher employing a Tavistock approach (Meyers, 2015, p. 7).

This case study finds purchase upon the works of Wildren Bion (1961), a scholar and pioneer of group dynamics. His research helped clinicians identify the long-term adverse effects that neurotic group dynamics can have

within an organisation. In *Experiences in Groups* (1961), Bion provides evidence of neurotic, irrational and contradicting behaviour of individuals operating in groups which stems, to a great extent, from unconscious processes (p. 53). He remains the most cited author in psychoanalytic scholarship, second only to Freud (Levine and Brown, 2013, p. 1) and his intersubjective theory of thinking helped psychologists understand that trauma originates from the mother-child dyad (p. 245). Roberts and Oblozher (2019), who suggested affective containment strategies as a deterrence to basic assumption behaviour within organisations.

3.1 Psychodynamic Studies on School Organizational Cultures

Despite the re-emergence of Psychodynamics in the field of education during the last twenty years, empirical studies on the opportunities and challenges that psychodynamics poses for research on teachers are scant (Storey, Nimroody, Prout, Rice, & Hoffman, 2023, p. 14).

This contrasts with a backdrop of growing studies highlighting the enormous potential that the psychodynamics methodology offers to promote optimal mental health in schools. Ryan & Jenkins (2020), for instance, looked at how partnerships between health professionals and schools help combat basic exclusionary practices and in the school communities and allow for generalised benefits. That study also concludes that schools are organisations where staff are particularly prone to exhibit paranoid-schizoid states and defences given that many of these institutions are understaffed, underfunded, and overcrowded as is the case in many schools across the England (p.58). Storey, Nimroody, Prout, Rice & Hoffman (2023) identified schools in the U.S. as the primary institution for mental health for a staggering three out of four children (p.14). According to that study, there is a growing discrepancy between school managers and teachers; the former tend to prioritise the mental health of children more so than the latter (p.27). However, most educators see the promotion of mental health of a child as part of their role and are the most privileged in spotting potential mental health issues among students. It is, however, important to determine the extent to which teachers, especially in secondary schools, often portrayed as *conveyors of knowledge*, are appropriately equipped to handle the growing number of students with socio-emotional issues among students in their care (Dietrich, 2021, p. 323).

Psychodynamic studies over the last three years address mainly teacher preparedness in the social-emotional field (Dietrich, 2021; Williams & Moser, 2021; Martin et al.,2022), often disregarding organisational and psychological challenges faced by teachers (de Passos, 2021). This study thusly seeks to address this gap in knowledge by looking at the way that basic-assumption behaviour (Bion, 1961) among teachers acts as a deterrence for important curricular and classroom reforms to take place.

3.2 Basic Assumption Group Mentality vs Work Group Mentality

It is important to establish what is group mentality, namely the machinery *of intercommunication designed to ensure that group life is in accordance with basic assumptions* (Bion, 1961, p. 66). It is often at odds with the individual's motivations and desires. Whenever the individual behaves in a way that challenges the basic assumptions of the group, this will impact them negatively in the eyes of the group.

A basic assumption group (BAG) is phenomena that take place when a group (a band of individuals sharing a common goal) find themselves under stress caused by external realities which, in turn, leads to the group's primary task going ignored while group dynamics prevail. BAGs are the opposite of work groups, consisting of groups which operate more regularly and effectively, focussed on completing the main reason for their existence, their primary task. In the case of the basic-assumption group, however, the primary task is subverted by basic assumption behaviour and group survival replaces the primary task.

Bion (1961) provides a suite of mechanisms for clinicians and researchers to identify basic assumption mentality and how it manifests within a

group. These will be the primary instruments operationalised in this study to help understand the reasons for the uncoordinated approach between both departments. The premise for BAG is that a single basic assumption is prevalent at each given time, although these can change within years, months, or hours depending on the BAG (Bion, 1961, p. 154). Another important prerequisite is that every BAG has a leader even if, in the case of pairing groups, this leader is *unborn* or yet to appear; An inanimate object or the very history of the group can act as its *leader* if no group member rises to assume the leadership role. This will be especially pertinent to help understand the manifest resistance to change that was so manifest in both modern language departments.

3.3 Pairing/Dependency

Pairing happens when BAG is convinced that problems can only be adequately addressed by *a messiah*-like figure from which the group obtains a sense of security (Bion, 1961, p. 67).

Groups experiencing a stage of pairing have the absence of a leader as a prerequisite. Pairing groups exist and function around *messianic* hope (p. 152), depositing blind faith upon an *unborn* leader who will solve every problem at some unknown point in the future and protect the group from external threats. This leader does not necessarily need to be a person but can also be an object, existing policy, or simply falling back to the "this is the way we have always done things" prerogative.

An example of pairing was when the HS department functioned without a department head for an entire academic year. The absence of a leader allowed for important planning tasks to be set aside, especially tasks aimed at promoting better coordination across divisions. This is interpreted by some adopting the Tavistock tradition as *forestalling* (Bion, 1961, p. 153), albeit such an interpretation of hope is reductive. Authors following a Freudian school of thought are prone to reduce hope to simple wish-fulfilment (Groarke, 2018, p. 365 as cited by Passos, 2021, p.1), leaving out

many kinds of hope exist, and that leaders can operationalise the concept itself as a powerful instrument to refocus their staff.

3.4 Fight/Flight

When a group identifies a common enemy, they enter a stage of unity that manifests into fight or flight (p. 67). When the leader of such a group passes on decisions that do not fall under aggression (fight) or escaping from a commonly accepted enemy (flight), their requests go unanswered. During his fieldwork as a clinician, Bion (1961) provoked one of his therapy groups into a state of fight-flight by simply remaining silent for most of the session, thusly inciting group participants to unite against him as a threat against the group and going so far as attempting to find a new leader (p. 71).

A practical example was when the new department head, under request from the senior leadership team, requested that high school teachers create a simpler version of a given scheme of work to facilitate planning for middle school ML teachers. Only two out of seven department members produced the overviews in three months despite repeated requests. Such behaviour reinforces the theory that unwelcome change, spurred by the senior management team, was seen as the enemy, leading to the department head's multiple requests and reminders going unanswered.

3.5 The Four Processes: of Denial: Transference, Introjection, Projection, and Splitting (Bion, 1961).

There seems to be little consensus on the definitions of transference, introjection, projection and splitting. The descriptions of these unconscious defences have evolved significantly over time. Introjection was initially defined as the absorbing of positive experiences into oneself, while projection was once labelled as the process of wishing bad experiences away (De Board, 1978, p. 18).

Within the context of this study, introjection is the process of incorporating someone else's feelings as our own, while projection is the transmission

of our own feelings to someone else (Dale & James, 2015, p. 94). These processes are essential mechanisms of personality-building, studied in the field of psychodynamics to explain both group and organisational behaviours while remaining exceptionally relevant to measure the efficacy of leadership approaches.

Melanie Klein (1964) identified a fourth phenomenon: splitting which reduces a range of different emotions to the categories of *good/right* or *bad/wrong* (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994, p. 13). Splitting is of particular interest within organisational settings during periods of change/crisis as employees tend to use splitting as subconscious responses to new expectations or unwelcomed change as is the case in this study with the introduction of new, increased, curricular expectations for faculty members.

Processes of denial and avoidance stand as common characteristics of the basic assumption group (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994); In such groups, leaders tend to focus on trivial subjects or resort to narcissistic displays that often favour quick effortless solutions to external threats over carefully thought, long term solutions. Demoralised employees remain doubtful of their own agency and ability to enact meaningful change which helps BAG mentality proliferate (p. 43).

In organisational settings, formal and informal work contexts interface to create the lived experience of employees. Authors such as Dejours (2009 as cited by Czander, 2017, p. 19) tell us that work is at the very core of our lives and affective experiences; Work can provide pleasure, subjective expansion, and freedom while also being able to inflict wounds to the ego and induce pathological suffering. Our own psychic needs will ultimately influence our experiences at work. Often it is not possible for an employee to achieve fulfilment at work due to several reasons be they systemic or individual.

The resulting, frustrated expectations can lead to narcissistic wounds and unintended behavioural responses. According to scholars in the field of psychodynamics, when facing psychic conflicts, the individual is left with two choices: either to seek a different source of psychic gratification or

resort to the psychological defences (Czander, 1993, p. 7).

Groups are generally averse to change, and external *threats* that might jeopardise the status quo. Such resistance is especially salient in educational organisations, conservative in nature (Dale & James, 2015, p. 93).

4. Symbolic Interactionism

A symbolic interactionist approach is at the core of this study, and one of its main tenants is that the active construction of meaning, that our interpretations of truth are socially constructed and that we negotiate our own versions of truth with others living as social beings (Hammersley, 2019, p. 4).

Researchers must be prepared for *surprises* that may even change the course of the research itself. This concept was first coined by Blumer (as cited by Hammersley, 2019), who postulates that purely quantitative methods are not ideal in sociology as these often fail to take context and systemic elements into account.

One of the most salient criticisms faced by symbolic interactionist approaches is how they often fail to place hypotheses through *rigorous* testing (Gouldner, 1971, p. 498), as most interpretations hold a fair share of truth and falsehood. This is an outdated, positivistic perspective that no longer holds merit in a modern, complex world where mental health issues can hardly be addressed with a one-size-fits-all approach, especially in sociological research.

The primary data-gathering method employed in this study is the focus group method which directly derives from symbolic interactionism, finding purchase on the assumption that understanding social phenomena is not undertaken by the individual in isolation but through social interactions (Bryman, 2012, p. 504).

Focus groups have long enjoyed popularity among organisational theorists, including proponents of the Tavistock Institute in London. In the vast toolkit of qualitative methods, focus groups are often perceived as a powerful, participatory method that can offer a platform to marginalised/ignored elements within the

organisation (Johnson, 1996 as cited by Meyer, 2005, p. 104) and can centre the outcomes of the research on the needs of voiceless minorities.

In the context of group dynamics, focus groups are beneficial. This method offers an opportunity to gauge the individual's tendency to forego their personality and personal needs over the needs

Within the context of this study, some participants tended to control the narrative and course of the session, whilst others were more prone to go silent and avoided difficult questions. It was also quite challenging to divorce my role of department head from my role as moderator, as I believe some participants could have perhaps contributed further had I been an external researcher.

Focus groups provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on their own agency in enacting or stifling Affective Change within the organization. Incidentally, and despite the social nature of focus groups, very few studies operationalising this method draw inferences from the group dynamics of participants. Kitzinger (1994, as cited by Bryman, 2012) reviewed over two hundred studies across five decades and concluded that most data were reported no differently than had the method been individual interviews (p. 514). Incidentally, a common expectation of the focus group moderator is to help the conversation stay its course, providing every participant with the opportunity to voice their opinions.

The most powerful argument for adopting focus groups is the method's suitability for action-research-oriented projects, which is what this pilot research enquiry proposes. As Crabtree et al. (1993, p. 146, as cited by Barbour, 2008, pg.33) suggest that it is possible to simultaneously use focus groups as *a data collection tool and intervention* (p. 33). This is essential in the context of this study, as it is its long-term goal to propose solutions to rectify such basic assumption behaviour.

5. Ethical and Ontological Considerations:

As a researcher working for the same organisation that is the object of this study, it was pivotal for me to reflect on conscious and unconscious biases and how they may affect this study's development and outcomes. When conducting participatory research, there is a risk of aligning one's research outcomes with the political interests of the researched group. Barbour (2008) demarcates the critical difference between researching 'with' and researching 'on' a given group (p. 26), highlighting the ethical need for researchers to reflect on responsibility and inherent biases, which may hamper the credibility of one's findings.

Major studies rely on multiple researchers or co-researchers to avoid being overly constrained by biases to deter emotionally led assumptions or conclusions based on past experiences (Meyers, 2015, p. 6). Given that this is not logistically possible in this study, I will strive for self-disclosure (p. 20), aiming to provide a more natural narrative of the organisation. By informing the reader regarding methodological gaps and ideological biases, I aim to achieve a robust ontological and phenomenological platform that will provide credibility to the data and interpretations resulting from this study.

Meyers (2015, p. 39) warns against countertransference, a common event within the field of clinical psychology, whereby the researcher, guided by memories and fears, projects onto the subject and thus affects the outcome and interpretation of the events and research. Throughout this study, I reflected on such questions, including how answers from my participants affected me personally.

6. Sampling

To reduce potential biases, focus groups will also become the basis used for purposeful sampling (Meyers, 2015, p. 102), also known as 'snowball sampling', which consists in asking participants whom they believe to be the relevant key stakeholders to interview as opposed to having the researcher choosing the sampling. This is particularly poignant given that I was relatively new to the institution and am sure to have missed critical incidents that have contributed to the organisation's current state. This allows for a chain of enquiry whereby participants set the direction of the

study as opposed to a traditional, research-led approach.

In this study, all focus groups were capped at a maximum of six participants as experts in the field recommended a number between six and ten (Morgan, 1998 as cited by Bryman, 2012, p. 507). Smaller focus groups are encouraged when dealing with controversial matters, as is discovering the underlying reasons for the lack of coordination between two departments. The small group size helps prevent the discussion flow from going off-topic or group dynamics from taking over while permitting salient issues to be raised by the moderator and preventing logistical issues such as the inability to identify who said what in audio recordings and subsequent transcripts. Finally, all group members were given a chance to speak, which was only possible given the small number of participants and attentive moderation. To reduce potential biases, *snowball sampling* (Meyers, 2015, p. 102) was employed, asking participants whom they believe to be the relevant key stakeholders to interview as opposed to having the researcher choose.

7. High School Department Focus Group

Before I officially started the session, the most senior teacher in the group in years of service at the school, Mr A, noted a couple of late arrivals, leading other participants to agree and speculate on the reasons for the others' lateness. The conversation diverted at that point for around seven minutes. Such behaviour is not uncommon in groups and seems to validate the thesis that BAGs exist primarily to maintain and preserve themselves (Bion, 1961, p. 63) and that participating to the group is an outcome of itself. Absenteeism is a perceived existential threat to the group, which explains why the participant mentioned this early in the session.

After a short viewing of a video illustrating the merits of harmonious transitions between grade levels, the group was asked about their own their views. Participants were then asked to think of examples of successful transitions and finally explain what role transitions play in their school's context.

The tone quickly shifted to an accusatory one; One teacher, Ms Z, raised her hand to point out the school's lack of support and time provided in facilitating transitions. She was indicating that the SLT were responsible for this. The instinct to find a common enemy instead of answering the question led me to believe that the group was transitioning to a different basic assumption, whereby participants identified a common enemy to unite the group.

At the same time, Mr X and Ms Y, who had kept to themselves until that point, began *pairing off* (Bion, 1961, p. 72) into a private conversation, scarcely engaging with the questions despite being asked. Pairing is a common way for individuals to handle anxiety when tension rises, as was the case with this challenging conversation. And although some authors advocate that casual social interactions lead to a healthy environment among workgroups (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994), this particular group would often go on side conversations risking the primary task of the session going unfulfilled.

When asked about what decisions relating to transitions were taken in the past, Ms Y provided her first contribution to the discussion, pointing out that she had taught German classes to middle school groups before and therefore had always used the American standards when planning, and failed to see the point in transitioning to ECFL standards despite all other participants using these, and this being an expectation from HS language teachers. Here lies a salient example of *bible-making* (Bion, 1961, p. 155*),* or holding on to older precedents to resist change; BAG participants experience and voice their emotional opposition to any new idea that challenges the *status quo*. In the context of a mental health institution, Bion provides an example of *bible-making* when during a session with fellow clinicians, one participant refers to minutes of prior meetings to counteract the employment of a new approach.

Another critical incident was when one of the participants, a faculty member of longstanding, Ms Z, pointed out that in her subject area, German, transitions worked well, mainly taking place through informal

contacts with her middle-school counterpart. She then pressed on with her theory, stating that curricular transitions were only problematic as regarded French and Spanish.

At this stage, it was necessary to mention that it had been precisely Ms Z's counterpart in middle school who'd reached out to both department heads two months prior asking for more time for divisional vertical planning. This was done intentionally to determine which basic assumption the group would revert to and thus avoid the projecting of blame onto the Spanish and French teachers.

Ms Z's answer surprised me; she said that I was new to the school and could not understand what was going on as I had only joined six months ago. There was a clear case of *splitting* whereby the group creates a concrete border between insiders and outsiders, the former being perceived as all-knowing and heroic, whereas the latter would the opposite (Obhlozer and Roberts, 2019, p. 15).

At that moment, I had become the target of the group's frustration, as I myself was an *object* of the change prompted by the newly appointed dean of curriculum. The group saw me as a convenient scapegoat, an outsider, whereby the group projected all their anxieties relating to the new ideas, suggestions, and expectations onto me (Dale and James, 2015, p. 95). The group had thus evolved to a fight-flight basic assumption.

Vega Roberts (2019) provides compelling evidence to corroborate such inclinations on behalf of basic assumption groups. Clinical data shows that both in the case of therapists at mental health institutions as well in the case of the staff operating within the context of a social services residential unit for underaged children, there was a: "collective sense of everything good and helpful being inside the organisation, and of the outside world as harmful and dangerous." (p. 131)

Discharging the patients or sending the children off to their new host families was a decision perceived mostly negatively by staff members.

The group quickly turned to splitting feelings between 'right' and 'wrong'

(Obhlozer and Roberts, 2019, p. 131), a common defence from groups experiencing heightened anxiety levels. What followed was effectively a contradiction insofar the majority of the group either shifted blame / projected to SLT or argued against the premise that the need ever existed for a more coordinated approach among departments (denial).

It was evident that the prompt I had used had led to some staff members of longstanding resorting to defences after being confronted with the reality that poorly designed transitions negatively affected students. The basic assumption had changed to one of fight-flight, and I had become the target as the outsider who *couldn't possibly understand the real issue* or *what was at stake*.

7.1 Middle School Department Focus Group

The prompts and questions used for this focus group session were identical to those used during the High School department. This was a purposeful attempt to identify differences in answers, which could indicate the existence and maintenance of basic assumptions preventing better communication and collaboration between the two divisions.

This session proved challenging almost from the offset; some department members were familiar to me, although I had had few interactions with them in a professional and social capacity. The group seemed suspicious of the purpose of the session and pressed on this despite the goal having been explained both by email and individually to each participant.

After an awkward silence that lasted around two minutes, the MS department head started by listing the many reasons why the American standards curriculum and the standard-based assessments used in middle school served middle school students better than the letter grade approach used in high school. This was the main narrative heard amongst middle school staff and, in fact, the exact words of the middle school principal, who allegedly did not get along with his high school counterpart. Thus leading me to consider whether this was a pertinent example of introjection, whereby the

department head and the rest of the MS department faculty introjected the middle school principal's expectations. It could also be argued that this was a case of adherence to the dominant norms in the staff group or another case of splitting whereby all decisions made in MS were seen as *right* and the opposite applied to HS decisions.

I had heard those exact words from the MS principal very many times. There was nothing new to the argument resulting in a different perspective being suggested: many middle school students transitioning to high school found themselves at odds with the differences between the academic language and standards in middle school to those used in high school.

At this point, the MS department head pivoted to his original argument, expressing disapproval toward the high school grading system, where numerical grades prevailed over criteria ones. In this early stage of the session, the group seemed to be experiencing a state of dependency on the department head to speak in their stead. The group effectively saw the department head as a *good object* (Czander, Jacobsberg, Mersky, & Nunberg, 2002, p. 370). A shield from the unwelcome change that the dean of curriculum seemed to represent in the eyes of the participants.

The relative listlessness of the group during the first half of the session also suggested a case of projective identification (Likierman, 2002 as cited by Dale and James, 2015, p. 95) whereby the MS head of department's suspicions toward high school practices were actively projected and introjected; leaving little room for an honest debate about how the lack of coordination was affecting rising high school students.

The question relating to common planning time among departments divided the group and invited further discussion. At this point, Ms W, herself married to a high school modern languages teacher, pointed out that during the previous academic year, only a single meeting had been

dispensed for joint curricular planning and moderation across both departments. This provides evidence of an absence of dialogue and lack of opportunities for change to be contained but also that this is not a priority for the management team.

The Middle school modern languages department followed a similar pattern to their HS counterparts; Instead of projecting their frustration and anxiety toward me, as their HS colleagues had, the group's negative emotions were directed at the school's leadership team and especially at individuals who had already departed, In what case of projective identification (Dale and James, 2015).

The negative feelings toward the organisation were projected onto a *bad object* and apparently introjected and *wished away* when the individual eventually left. The previous head of school was scapegoated, gaining quite a bad reputation for himself, with rumours of incompetence and floating in corridors.

I proceeded to point out that an entire academic year had passed since the departure of this individual. This was primarily an attempt at affective containment as I attempted to readdress the poor coordination between departments while showing participants that their agency was instrumental in enacting change. Indeed, the lack of awareness among work groups of their role and personal agency in driving meaningful change is a common feature of BAGs (Oblozher & Roberts, 1994).

When asked about potential stakeholders to interview next regarding the lack of coordination issue, the group suggested the name of the former Dean of Curriculum. One participant volunteered that she'd been the *opposite* of her successor, a *flexible* and *spirited* individual, which could be seen as an example of splitting where objects and individuals are reduced to *good* or *bad*.

There were also examples of more subtle defences at work, namely when Ms Y, a faculty member of longstanding, stated, "(I) keep having *deja vus* in those (vertical) meetings.» This remark sought to reinforce the dominant

view among the group that joint meeting time among both departments was scarce and ineffective. Humour and sarcasm are also defences used to prevent effective change (Contu and Willmott, 2006 as cited by (Dashtipour and Vidaillet, 2017, p. 32).

8. What Obstacles Remain for Effective cross-departmental collaboration from an Organisation-Wide Perspective?

The role of the psychodynamically-informed organisational researcher is twofold: to find the root causes for the projection of negative emotions that stifle efficiency within the organisation whilst also to train the groups that make up the organisation to become more aware of these and other unconscious processes. Such an approach guards the individual against paranoid-schizoid tendencies that stifle effective collaboration (Bion, 1961, p. 14).

In addition to recognising both written and *unwritten* norms and the role that systemic limitations, including race, gender, and sexuality, play in group dynamics, structural organisation-wide limitations must also be considered. In previous sections, the root causes of the (often cyclical) basic-assumption behaviour from the High School department were explained. Still, it is just as essential to provide context from an organisation-wide level, exposing the impediments to a group working towards its primary task.

Data from both focus groups group revealed three main obstacles at an organisation-wide level for a more balanced approach to curriculum:

- The significant differences between grading systems used in high school (letter grades/percentiles) and middle school (criteria/standard-based grades) and how such differences are misleading the perception of grades from incoming middle school students

In addition, differences in formative assessment policies include mandatory test retakes and no homework to be assigned during holiday breaks in MS versus professional judgment in HS.

- The complexity of the grading software and marrying the percentages of external course rubrics and numerical grades to traditional American letter grades.

- The lack of time and relevant agendas provided for vertical meetings involving both ML departments to facilitate collaboration and moderation.

Anecdotally, other departments expressed similar concerns, which led to the newly appointed Dean of Curriculum pushing to introduce more time for vertical meetings during personal development days. Despite these efforts, faculty members showed little appetite to address this issue actively. This raises the question of the extent to which past and existing leaders have provided a consistent message on the merits of standardisation and curricular transitions.

A fourth, and perhaps more pragmatic obstacle that should be added to the list above is scheduling. Modern languages departmental meetings take place at the same time across divisions. In addition, there is more than one teacher in either department teaching groups across both divisions, which means these educators must choose which meeting to attend, thus missing vital information and creating anxiety and stress. Although these might be perceived as insignificant details, they are manifestations of an unconscious, organisational desire to maintain *walls* between divisions.

Managers often use scheduling inconsistencies to avoid addressing institutional conflicts and keeping disparaging groups from working together (Oblozher and Roberts, 2019, p. 90). Such is a symptom of basic-assumption behaviour, as quick, short-term solutions as the preferred response within BAGs.

9. Affective Containment: A Blueprint for Cohesion among Divisions

Obhlozer and Roberts (2019) warn us against the tendency for new managers and clinicians to use the Tavistock approach to immediately clamour for change within institutions, which in the case of the former, can be seen as a way for leaders to demarcate their territory and project their expectations

upon staff. Such an approach often backfires as existing staff members, faced with an overwhelming push for change, may introject that their work methods until that point were subpar, leading to the corrosion of morale (p. 112).

Leaders must pay attention to the emotions of their subordinates and make them active parties to institutional change by, for example, providing forums and other means for individuals to express their minds before taking significant decisions. Wilfred Bion (1961) dubs these strategies as affective containment.

The pandemic acted as a catalyser for basic assumption behaviour within many educational organisations. Fraser and Horden (2021) provide evidence of the nefarious effect that unattended negative emotions felt by change among staff members can have on faculty and managers alike. The authors point to two possible strategies that managers possess during times of heightened anxiety and stress:

Affective control stands as the opposite of affective containment. It consists of the tacit prohibition of *outward displays of emotions* that *may disrupt the smooth running* of the school (Fraser and Horden, 2021, p. 2). Such an approach often results in unintended consequences as employees dealing with repressed emotions eventually express them in ways they and the organisation did not expect.

The alternative approach, pioneered by Bion (1961) and further developed by sociologist Yiannis Gabriel (1999), is affective containment; the process of accepting that situations of heightened stress and anxiety inevitable happen and that a *talking culture* within an organisation is paramount to maintaining a healthy working environment.

Any member of a group can facilitate affective containment, but leaders are undoubtedly better equipped to introduce this strategy. In the context of the HS modern languages department, the absence of a departmental leader explains the high levels of distrust towards the SLT and the indifference shown by some department members towards the new professional expectations.

During periods of affective intensity in educational organisations, such as during the introduction of different curricular or pedagogical expectations,

providing the adequate means, time, and venues, for emotions and feelings both to be expressed and experienced, is a powerful means for such emotions and feelings to be used productively (Dale and James, p. 93). Groups within educational organisations often do not welcome change and project negative emotions towards other faculty members or students.

Bion and Winnicot (as cited by Dale and James, p. 104) refer to two kinds of affective containment. The original theory is that of the *container*, whereby an individual *volunteers* to become a *container* for negative emotions, thus helping the group at large with the handling of unwelcomed change. The alternative approach is the one proposed by Obholzer (1994) in which systems, processes, and the organisational structure itself allows for difficult feelings and emotions to be experienced, accepted, transformed, and re-experienced by employees in a more constructive way.

Affective containment is one of the many strategies that school administrators can use in times of great anxiety and stress; Providing forums for educators and the school community at large exemplify trust in middle managers and educators to maintain a high degree of professionalism among other strategies are in the administration's toolkit (de Passos, 2021).

10. Conclusion

This study has contributed to the field of psychodynamics insofar it demonstrates how group dynamics operate and shape teachers' affective and subjective lived experiences across two divisions of an international school. It further shows how anxiety and defences stifle communication and collaboration by driving *invisible* walls between basic assumption groups and perpetuating practices that prevent meaningful organisational change from taking place.

Data collected from the focus group sessions points to many teachers who either disagree or fail to see the merits of standardisation and moderating and the importance of transitions to students. This raises the crucial question: to what extent is the importance of creating effective curricular

school. It further shows how anxiety and defences stifle communication and collaboration by driving *invisible* walls between basic assumption groups and perpetuating practices that prevent meaningful organisational change from taking place.

Data collected from the focus group sessions points to many teachers who either disagree or fail to see the merits of standardisation and moderating and the importance of transitions to students. This raises the crucial question: to what extent is the importance of creating effective curricular transitions consistently relayed and promoted amongst faculty.

Gaining access to the MS department and convincing them to partake was one of the main obstacles to this study. Despite being a member of this organisation, I often felt like some participants needed to toe the line, not over fear of reprisal, so much as distrust of myself as an outsider and symbol of change.

The specific setting of an international school was critically analysed in this study. This is particularly meaningful in psychodynamics, where the lion's share of academic literature revolves around healthcare and mental health contexts.

Some of the limitations of using the psychodynamic approach in the context of this study include the assumption that most behaviours are determined by unconscious processes (Bion, 1961) and therefore very difficult to change. Such an assumption makes finding the root causes behind the incoordination between departments challenging and prolonged. The same applying to the adoption of an affective containment culture within the school.

Further research is warranted on schools using psychodynamic frameworks to identify and address basic assumption behaviour.

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