



Bias Bite #3: Dichotomous Thinking

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Bias Bites are written for administrators to help teachers explore their cognitive limitations through suggested protocols that can be implemented in school-wide meetings and other professional development opportunities. The following activities guide teachers to explore dichotomous thinking, which is the tendency to view things in extreme, binary terms while ignoring the possibility of nuance. While this cognitive pattern can help simplify complex issues, it can also lead to oversimplification and inaccurate understandings. The structured learning experiences in this Bias Bite provide educators with a more thorough understanding of this bias. They also help educators develop greater humility and awareness of their cognitive limitations, fostering more spaces for civil discourse in their schools.



Driving Question

Why is it so difficult for us to hold 2 opposing ideas in our mind at the same time?

Materials Needed

- The story of or the video the Chinese Farmer “‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Are Incomplete Stories We Tell Ourselves”
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

Bias Description

Dichotomous thinking, also known as black-and-white thinking or all-or-nothing thinking, is the tendency to view things in extreme, binary terms, often ignoring the possibility of nuance, shades of gray, or a spectrum of possibilities. Every bias has its pros and cons. The pros and cons of dichotomous thinking are as follows:

- Quick decision-making. Dichotomous thinking allows us to simplify complex issues into manageable categories, which can help us make decisions quickly.
- Bias reinforcement and extreme views. This bias can lead to oversimplifications and inaccuracies, which may reinforce biases and/or lead to extremist views about people and the world.

Bias in Action: School-Based Examples

- A school administrator believes that a strict disciplinary policy is the only effective way to manage behavior. As a result, teachers feel pressured to either enforce harsh penalties for minor infractions or allow disruptive behavior to continue unchecked, failing to recognize the benefits of a balanced approach that involves restorative practices alongside discipline.
- In group activities, students may be seen as either “leaders” or “followers.” A student who tends to take charge in group discussions is viewed as a natural leader, while another who enjoys contributing ideas quietly may be pigeonholed as a follower. This oversimplification can limit both students’ opportunities for growth in different roles.
- A school culture is steeped in an “us versus them” mentality. This mindset creates divisions between teachers and students, or different groups of students, rather than fostering a sense of shared community.

Professional Development Protocol for School Leaders

ACTIVATE

- Read the story of or watch the first minute of (stop at 1:02 of the second video). the Chinese Farmer “‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Are Incomplete Stories We Tell Ourselves”
- Ask educators to reflect on the following questions:
 - What are examples of when you’ve framed situations into a good/bad binary?
 - In what situations would it make sense to create binaries? In what situations does it not make sense or serve us?
 - What are other examples of the good/bad (all/nothing) binary that you observe in schools, or in the greater community?

EXPLAIN

- Define dichotomous thinking and explain why it occurs.
- Dichotomous thinking occurs for several reasons:
 - Our brains are wired to take shortcuts.
 - We engage in confirmation bias and tend to seek information that supports our preconceived notions and ignore information that doesn’t.
 - We tend to use the availability heuristic and overestimate and exaggerate information that is easily recalled.
- Share mitigation strategies.
 - Actively seek out contradictory evidence or alternative perspectives when forming opinions.
 - Recognize when others frame situations within a “good/bad” binary.
 - Practice “both/and” thinking, where you consider the positive and negative aspects of a situation.
 - Engage in regular self-reflection and be willing to acknowledge the limitations of your own knowledge or biases.
 - Be willing to explore multiple angles and perspectives on complex issues.

DISCUSS

- Engage in a whole-group discussion about the following questions.
 - What is the relationship between this bias and the others you’re learning about?
 - How can dichotomous thinking show up in schools for different stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, families)?
 - Under what conditions or in what situations are we most susceptible to this bias?
 - How could one recognize when this bias is affecting them?

- What are some strategies to overcome this bias?
- What is the relationship between this bias and humility? In what ways can our awareness of this bias improve civil discourse?

SYNTHESIZE

- Revisit the driving question and have participants respond.