



Bias Bite #5: Negativity Bias

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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 negativity bias, which is the tendency for people to pay more attention to negative information or experiences than positive ones. While this cognitive bias can motivate us to act, it can also foster stress and anxiety by putting an overemphasis on negative events. 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 do we often see the cup as half empty?

Materials Needed

- Paper
- Pencils/pens
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

Bias Description

The negativity bias is a cognitive bias that causes people to pay more attention to negative information or experiences than to positive ones. This bias is why the pain of losing, or loss aversion, is psychologically more powerful than the pleasure of gaining. Every bias has its pros and cons. The pros and cons of the negativity bias are as follows:

- Motivates us to act. Negativity bias helped our ancestors survive by highlighting potential threats, and it can motivate us to take action to address negative situations and prevent future problems.
- Overemphasizes negative events. This bias can lead to a pessimistic outlook and an overemphasis on negative events, even when more positive evidence is available.
- Fosters anxiety. Negativity bias can contribute to stress, anxiety, and negativity in our thoughts and behaviors.

Bias in Action: School-Based Examples

- Administrators might focus heavily on areas for improvement during teacher evaluations, while providing limited feedback on their strengths and growth.
- Teachers might focus more on students' weaknesses and areas for improvement than on their strengths and potential.
- Teachers might quickly remember and dwell on a student's disruptive behavior, while failing to recall the student's engaged participation or academic successes.

Professional Development Protocol for School Leaders

ACTIVATE

- Pass out paper and pencils. Ask educators to write down as many details as they can within 45 seconds about "A time when . . ." (using the prompts below):

- A student expressed gratitude for you being their teacher.
- A class was especially joyful to teach.
- A student was disruptive in your class.
- A class had significant behavior challenges.
- Reflect as a whole group using the following questions:
 - Did you notice any differences in your ability to remember the details of the positive versus negative statements/scenarios?
 - Why do you think you were able to recall more information about the negative items?

EXPLAIN

Define negativity bias and explain why it happens. Tell educators that our brains are wired to respond more intensely to negative events/surroundings/information than positive ones. Explain that 2 psychologists, Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman, wrote that suggests negativity bias occurs for the following reasons: an article

- Negative potency. Negative events have a stronger “stickiness” in our minds. They feel more consequential, and we remember them more vividly. Example: We’re more likely to remember a time we were harshly criticized than a time we received positive feedback, even if both events had an equal impact.
- Steeper negative gradients. As a negative event approaches, our emotional response intensifies more quickly than for a positive event. Example: The anticipation of a dreaded test causes increasing anxiety as the test date nears, while anticipation of a fun field trip brings less stress as the date approaches.
- Negativity dominance. Our overall impression of an event is often more negative than the sum of its positive and negative parts. Example: Even if a school trip has some positive moments, a single negative incident (like getting lost or being bullied) can overshadow the positive experiences and leave a negative overall impression.
- Negative differentiation. Negative events require more cognitive effort to process, so they are often more memorable and intense. Example: We remember more vividly a time we failed a test than a time we aced it, because processing the failure required analyzing our mistakes, strategizing for improvement, and managing disappointment.
- Share mitigation strategies:
 - Recognize and replace negative thoughts with more productive ones.
 - Use targeted self-reflection questions that challenge negative thinking.
 - Practice mindfulness strategies.

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 negativity bias 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.