



## Bias Bite #7: The Pygmalion Effect

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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 the Pygmalion effect, which is the phenomenon in which higher expectations placed upon individuals lead to an improvement in their performance. While this cognitive bias can motivate others to perform well, low expectations can also lead others to underperform. 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 other people's expectations of us affect our performance?

## Materials Needed

- “The Power of Expectations” video
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

## Bias Description

The Pygmalion effect, also known as the Rosenthal effect, describes the phenomenon in which higher expectations placed upon individuals lead to an improvement in their performance. This gain occurs because our expectations influence our behavior, which in turn affects the behavior and performance of those around us.

Every bias has its pros and cons. The pros and cons of this bias are as follows:

- High expectations motivate others to improve. This bias can lead to higher expectations of others, which can boost motivation, lead to improved performance, and create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which others internalize these expectations and strive to meet them.
- Low expectations lead to underperformance. While high expectations can lead to a positive self-fulfilling prophecy, low expectations can create a negative self-fulfilling prophecy, in which others internalize these expectations and underperform.
- Expectations lead to unequal treatment. The Pygmalion effect can lead to unequal treatment of others on the basis of one's expectations rather than actual abilities or needs.

## Bias in Action: School-Based Examples

- Students internalize their teachers' beliefs about their potential and ultimately underperform as a result.
- Administrators make hiring decisions using preconceptions about teacher candidates' effectiveness.
- Teachers hold lower academic and behavioral expectations for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Professional Development Protocol for School Leaders

### ACTIVATE

- Watch video: "The Power of Expectations"
- Ask the following reflection questions:
  - What stood out or surprised you in this video?
  - What implications might expectations have on our work as educators?
  - What biases might be at play?

### EXPLAIN

Define the Pygmalion effect and explain why it occurs:

- Tell educators that Robert Rosenthal was the first to examine the Pygmalion effect. In 1968, he identified the 4 factors as climate, input, output, and feedback. Explain each factor as it is outlined here:
  - Climate: Teachers who hold high expectations for students often create a warmer, more encouraging classroom climate. They may smile more, make more eye contact, and be more responsive to student needs. This positive environment encourages student participation and engagement.
  - Input: Teachers with high expectations tend to provide students with more challenging and stimulating material. They might give them more opportunities to learn, explore, and develop their skills.
  - Output: Teachers may call on high-expectation students more frequently, give them more opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, and provide them with more feedback, which can lead to increased learning and confidence.
  - Feedback: Teachers may provide more positive and specific feedback to high-expectation students, focusing on their strengths and progress. This positive reinforcement encourages further effort and achievement.
- Share mitigation strategies.
  - Challenge negative stereotypes.
  - Be skeptical of strong group identifications.
  - Ask yourself challenging questions to counter lower levels of motivation.

### 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 the Pygmalion effect 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.