

# The Squidward Phenomenon

American schools are failing introverts. Here's why that matters.

The fifth grade classroom is buzzing with whispering students as the teacher calls their attention.

“Okay, class. Getting back to the topic, why do you think it took our country so many years to make slavery illegal? Kyle?”

All eyes fall on the quiet boy in the back of the class. His hands begin to tremble, his pulse begins to quicken, and his mouth opens ever so slightly. The room freezes. Kyle waits, paralyzed in a silent deathgrip, until the teacher shakes her head and moves on. Mortified, Kyle lowers his head onto his desk. *It is because the southern economy depended upon it*, he thinks. Kyle leaves that day with a bad grade, an undeserved sense of failure, and an important thought that he was unable to share with the class.

Kyle is an introvert, one of many whose ideas get buried in the noise of an extroverted culture. Introverts are not only underutilized in American society, but they are also frequently pressured to take on extroverted styles and behaviors. The United States has a long history of preferring extroversion, and this preference is evident in all aspects of American culture – especially in the school system. It begins the moment children enter Kindergarten, with activities designed to encourage extroversion, and continues through middle school and onto high school, where the pressure to be extroverted accelerates and includes penalties for those who do not comply. As an outgrowth of the American glorification of extroversion, apparent in all aspects of society, American schools are designed specifically to create extroverted students, a futile and damaging effort that stifles the abilities and contributions of the inner-life introverts.

**Introversion versus extroversion – what's the difference?**

To understand how the United States is biased towards extroversion, it is important to first establish the differences between extroverts and introverts. To preface, no two extroverts or introverts are exactly alike, but they embody enough of the typical traits to be considered predominantly one or the other. In general, extroverts get their energy from other people and enjoy bouncing ideas off of their peers, while introverts need alone time to recharge and prefer working alone (Delvis). Extroverts tend to be talkative, outgoing, and social, while introverts are quieter and tend to dislike surplus socialization (Bushak). Extroverts are typically more likely to contribute vocally in meetings, while introverts usually quietly observe (Delvis). Additionally, introverts are often hesitant to voluntarily voice an opinion, and may know more than they choose to show (Laney). A key difference between the two personalities is that extroverts “speak to think,” while introverts “think to speak” (Rauch). In other words, introverts need time to organize their thoughts and ideas in silence, while extroverts are able to do so through the process of speaking.

While extroversion and introversion can be defined by a person’s preferences, one does not *choose* his or her personality type – these are predilections that are chemically ingrained in the human brain from birth, invalidating and undermining any attempt to manufacture extroverts in society. This has been proven by a variety of experiments, one of which was conducted by Psychologist Jerome Kagan, who tested to see if infants reacted differently to a variety of stimuli. Kagan’s work was based on what Psychologist Hans Eysenck had previously asserted – that introverts are easily overstimulated, while extroverts are able to remain calm in the presence of a lot of stimulation (Bushak). Armed with this knowledge, Kagan excited infants through loud noises and bright lights. Some of the babies barely reacted to the stimulation. Others, however, began kicking, screaming, crying, and panicking. Keeping this information on file, Kagan continued to keep track of the children into their teenage years. The results were the same for all of the participants. The ones who had reacted to the stimulation were clearly introverted, and the ones who remained calm were extroverts (Cain 100).

Introversion and extroversion are part of a person’s genetic makeup. A child who was overstimulated as an infant will continue to experience overstimulation for the rest of his life. It is true that people can develop skills over time to counter their natural tendencies, but they cannot change their innate preference. While it is possible to be successful masquerading as the other personality, a person will never be able to reach their full potential when they are forced to work in a way that is unnatural to them.

### **The extroverted bias didn’t just appear out of thin air.**

When in their comfort zones, both introverts and extroverts are capable of incredible accomplishments; however, the United States is overwhelmingly biased

towards extroversion, believing it to be the more favorable personality type. The Extrovert Ideal, or the “omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight,” dates back to the 1920s, right after the conclusion of World War I (Cain 4). The end of the war brought about a time of economic boom for American cities. More families were leaving behind farm life in pursuit of the American Dream, which consisted of a house in the suburbs, a fancy automobile, and, of course, a reputable job in business. President Coolidge greatly endorsed this exponential rise of business. Ironically nicknamed “Silent Cal,” Coolidge believed that “The business of America is business” (Deis). A 1920’s article from *The Atlantic Monthly* further encapsulates this obsession with business, stating, “[The American businessman] plans business on his way to the office. His morning is spent in reading business, dictating business, and talking business” (White). As more men began equating The American Businessman with success, they strove to be just like him – from the way he dressed in flashy suits, right down to his personality – which happened to be extroverted. As businessmen and success became synonymous, the extroverted “businessman traits” became more desirable. Among these traits were: likeability, ambition, an ability to take charge, a competitive attitude, the desire to take risks, and the ability to communicate well – strengths that tend to be aligned with extroverts (“Top 10 Qualities of a Great Business Person”). Thus, the infatuation with the businessman was the beginning of the Extrovert Ideal.

### **Popular culture reaffirms the bias.**

America’s obsession with extroversion did not stop with the conclusion of the Roaring Twenties; this preference has continued to turn the United States into a nation captivated by the extrovert. The elevation of extroverts and, more importantly, the negative portrayal of introverts, are relayed to the nation subtly through advertisements and television shows. A prime example of how America views the two personalities is evident in the DIRECTV commercial featuring Rob Lowe. This commercial is designed to persuade the watcher to “ditch cable” and get DIRECTV through the two different versions of Rob Lowe. The Rob Lowe with DIRECTV is outgoing, has big parties, enjoys social interactions, and is clearly supposed to be the desirable of the two Rob Lowes. He is the image of extroversion. His alter ego, the Rob Lowe with cable, prefers staying home alone, has a slight fear of interacting with other people, and is overall offbeat. He is the image of introversion, and a perfect example of how introverts are negatively portrayed in the media. Extrovert Rob Lowe even blatantly says about his introverted alter ego, “Don’t be like this me” (DIRECTV). While this ad is intended to be lighthearted, it sends a clear and harmful message: it is shameful to be introverted, and personality is malleable (careful! Choosing the wrong cable provider could result in catching introversion!). This has a substantial impact on the nation, as introverts learn

that their desire for alone time directly correlates with awkwardness, unpopularity, and, of course, a bad cable experience.

Another more insidious example of the negative portrayal of introverts on television is in the popular children's show, *SpongeBob Squarepants*. Spongebob and Patrick are happy, outgoing, vibrant, and extroverted. Both SpongeBob and Patrick enjoy interacting with people, and are, overall, bubbly, likable characters. Their next-door neighbor, Squidward Tentacles, on the other hand, does not enjoy social interaction, loves spending time alone, and is deeply passionate about his music. Squidward is clearly an introvert, and the series never lets the viewer forget that this is a bad thing. Squidward is consistently negatively portrayed throughout the entire series. He is labeled as "grumpy," "dark," and "antisocial," and is seldom seen without a hard grimace on his face. In one particular episode, "Good Neighbors," Squidward wants to enjoy his Sunday relaxing and practicing clarinet, but SpongeBob and Patrick are set on playing with him. Even though Squidward continues to tell SpongeBob and Patrick that he wants to spend time alone, they perceive this as his having a bad day and continue to pester him (Nickelodeon). This, like the DIRECTV commercial, is also meant to be light-hearted comedy – but it once again illustrates to viewers that liking time alone is a sign of grouchiness, and that it is unnatural (and offensive to your friends!) to enjoy solitude from time to time. The fact that this show is targeted to young children makes this dynamic even more concerning. By using Squidward's desire to be alone as a way of mocking him, *SpongeBob Squarepants* is clearly illustrating to kids the negative connotation associated with introversion.

### **What's wrong with my kid?**

The way introverts are represented in the media leaves millions of parents worrying about their quiet children, and thousands of quiet children worrying that something is wrong with them. Laurie Helgoe, psychologist and author of *Why Your Inner Life is Your Hidden Strength*, says she has had countless young patients brought in because their parents are worried about them being too quiet. She has never once had a child brought in for being too outgoing (Helgoe 27). As parents watch shows such as *Spongebob* over their children's shoulders, they begin worrying that their child's desire to hide away in his room from time to time is reflective of future isolation, pessimism, and even depression, all seemingly illustrated by Squidward. This bias does not just concern parents, but also affects these quiet children. "Even as a kid, everyone would always go 'You're so quiet. Why are you so quiet?'" Westfield High School introvert, Claudia Savickas, recalls. "And it was just kind of how it was, and I wondered if it was wrong to be that way" (Savickas). Pressures from society can cause children like Savickas to wonder why they are so quiet, and may result in the development of

lifelong insecurities. These insecurities are further advanced as soon as the child enters school.

### **And then they go to school...**

The suppression of introversion is particularly clear in America's school system, which favors and encourages extroversion, while introverted qualities are suppressed and even punished. This can partially be explained by the fact that Americans still believe that going into business equates with success. The idea of the American Dream is still thriving today, and countless young people still desire to become successful entrepreneurs. Often in business, the ability to sell a product is just as valuable as the product itself. Therefore, the extrovert's oral confidence is supposedly essential to succeed in business. Due to this phenomenon, schools today are set up to create children who would theoretically prosper in business – and therefore teach children the needed extroverted qualities. Since schools are set up to prepare kids for success, and success is still associated with the extroverted businessman, it isn't hard to connect the dots that schools are designed to raise extroverted children.

This process of encouraging extroversion begins as soon as a child enters the public school system: Kindergarten. A simple Google search of "What to expect in Kindergarten" results in a clear articulation of society's desire to raise extroverts. One description of the goal of Kindergarten activities is that they "are built around encouraging kids to socialize, even if they appear more academically oriented" (Ghezzi). This is a poorly-masked euphemism for discouraging introversion. So important is this effort that getting children to "overcome" their introversion is one of the primary goals of Kindergarten activities, which, as previously described, is impossible to do. "What to Expect in Kindergarten" goes on to explain that Kindergarten is intended to teach the kids to enjoy the presence of others, to solve problems by talking with one another, to share, and to work together (Ghezzi). These are all activities preferred by extroverts, and draining for introverts when done in large doses without breaks. Though learning to work together is essential, Kindergarten neglects to teach the importance of independent work. The article mentions nothing about allowing children to independently discover their academic interests, or spend time by themselves thinking about or reflecting on problems. Instead, the introverted children are forced constantly to spend time, work, and play with their peers without any alone time to recharge and recuperate. The desks are even arranged in groups, taking away any time a child might have to himself (McKinley School). Absent this much-needed alone time, the introverts naturally become exhausted and overwhelmed by the end of the day.

This one-sided focus on extroversion stunts the voices of introverts, and retracts from the overall learning environment. Introverts feel more comfortable and are much

better at solving problems alone, and can never meet their full potential when they are forced to work only in groups. Depending on the study consulted, one third to one half of the nation is composed of introverts (Cain 3). Therefore, if introverts do not feel comfortable contributing towards solving a problem, a third to half of the ideas in the room are lost. While it is useful for each personality type to be encouraged to develop skills that may come easier to the other type, this is happening only in one direction. Even as children learn to develop useful skills that may not feel natural to them, no child should be made to feel less worthy for their preference. Kindergarten further advances the idea that introversion is the lesser of the personalities, which children have already been receiving from other aspects of American culture. At such a young and formidable age, these early lessons are highly impactful – they matter, and they stay with these children as they grow.

This combination of discouraging introversion and encouraging extroversion continues into middle and high school, with a brand new, effective weapon of reinforcement: grades. One example of this is the Socratic seminar, which is typically held in English classes. Socratic seminars are student-led discussions in which there is no teacher mediating, and students are required to jump in, interrupting their peers, to voice their opinions. Preparation is necessary beforehand, but bringing in notes and being prepared is only a small fraction of the grade. Socratic seminars are timed, and if a student attempts to join the conversation but is unable to do so in the allotted time, they will fail the assignment. The grade is based not only on content, but also on the ability to articulate without use of “ums,” “likes,” and other filler words. This assignment targets introverts, forcing them to speak up by threatening them with the potential of a bad grade. What actually ends up happening, however, is entirely different. An introverted student at Westfield High School, Courtney Casale, explains how. “In Socratic seminars, the students who are more outgoing and louder tend to interrupt or talk over [the quieter students], which does not allow introverts to talk as much, and their grades suffer because of it” (Casale). Not only do introverts get punished when they yield to their peers in these seminars, but once again, the conversation is missing a third to a half of the students in the classroom. This style of conversation also breeds quantity over quality, with the same few participants speaking as much as possible for a good grade, rather than measuring the actual substance of the contributed idea. Thus, discussions are not nearly as deep as they could be – especially without the inclusion of introverts in the dialogue.

Another way grades are used to squelch introversion is through participation grades, based heavily on oral participation. Participation grades are specifically “for those who can keep up with the discussion – who speak to think,” while the quieter students “are often left in thought, possibly coming up with a response well past its pertinent time frame” (“Participation Grades Unfairly Reward Extroverts”). Introverts

need time to ponder questions, and classroom discussions often move too fast for them to have the chance to fully think through the question in order to participate. Additionally, it may appear to the teacher that the students not raising their hands are not focusing or have nothing to add, but a student not volunteering may very well be thinking, considering, and therefore present in the discussion (“Participation Grades Unfairly Reward Extroverts”). Furthermore, grading students based on how willingly they participate is not only unfair, but does not actually encourage rich discussions. What often occurs is the students who feel comfortable verbally contributing do so even when they have nothing substantial to add to the conversation - just for the sake of a good grade, the same pattern that occurs in Socratic Seminars. Therefore, introverts get punished with bad grades because the conversation is moving too fast for them to speak, and extroverts get rewarded for contributing even when they have nothing of value to add to the discussion.

The American school system’s obsession with group work – which begins in Kindergarten – not only restricts introverts, but actually is not the most efficient or effective way for anyone to work. Psychologist Anders Ericcson conducted a study to see what made exceptional violinists better than the worst violinists. He figured out that while the best violinists, the mediocre violinists, and the worst violinists all practiced the same amount in groups, the best group practiced the most alone (Cain 80). In terms of improving, working individually is much more effective than working in a group, because only an individual can know what they need to do in order to improve. In a different experiment conducted by Marvin Dunnette, a University of Minnesota psychology professor, men got together in groups of four to brainstorm ideas to a simple question. These same men were then split up to work individually, and had to brainstorm ideas for a similar question. The quality and quantity of the ideas were then ranked. The results showed that the men’s ideas were of equal and in some cases higher quality and quantity when they worked alone versus when they were in groups (Cain 88). This experiment was monumental – it disproved the popular idea that people working together are more powerful than people working alone. Steve Wozniak, cofounder of Apple Computer, is opposed to group work because he believes that nothing truly revolutionary ever comes from a team (Cain 73). He also notes that nearly all innovative advancements – electricity and the theory of relativity, to name a couple – were made by individual thinkers, and not by committees. Therefore, not only is group work proven to be less effective than working alone in terms of performance improvement, it is also arguably inferior when it comes to generating better innovation and ideas.

None of this is to suggest that introverts should not be expected to contribute to classroom discussion. Instead, it is a matter of finding different ways for them to contribute. When introverts participate in ways that make them feel comfortable rather

than in ways that are unnatural to them, the added voices and ideas accelerate and enhance discussions, and enrich the overall learning environment for everyone.

### **What should schools be doing differently?**

There are some fairly simple ways that schools can begin to make changes to include, motivate, and empower introverts, and some schools are beginning to do so. For example, several schools have integrated technology into the classroom as a form of discussion and have seen incredible results. New programs, such as Today's Meet used in Sioux Rapids, Iowa, allow students to "comment, pose questions (answered by either one another or the teacher) and shed inhibitions about voicing opinions" through different social media-like sites (Gabriel). In this setting, students sit in a circle with laptops on their desk, and combine oral discussion with online communication. A teacher might ask a question, have the students answer online, and then further discuss aloud. Alternatively, a student might ask a question that the teacher then answers vocally. Purdue University developed its own virtual classroom called Hot Seat to incorporate into classroom discussions. One Professor at Purdue, Professor Chakravarty, said that before Hot Seat, many students were too intimidated to participate. "'It's clear to me,' he added, 'that absent this kind of social media interaction, there are things students think about that normally they'd never say'" (Gabriel). This also further proves that just because a student is not vocally participating does not mean they are not mentally present in a discussion. As introvert Courtney Casale explains, "It can be extremely difficult [for introverts] to express their thoughts through spoken word" (Casale). Technology gives introverts the opportunity to participate in a way that makes them feel comfortable – in writing. Online discussions eliminate the introvert's fear of having to voice an opinion in front of a group, and this lowering of inhibition allows all students to feel freer to say what they really think and feel. English teacher, Nicholas Provenzano, who teaches in a high school outside of Detroit, says that normally only twelve kids would participate out of thirty, but with the addition of technology, another eight might join the conversation (Gabriel). The impact of eight additional voices to the conversation can be enormous. Having technology in the classroom improves the quality of a conversation, and allows the introverts to finally feel comfortable and able to contribute effectively to a discussion.

These and other minor changes can be made to include introverts, and these alterations in the classroom should begin in Kindergarten and elementary school. Since children are surrounded by television telling them otherwise, school must teach kids that wanting alone time is perfectly normal, and that it is okay not to always desire to be surrounded by people. Children must learn the importance of working alone in addition to working together, so that they can develop a comfort with both, and so they can decide which method works best for them. Neil Fleming, a teacher in New Zealand,



invented a model to aid teachers in helping the greatest number of students possible. He called his model VARK – standing for visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinesthetic. These four learning styles are designed to reach a variety of students, including those who learn best through watching, speaking, doing, or writing. Fleming's goal was to help students discover the way they learn best, and give every student a chance to succeed ("Different Learning Styles in Education"). Following this model, desks should be arranged individually to allow everyone to have some time to themselves. Since they can easily be pushed together for group work, this also allows students to figure out which way they learn better, while simultaneously giving introverts time to unwind in their own space.

In middle school and high school, minor adjustments – in addition to the use of technology – can be made to everyday activities to encourage introverts. In traditional discussions, the simple addition of a teacher saying, "Take a minute, jot down some ideas, maybe bounce them off your neighbor" would add many introverts to the conversation. Because introverts think to speak, this would give them the proper thinking time, making them feel more comfortable orally participating. A teacher could also give the class a set of ideas and questions to think about for the following day. With the addition of "thinking" time, introverts could overcome fear and panic, and contribute meaningfully to discussions.

Changes in how participation is measured would also give the introverts a fair shot at a good grade while improving classroom discussion. The participation grade could be based on whether a student was prepared, taking notes, and attentive in class, in addition to his or her vocal contribution. Further, grades should not be based on how often a student speaks, but on the quality of what is said. Teachers could also have students write a short paragraph at the end of a class explaining what they took from class that day in order to prove to teachers that students who are not vocally contributing may still very well be participating. Additionally, making the conversation feel casual could also result in more participants. If the teacher sat down, for example, and asked the students to respond to each other rather than just the teacher, students would more likely participate. Savickas notes that, "Some teachers approach extroverted activities such as participation in a way that makes me feel relaxed and able to speak up. [My teacher] always made it seem like a casual conversation, and I was very much at home when talking in her class" (Savickas). Finally, an essential part of encouraging participants is simple encouragement. If a student gets a wrong answer, reassurance is a must, so as not to intimidate and scare away the quieter students. Making these small adjustments in the way classrooms are run would not only make introverts feel more comfortable, but also deepen discussions and improve the overall classroom experience for all students.

The American schools system's attempt to create extroverted children has left introverts out of the conversation for too long. If schools took the time to work with and encourage introversion instead of attempting to train it out of students, the collective voice of the next generation would be amplified. There are so many unheard voices like little Kyle's in the United States. It is about time America listened.

## Works Consulted and Cited

- Bushak, Lecia. "The Brain of an Introvert Compared to That of an Extrovert: Are They Really Different?" *medicaldaily.com*. Web. 8 Jan. 2015. <<http://www.medicaldaily.com>>. Cain,
- Susan. *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. New York: Random, 2012. Print. P/S
- Casale, Courtney. Personal interview. January 28, 2015.
- Deis, Robert. "'The Business of America Is Business.'" *Thisdayinquotes.com*. 17 Jan. 2014. Web. 4 Apr. 2015. <<http://thisdayinquotes.com>>.
- Delvis, Denise, ed. "Introverts, Extroverts, and the Workplace." *The Advisor*. Web. 4 Apr. 2015. <<http://csuchico.edu>>.
- "Different Learning Styles in Education." *education.com*. 28 Oct. 2013. Web. 4 Apr. 2015. <<http://education.com>>.
- DIRECTV. Painfully Awkward Rob Lowe DIRECTV Commercial. *Youtube.com*. Web. 4 Apr. 2015. <<http://youtube.com>>.
- Ghezzi, Patii. "Kindergarten Social Changes: What to Expect." *schoolfamily.com*. Web. 10 Jan. 2015. <<http://schoolfamily.com>>.
- Hawking, Stephen. "Stephen Hawking." *whoisstephenhawking.com*. Web. 4 Apr. 2015. <<http://whoisstephenhawking.com>>.
- Helgoe, Laurie. *Why Your Inner Life Is Your Hidden Strength*. Laurie Helgoe, 2008. Print. P/S
- Laney, Marti Olsen. *The Introvert Advantage*. Marti Olsen Laney, 2002. Print. P/S
- Nickelodeon. *Spongebob Squarepants Good Neighbors & Skill Crane*. *Nick.com*. Web. 4 Apr. 2015. <<http://nick.com>>.
- "Participation Grades Unfairly Reward Extroverts." *Knighterrant*. Web. 10 Jan. 2015. <<http://bsmknighterrant.org>>.
- Personal visit. McKinley Elementary School. January 22, 2015.
- Rauch, Jonathan. "Caring for Your Introvert." *The Atlantic*. 1 Mar. 2003. Web. 10 Jan. 2015. <<http://theatlantic.com>>.
- Rumi. "Rumi > Quotes > Quotable Quote." *goodreads.com*. Web. 4

Apr. 2015. <<http://goodreads.com>>.

Savickas, Claudia. Personal interview. January 28, 2015.

"Top 10 Qualities of a Great Business Person." Internationalbusinessdegrees.org. Web. 4 Apr. 2015. <<http://internationalbusinessdegrees.org>>.

White, Percival. "The Almighty Minute." The Twenties in Contemporary Commentary. Web. 4 Apr. 2015. <<http://americainclass.org>>.