Are introvert children overlooked in school?

The “quiet schools network” in the US wants to change the classroom environment

by Caroline Smrstik Gentner
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Anyone who has been in a school classroom lately – or can remember back to his or her own school days – knows that when the teacher asks a question, there is always a knot of kids whose hands shoot up immediately. There will be a handful who think about it and raise their hands hesitatingly, and there are those who hunch a little smaller in their seats and try to become invisible. And when the really extroverted kids shout out answers even before the thinkers get their hands up, it’s easy to understand why many children are ranked low in class participation evaluations.

Introverted, not shy

Susan Cain’s 2012 bestseller Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking, called the 20th century “Extrovert Ideal” into question. With her examination of classrooms and workplaces, and considering which behavior is rewarded, Cain struck a nerve.

Introverts and extroverts handle stimuli differently. While an extrovert gains energy from interacting with others, introverts need to be alone to recharge. American business culture – which spreads its fads and practices across the world – has placed a strong value on collaboration and team-bonding, and pushes the much-detested open plan office.

According to Cain, all these measures are counterproductive when it comes to fostering innovation. And when companies unconsciously single out the gregarious networkers for promotion, then the leadership potential of introverts is being overlooked.

Following their intuition, “introverts make self-negating choices reflexively,” says Susan Cain in her TED talk based on the book. Changing the business culture means going back to where the definition of success begins: at school.

Patterns are set early on

Teachers still believe the “ideal student” is an extrovert – though introverts generally get better grades, according to Cain.

The typical modern classroom has clusters of desks, with kids often facing each other and working on group projects. Children are expected to act like committee members, coming to agreement on a task. While collaboration is not bad or wrong, solitude is necessary for some people to develop their talents.
“Stop the madness for constant group work!” Cain advocates. Teach kids to work together, but teach them to work on their own too, because that’s where deep thought and creativity happen.

**Starting a revolution …**

With *Quiet* translated into 38 languages and Cain’s TED talk based on the book viewed more than 14 million times, it was time to take action. Susan Cain’s message has become the basis for the for-profit organization *Quiet Revolution LLC*.

The “Quiet Revolutionaries” have set out to change corporate thinking about leadership; and to support parents and educators in identifying and encouraging introverted children. In the competitive school atmosphere – ostensibly preparing students for a successful career – some introverted children slip so far off the grid that they are identified as learning disabled.

The ultimate goal that Susan Cain and former teacher Heidi Kasevich have set is to create a network of Quiet Schools, with an inclusive culture that recognizes every student’s potential to learn and lead. In order to get there, they plan to partner with interested schools to train “Quiet Ambassadors” as experts on introversion and extroversion. The Ambassadors will then work with their educator colleagues to create a quieter, gentler and more creative and supportive learning environment in their school.

**… in New York City**

The kick-off for the Quiet Schools Network invited 60 New York City educators to spend two days in June 2016 thinking about ways to engage the quiet souls in their classrooms. The agenda was developed by Heidi Kasevich, who now heads the Quiet Revolution education initiatives. School administrators, teachers, school psychologists and guidance counsellors discussed ideas for balancing the classroom atmosphere in order to slow down the extroverts enough to let the introverts shine.

Kasevich asked educators to think of “class participation” as classroom engagement. In many schools, this counts for a large portion of students’ grades. Showing enthusiasm and connecting doesn’t have to take place through talking. Drawing, writing or working in pairs can pull more ideas out of a student group. Another suggestion: have students walk around the room and write ideas on pieces of paper, tacking them to the walls. That way, kids can respond to each other’s ideas in their own time, as a silent dialogue.

It’s a long road from the competitive, self-promoting atmosphere found in today’s US schools to the more inclusive classroom envisioned by Cain and Kasevich. Awareness-raising has just started; as with so many school initiatives, success will depend on the will and ability of teachers and administrators to change their way of thinking.

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