

Epistemic Bubbles in Affluent Schools

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In his research, Dr. Adam Howard has discussed at length his efforts to introduce new ideas and encourage questions among his students at affluent private schools.¹ Dr. Howard has had to find innovative ways to get through to his students because these school communities may exist inside what is called an epistemic bubble. C. Thi Nguyen describes an epistemic bubble as “a social epistemic structure in which other relevant voices have been left out, perhaps accidentally.”² An epistemic bubble occurs when a social group does not circulate diversity of thought or idea, leading to one prevailing way of seeing things. Structures like these do not encourage critical thinking, which is a vital skill for students to learn, especially considering the sheer volume of information they ingest daily.

How Are They Formed?

Affluent private schools offer an ideal environment for epistemic bubbles to form. For one, it is hard to be exposed to diverse ideas and worldviews when the majority of those around you have similar backgrounds and experiences. Most students in private schooling are white.³ The typical white student in private school experiences very little

diversity; on average, their class is made up of about 4/5ths white students.⁴ Another contributing factor is the culture built around failure. In his teaching experiences, Dr. Howard found that his students were afraid to give incorrect answers because they saw it as a failure, and to fail was unacceptable.⁵ This fear of being wrong can be associated with a fear of being different—if we all agree, then no one can be on the ‘wrong’ side of a discussion. Considering this mentality, it is easy to see how any questions or differences of opinion might quickly be dismissed before they were even discussed. Dr. Howard began to understand privilege as an identity, and “as an identity, privilege is a lens through which one understands not only oneself, but also oneself in relation to others.”⁶ Most affluent private school children fall under the identity of privilege, and so it becomes a part of the group fabric, a common thread weaving these people together. It can be hard to look outside of this or challenge it because it is comfortable and so deeply ingrained in the community itself.

What Can We Do?

To combat these structures, the most important thing we can do is work to introduce new ideas.

¹ Adam Howard, *Learning Privilege: Lessons of Power and Identity in Affluent Schooling* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 2.

² C. Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers And Epistemic Bubbles,” *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 141–61, <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32>.

³ Jongyeon Ee, Gary Orfield, and Jennifer Teitell, “Private Schools in American Education: A Small Sector Still Lagging in Diversity,” UCLA Civil Rights Project, March 5, 2018, 13.

⁴ Ee, Orfield, and Teitell, 27.

⁵ Howard, *Learning Privilege*, 3.

⁶ Howard, *Learning Privilege*, 11.

Simply sharing varying perspectives on a topic encourages others to think about why they hold the opinions they do. When there are multiple avenues of thought out in the open, students must back up their perspective with evidence beyond what everyone thinks. However, this is all easier said than done. In his published works, Dr. Howard provides a few specific examples on how he expanded the thought processes of his own students.

One of the biggest ways he created change was in encouraging his students to ask questions. Dr. Howard offered up his own writings for critique by his students, and eventually asked them to critique the work of their peers. At first, students were uncomfortable questioning an established authority figure, but after some time, began to grow into the role, becoming less competitive and more open to constructive feedback.⁷ Encouraging students to not accept things at face value, even when they are presented by a figure of authority, is an important step in growing critical and independent thinkers. People are more likely to consider new ideas if they are unafraid to question the ones they already hold. Another step Dr. Howard took was creating situations in the classroom that grounded theoretical discussions in reality. His privileged students were unable to understand discussions on discrimination beyond

hypotheticals, so he staged a simple simulation in which only some students were allowed the privilege of sitting down, sparking frustration and anger in those left out.⁸ This experience gave students the ability to contextualize some of the social issues they discussed, and even prompted them to engage with these issues within their community.⁹ These students had no real understanding of what discrimination felt like because they had never had to acknowledge it before, and even this watered-down version sparked a change in their worldview.

Looking Forward

Epistemic social structures leave prevailing viewpoints unchallenged. This does not mean that every idea within these structures is inherently bad — the harm comes from the lack of exposure. Epistemic bubbles prevent those inside them, especially youths, from developing the skills necessary to thoughtfully analyze contrasting opinions and engage with issues outside of their immediate community. Encouraging students to think critically about their lives in relation to the rest of the world and to consider how they fit into the bigger picture forces them outside of that bubble and into the real world where they can begin to participate in a diverse and global community.

⁷ Howard, *Learning Privilege*, 3.

⁸ Howard, *Learning Privilege*, 7.

⁹ Howard, *Learning Privilege*, 7.

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