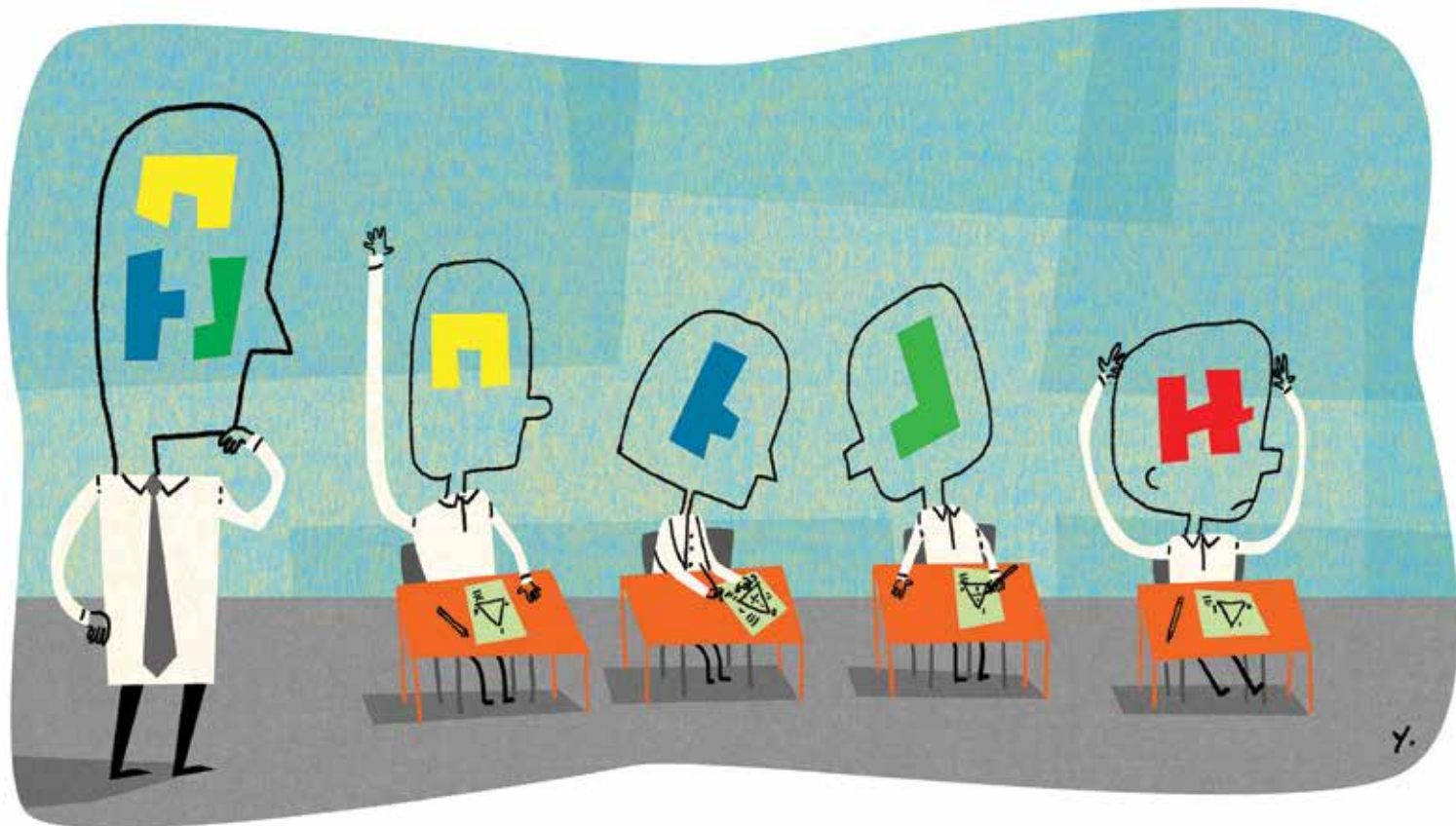


Help-Seekers and Silent Strugglers

Student Problem-Solving in Elementary Classrooms



BY JESSICA CALARCO

One February morning, the students in Ms. Dunham's fifth-grade class were taking a math test. Jesse, a student from a suburban working-class family, was bent over his desk, tapping his pencil, a deep frown on his face. Ms. Dunham weaved her way around the room, glancing over students' shoulders as they worked. Sensing Jesse's frustration, she paused next to his desk. Leaning down, she whispered: "You OK?" Jesse looked up sheepishly. Pointing at question 5, he hesitated and admitted quietly: "I don't get this one." Ms. Dunham nodded and gave Jesse a quick explanation.

After Ms. Dunham finished explaining, Jesse continued to frown, but she did not notice. As soon as Ms. Dunham finished answering Jesse's question, Ellen, a student from a middle-class family, thrust her hand high in the air and whispered loudly: "Ms. Dunham!"

Jessica Calarco is an assistant professor of sociology at Indiana University and a former intern with the AFT's educational issues department. Her research focuses on social inequalities with respect to children, culture, education, and families. This article is based on research published in the American Sociological Review (2011 and 2014) and in Social Psychology Quarterly (2014).

Ms. Dunham immediately turned toward Ellen. Ellen let her shoulders fall in a dramatic slump. "What does number 5 mean?" Ms. Dunham gave Ellen the same brief answer she gave Jesse, but Ellen was not satisfied; she immediately followed up with another question: "Wait, but does that mean we're supposed to multiply?"

Ms. Dunham went over to Ellen and squatted beside her, talking her through the problem with a longer, more detailed explanation. From across the room, Jesse watched Ms. Dunham for a moment and then sighed softly, sinking lower in his chair and continuing to frown at his test.

When I talked to Jesse about this incident later, he explained with frustration that although Ms. Dunham tried to help him, he "didn't even understand what she said," and he blamed himself for not understanding: "Ellen is smart, and when Ms. Dunham finished with me, she went over there, and Ellen got the question right."

As Jesse and Ellen illustrate, students' experiences and outcomes—even in the same classroom—often diverge along socioeconomic lines.* As I will explain, students from different backgrounds tend to manage problems in contrasting ways. Those

*I determined students' class backgrounds using data from parent surveys. Teachers generally had only a vague sense of students' family circumstances, including knowing which students received free lunches.

differences, in turn, have real consequences in the classroom. They show the pervasive and often nonmonetary ways that social class matters in our schools.

Social Class Differences in Learning and Parenting

In attempting to explain the role of social class in the classroom, scholars typically point to schools and families. Teachers want the best for their students, but they also face real challenges in their efforts to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to succeed. We know, for example, that students from working-class families often attend schools with limited resources.¹ Even in the same schools, children from middle-class families tend to be assigned to higher academic tracks or ability groups.² There is also some evidence that teachers, whether they realize it or not, may hold less-privileged students to different standards than their middle-class peers.³

We also know that families from different social classes are not equally equipped to support their children's learning, and that those differences generate advantages for students from middle-class families and disadvantages for students from working-class families at school. In her book *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, Annette Lareau shows that while middle-class and working-class parents both

and activities that research shows are conducive to learning.⁶ Compared with their peers from working-class families, children from middle-class families have better access to educational resources,⁷ participate in more extracurricular and enrichment activities,⁸ and are encouraged to express themselves more frequently and fully at home.⁹ As a result, they tend to start school ahead of their peers from working-class families,¹⁰ and they also maintain those academic advantages over time.¹¹

Through my research, I have found that these existing explanations for class-based inequalities in children's outcomes are important but limited. Specifically, they are limited by their lack of attention to the children themselves and how teachers respond to them. As my classroom observations show, children are not simply the passive recipients of advantages (or disadvantages) provided to them by their parents and their schools. Rather, the class-based behaviors that children bring with them to the classroom play a powerful role in generating educational inequalities.

As I will show, these unequal outcomes were particularly apparent with respect to children's efforts to manage challenges they encountered in the classroom. In such situations, children used different problem-solving strategies, depending on their families' socioeconomic level. More specifically, children from middle-class families tended to actively seek help from their teachers, while children from working-class families generally



Students' experiences and outcomes—even in the same classroom—often diverge along socioeconomic lines.

care deeply about their children's academic success, middle-class parents are more familiar with school expectations and are more comfortable intervening at school on their children's behalf.⁴ This kind of parental involvement in schooling has positive effects on children's learning and achievement, and thus contributes to inequalities in children's outcomes.^{5†}

In Lareau's book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, she further shows that middle-class parents are better able to provide their children with the kinds of home environments

tried to manage problems on their own. I found that they did so because of contrasting lessons they learned at home, with parents coaching them to adopt class-based understandings of the "appropriate" way to problem solve. These different approaches, however, did not automatically generate inequalities. Rather, inequalities resulted because teachers—through no fault of their own—tended to respond to children's class-based problem-solving strategies in different ways.

A Fly on the Wall at Maplewood Elementary

Before reviewing these findings in detail and discussing their implications, let me first set the stage. I base my conclusions on more than three years of observations and interviews with students, teachers, and parents in one suburban, public elementary

[†]Maplewood has very few students who live below the poverty line. Thus, I focused primarily on the differences between students from working-class and middle-class families. If the study had included more students from poor families, I suspect that the social class differences I observed in students' problem-solving would have been similar or even more pronounced.

school. That school—which I call Maplewood—is located outside a large city on the East Coast. It enrolls approximately 500 students in grades K through 5, with four classrooms (and four teachers) in each grade. (The names of all students and teachers have been changed to protect their anonymity.) The low brick building is nestled in a quiet residential neighborhood, surrounded by trees and playing fields. The wide hallways constantly bustle with activity and are adorned with inspirational posters and colorful displays of student work.

Maplewood serves students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds but is also relatively homogeneous with respect to race and ethnicity. The majority of the students (80 percent) are white; the rest are mostly Latino or Asian American, with only a handful of African American students. In my research, I focused on the white students, as they included students from both middle-class (70 percent) and working-class (30 percent) fami-

who were enrolled in third grade during the 2008–2009 school year. I followed that cohort of students over time, observing them in the fourth and fifth grades as well. During that time, I visited Maplewood at least twice weekly, for about three hours per visit. I divided my observation times between the four classrooms in each grade, and I observed each class during a variety of subjects and activities. In the classroom, I was primarily an observer with a notebook—sitting in empty seats or circling around as the students worked—though I sometimes helped with organizational tasks or had informal conversations with students and teachers.

In addition, I conducted formal interviews with all of the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers at Maplewood, and with a group of students and parents in the cohort. I used these interviews to learn more about teachers' goals and expectations, about individual students and their home lives, and about students' interactions with parents and peers outside of school. And I supplemented

The class-based behaviors that children bring with them to the classroom play a powerful role in generating educational inequalities.



lies. This allowed me to compare how students from different socioeconomic backgrounds—but of the same race and ethnicity—interacted in the same classrooms and with the same teachers and peers.

I use very specific definitions of social class, which may differ in some ways from other common conceptions of class in American society. As I define them, the “middle-class” families at Maplewood were those in which at least one parent had both a four-year college degree and a professional or white-collar job (e.g., teacher, lawyer, engineer, office manager). While some of these families had experienced divorce or financial problems (e.g., a parent lost a job), they all led relatively comfortable lives. The “working-class” families, on the other hand, were less privileged overall. Parents in working-class families, per my definition, had lower levels of education and less occupational prestige: most had a high school diploma and worked in blue-collar or service jobs (e.g., food service worker, transportation worker, daycare provider, sales clerk). These working-class families, however, also differed from families living in poverty in that they typically had steady jobs, modest incomes, and stable relationships, with divorce rates similar to those of middle-class families.

At Maplewood, I focused on one cohort of students—those

this interview data with information from parent surveys, which included questions about students' family backgrounds, friendships, and activities, and students' academic records.

Qualitative studies like mine cannot say whether patterns observed in one school can also be observed in others. But that is not their goal. Instead, the goal is to understand the social processes and interactions that produce those patterns. In this study, for example, I show how differences in the support-seeking strategies of students from different social class backgrounds contributed to inequalities at school.

Contrasting Lessons about Problem Solving

During my time with students, parents, and teachers, I found that children from middle-class families and those from working-class families came to school equipped with different beliefs about and different strategies for managing problems at school. These contrasting approaches to problem solving reflected the class-based lessons children learned from their parents at home. In other words, the children were often doing what their parents told them to do. When teaching their children how to manage challenges at school, middle-class parents encouraged a “by-any-means” approach to problem solving that involved negotiating

with teachers for assistance and accommodations. In contrast, working-class parents stressed a “no-excuses” approach to problem solving that involved respecting teachers’ authority by not seeking assistance.

These contrasting messages were apparent in the lessons that both middle-class and working-class parents described teaching their children at home. In interviews, for example, I asked parents what they thought their children should do if they were confused or struggling at school. Without hesitation, one middle-class mother said:

I always tell them they should go up to the teacher and ask. Whether it’s [to] raise their hand or quietly walk up to the teacher and ask. But they should ask. They should get clarification, as opposed to making a bad decision or getting it wrong. No matter what the question is, as long as they ask respectfully. I think you should always be able to ask questions in any life situation. So I always tell my kids: “The answer’s always no until you ask. So you gotta ask. If they say no, then you haven’t lost anything. But that doesn’t usually happen. Usually they help you—you find out something. Even if it’s not much more, you’re better off for having asked.”

Like this mother, middle-class parents taught their children to feel entitled to assistance and to recognize that asking was always better than “making a bad decision or getting it wrong.”

Working-class parents, on the other hand, worried that teachers might perceive requests for help or clarification as disrespectful. As a result, they offered their children very different lessons about managing problems at school. In interviews, I asked working-class parents the same questions about what they thought their children should do if they were confused or struggling. After thinking about this question for a moment, Mr. Graham, a working-class father, carefully explained:

My kids know that you just do your best and try. I just want my kids to be respectful, responsible. I try to be on the proactive, teaching them about being responsible and just getting it done. I tell ’em to just get it done and not complain. I always tell ’em: “Look, if you’ve gotta give somebody a hard time, give it to me. Don’t give it to your teachers.” And I’ve never had a teacher complain. My kids are good for the teachers.

Mr. Graham went on to recall that when his high-achieving daughter, Amelia, was in third grade, she came home from school confused about a comment on her report card, telling her father that the comment “didn’t seem to make sense.” Recalling his response, Mr. Graham explained: “I told her not to ask about it, cuz the teacher probably wouldn’t be too happy.” Like other working-class parents, Mr. Graham seemed to equate questions with complaints or excuses. He wanted to protect his children from reprimand, and thus taught them that teachers would be upset by requests for clarification. In light of these beliefs, working-class parents encouraged their children to work hard and to manage problems on their own.

Contrasting Problem-Solving Strategies

Parents’ lessons prompted students from middle-class and working-class families to view classroom challenges in contrasting ways. Students from middle-class families felt entitled to assis-

tance from teachers and were very comfortable making requests. In interviews, for example, they often said things like: “It was easy to talk to the teacher if I had questions,” or “I don’t want to guess and risk getting it wrong, because then I won’t get as high a grade as I should have gotten. So it’s better to go up and ask the teacher.” While shy and high-achieving children from middle-class families were sometimes nervous about speaking up or being perceived as “stupid,” their parents’ persistent coaching helped to reassure these children that teachers would welcome their requests and that the benefits would outweigh the risks.

Students from working-class families, on the other hand, held a very different view. Like their parents, they worried that teachers would perceive requests for assistance as a sign of laziness or disrespect. In interviews, for example, students from working-class families would often say things like: “You need to work hard and learn things. Like, teachers give you work to learn things. And if you get help, you’re not learning,” or “Teachers want you to be able to

Children from middle-class families and those from working-class families came to school with different beliefs about and strategies for managing problems at school.

figure it out for yourself, because you’re not always gonna be able to ask,” or “If you have a question, like about homework, you should just skip it. You don’t wanna go up and bug the teacher.”

While students from middle-class families felt entitled to assistance and focused on the possible benefits of help-seeking, students from working-class families were deeply concerned about the potential drawbacks associated with such requests. As a result, they typically tried to deal with problems on their own rather than reaching out to their teachers.

An example from Ms. Nelson’s fourth-grade math class makes these contrasting patterns apparent. At the beginning of each math period, Ms. Nelson asks her students to find their randomly assigned “math buddies” and pick a spot in the room to work. She then has each pair work together to complete a worksheet reinforcing the concepts from the previous day’s lessons.

One morning, during a unit on multiplication, Ms. Nelson handed out a worksheet that instructed students to “fill in the blanks” in various sets of multiplication facts (e.g., __, 22, __, 44, __, __, 77) and then “find the patterns” for each row. While the first task was relatively straightforward, many of the pairs found themselves confused by the second half of the directions. Brian and Kelly, both students from middle-class families, completed the facts

Studying the Ways Students Get Help with Classwork

BY SARAH D. SPARKS

If you need help, raise your hand.

It's one of the first lessons of school, but as students learn in an increasing variety of settings—in and out of classrooms, in person and online—educators and researchers are starting to take another look at how students learn to ask for help.

In a typical classroom, there are those students who raise their hands constantly and others who try to overhear the teacher's response to other students' questions without ever asking their own. And in online classes, some students hit the "help" button over and over to get straight to the answer, while others seek advice on problem-solving strategies. These behaviors can tell educators and researchers a lot about what a student thinks about learning,

Kiefer, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of South Florida. While it's difficult to nail down what "perseverance" looks like in a classroom, she says studying help-seeking can provide not only clear measures of students' mindsets but also an opening to strengthen students' learning skills.

"It's something that's very visible in the classroom, which makes it great for teachers," Kiefer says.

To get help successfully, a student has to understand that he or she has a problem, decide whether and whom to ask for help, do so clearly, and process the help that's given, says Stuart A. Karabenick, a research professor studying help behaviors at the University of Michigan School of Education. Some students ask for help before they even start thinking about a problem, while others

from elementary to middle and high school, the costs of looking foolish in front of their teacher and classmates start to weigh heavily in their decisions about how and when to get help.¹

In one 2012 study, educational psychologist Allison M. Ryan of the University of Michigan found that as children got older, they became less likely to ask classmates for help in understanding concepts, but far more likely to get "expedient" help—like copying homework.²

Similarly, in a forthcoming study of sixth-grade girls, Kiefer and her colleagues found that students were often reluctant to ask for help from others who were more popular than they were or who were perceived to be at the top of the class in that subject. It was just "too risky" socially.

Expedient help "is not cheating exactly," Kiefer says, "but [students] are like, 'I just want to get the homework done.' It's less threatening to their self-efficacy and self-worth" than to admit they don't understand the lesson.

Differences in help-seeking can exacerbate achievement gaps between students. Kiefer's research has found that students from low-income and working-class families are often taught that they should not "bother" the teacher by asking for help, while middle-class students are often taught to be "squeaky wheels" and ask for help aggressively.³ While teachers often appreciated the working-class students' politeness and patience, they were also more likely to overlook them in favor of giving help to the more assertive students from better-off backgrounds.

Ryan and Kiefer have been exploring how teachers can use peer study groups and tutoring to boost students' confidence in asking peers for help. "We have to figure out what are students really striving for in the classroom, not just academically but also socially?" Kiefer says. "If you can take away the mindset that 'I don't want to look like a loser,' and promote a growth mindset, that's huge."

When Helping Hurts

If students who actively ask for help get more support in the long term, does that mean students will learn more if they all become squeaky wheels? Not necessarily: too much help can hurt as much as too little. "Too often, we don't give students the opportunity to make sense by themselves," says Ido Roll, a researcher on students' help-seeking behavior and the



his or her engagement in the subject, and the student's confidence in the support of teachers and peers.

That makes help-seeking behaviors uniquely useful as educators and policy-makers look for ways to improve not just students' test scores but the deeper "academic mindsets" that form a foundation for student learning—among them, perseverance, intellectual curiosity, and a "growth mindset," the belief that ability and knowledge in a particular subject is gained through experience rather than being innate.

"Help-seeking is actually part of the process of self-regulation," says Sarah M.

Sarah D. Sparks is a contributing writer for Education Week. This article first appeared in the August 19, 2014, issue of Education Week. Reprinted with permission from Editorial Projects in Education.

avoid seeking help even after struggling fruitlessly on their own.

Whether a student is managing academic help appropriately can depend on the subject, the classroom context, and the student's personality. "The term 'help-seeking' suggests a deficit, but we need students to think of this as managing resources to solve a problem," Karabenick says. "You are always in the process of learning, and therefore you never know as much as you should. One has to learn the skills to acquire the knowledge you need."

Afraid to Ask

That doesn't mean students—or even many teachers—are comfortable asking for help.

"Help-seeking is both academic and social in nature, and adolescents are looking at their classroom as an academic and social minefield," Kiefer says. As students move

senior manager for research and evaluation at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology at the University of British Columbia. “We do know that students kind of like to ask for too much help; over and over again [in online systems], students will ask ... for all the help they can.”

While online courses can make it easier for more-reserved students to ask for help, Roll says they increase the risk that students will focus on expedient help rather than help that improves learning, such as problem-solving strategies. It’s easier to simply ask for “the answer” online than in a live class discussion, he says.

In one study published this fall in the *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, Roll and his colleagues tracked when high school students with high and low math skills asked for help on a computer-based geometry tutoring program.⁴ As might be expected, the students who overused the

would benefit more from either a longer, straighter path to the restaurant or the opportunity to stroll around and explore a restaurant district.

“Too often, we are adding cognitive load when we give help,” Roll says, because the information provided by a teacher or computer program often still requires a basic level of understanding of the subject, which a student may not have.

“I’m all for giving help, but giving help is not telling you what to do,” Roll says. “It’s giving resources to help you make sense of it yourself.”

Setting the Tone

That can be challenging, even for experienced teachers. “Teachers may not know why students don’t ask for help,” Karabenick says. “It may be that ‘I don’t know what I don’t know,’ ‘I don’t know how to ask,’ ‘I’m afraid to ask,’ or ‘I just don’t need help.’” “One of the major skills a teacher

frustrated students lean forward but remain upright in their body posture.⁵

The researchers are hoping to make it easier for software programs and teachers alike to recognize subtle differences in students’ postures that might signal when they need help but are uncomfortable asking for it.

From the first day of school, teachers can set the tone in their classrooms to improve help-seeking. For example, Karabenick found that in classes where teachers give short answers to complex questions, students become less likely to ask for help over time.

Teachers in lower grades typically start the year showing students the etiquette for asking questions—building on that old sequence of raising your hand, waiting to be called on, and so on. Karabenick advises also talking with students about when and whom they can ask for help, and letting them role-play different scenarios.

From the first day of school, teachers can set the tone in their classrooms to improve help-seeking.



help feature of the program—who simply clicked through to the answer, for example—learned less in the end, and students who asked for help primarily on the most challenging questions learned more in general. Interestingly, students with little prior knowledge of a particular question learned more when they avoided help and instead tried and failed repeatedly.

Roll and his colleagues also suggest that low-skilled students may not have enough prior knowledge to understand high-level help. Think of giving dining suggestions to two people—a native of your city and a visitor. The native resident, like the student with high math skills in the study, understands the layout and traffic of the city enough to benefit from somewhat convoluted, backroads directions to the hot new hole in the wall. The visitor, like the low-skill student, might be more confused by your insider knowledge and

needs,” he says, “is to be able to distinguish among these, ... but teachers by and large are not given any training in help-seeking, and they may not be comfortable asking for help themselves.”

Sidney D’Mello, an assistant professor of computer science and psychology at the University of Notre Dame, is using facial-tracking cameras and seat sensors to analyze the differences in facial and body posture associated with different emotions of learners in the classroom.

For example, students who are intensely engaged in their work and who likely do not need help—those said to be “in the flow”—lean forward in their seats and look intent, in a way that can seem similar to the posture of a student who is confused and frustrated. But D’Mello and his colleagues found that students actually in the flow lean forward more steeply, leaving the backs of their chairs a bit, while

“Make it explicit, let them practice it. ... It can be very, very effective to make it transparent that this is a normal part of learning,” he says. □

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quickly, but then began to debate what it meant to “find the patterns.” Almost immediately, Brian suggested: “Let’s ask Ms. Nelson.” Kelly nodded and they both jumped up from their seats.

Stopping in front of Ms. Nelson, Brian thrust out the worksheet and declared breathlessly: “We got all the facts, but we don’t know what kinds of patterns we’re supposed to find.”

As Ms. Nelson was answering this question, a number of other students from middle-class families also got up to ask for help with the directions. One of these students, Danny, was working

teachers often assumed, as Ms. Nelson did, that they were off task, and thus reprimanded them for not being more focused. Ironically, however, students from working-class families tended to avoid seeking help out of a desire to avoid frustrating the teachers with their requests. As Sadie explained in an interview, “If you have a question, like about homework, you should just skip it. You don’t wanna go up and bug the teacher.”

While the teachers at Maplewood were generally very willing to answer questions (and I never saw a teacher reprimand a stu-

Students from working-class families worried that teachers would perceive requests for assistance as a sign of laziness or disrespect.



with Tory, a student from a working-class family. While Tory waited at her seat, Danny got up to ask for help. Ms. Nelson answered the students’ questions patiently, reminding them of the activity the day before.*

Meanwhile, two students from working-class families, Sadie and Carter, were also struggling with the worksheet but did not ask for help. Sitting nearby, I could hear them whispering as they bent over their worksheets, frowning. Rather than complete all of the facts and then look for patterns, Sadie and Carter had filled in only the first row and were arguing in hushed voices about what kinds of patterns they were supposed to find.

Although Ms. Nelson was circling the room, Sadie and Carter never asked for help. Fifteen minutes after the start of the math period, they were the only students still working. After glancing at the clock, Ms. Nelson turned to them and said: “You guys! Time’s up. You were the only group that didn’t finish. You guys need to work better together.” Sadie and Carter looked down at the floor, squirming nervously, but said nothing. In that moment, they could have explained to Ms. Nelson that they were struggling to understand the directions for the worksheet, but they did not.

This reluctance to seek help was typical among students from working-class families, and it had real consequences. Like Sadie and Carter, students from working-class families often took longer to finish their assignments or completed them incorrectly. Furthermore, because these students did not acknowledge their struggles,

students from working-class families worried that teachers might respond negatively if they asked for help at the wrong time or in the wrong way. This put teachers in a bind. It was hard for them to help students if they didn’t know they were having trouble.

That said, and as we saw with Jesse, the student I mentioned earlier, children from working-class families did sometimes acknowledge their struggles. In these instances, however, they tended to be less assertive than their middle-class peers. Like Ellen, students from middle-class families would often call out to or approach the teacher directly, even interrupting to ask questions. Furthermore, if teachers tried to defer answering such questions, or if they offered only minimal information, students from middle-class families tended to continue asking for more complete or more immediate assistance.

Students from working-class families, like Jesse, on the other hand, would generally wait for teachers to approach them and offer assistance. Furthermore, when these students did try to seek help, they tended to raise their hands rather than call out to teachers or approach them with questions. As Sadie explained in her interview, “If the teacher says, ‘Did anybody have any problems with the homework?’ then you can raise your hand.” Also, like Jesse, these students rarely asked follow-up questions, even when they were still confused.

How Teachers Can Help

By adopting a more assertive approach to help-seeking, children from middle-class families tended to receive more attention and assistance from teachers and, as a result, tended to complete their

*When students from middle-class and working-class families worked together, students from middle-class families would often take the lead in asking teachers for help.

work more quickly and more accurately than did their peers from working-class families. Thus, class differences in children's problem-solving strategies often resulted in unequal educational outcomes.

A key question, then, is why? While some might assume that middle-class approaches to problem solving were inherently better, I found that it was not the children's strategies themselves that led to these unequal outcomes but rather the *teachers' responses* to those strategies. I don't at all mean to imply that teachers at Maplewood were overtly biased against children from working-class families. In many ways, it was clear they cared deeply about all their students and worried about those who, as one teacher noted, were not getting enough "support at home." But despite their good intentions, the structure of the school day and the pressures they faced made it hard for teachers to provide equal support to all their students.

The teachers at Maplewood often felt overwhelmed by accountability mandates, mountains of paperwork, large class sizes, curriculum changes, and constant meeting requests. As one teacher explained, "It's not that we don't care. It's just that we've got our heads down trying to get things done." Faced with numerous demands on their time and attention, teachers often found it hard to assess and respond to each student's individual needs. There simply was not enough time in the day to repeatedly check on each student and provide him or her with personalized support and assistance.

My classroom observations suggest that teachers can inadvertently contribute to classroom inequalities, at least in part, by misreading the thinking behind students' problem-solving strategies. That said, this is not the fault of teachers. As one Maplewood teacher pointed out to his students, "I can't read minds. You have to let me know [if you are struggling]." Still, if educators are aware of their students' class-based patterns and possible misperceptions, they may be better equipped to help all their students succeed.

To avoid having social class unduly influence students' problem-solving strategies, teachers can set clear expectations for when and how students should seek help. In some situations, the teachers at Maplewood explicitly encouraged their students to ask for help and actively demonstrated their willingness to answer questions. They did this both through their words (e.g., "Let me know if you have any questions," and "Come and see me up here if you need help") and through their actions (e.g., circling the room, checking students' progress, and watching for signs of struggle). In these instances, students from middle-class families readily sought assistance, and students from working-class families were more willing to do so.

During a fifth-grade art class, for example, the students worked on collages while the teacher, Ms. Cantore, circled the room. Meanwhile, Haley, a student from a working-class family, was struggling to find her collage, digging frantically through the project bin at the back of the room. She did not initially call out or ask for help, but as Ms. Cantore circled past, she noticed the worried frown on Haley's face and asked gently: "You OK?" Keeping her eyes down, Haley said quietly: "I can't find my collage. It's not here."

Ms. Cantore gave Haley a reassuring smile and explained: "I put the ones without names on the table up front. Lindsay [a student from a middle-class family] just found hers up there. Let's see if we

can find yours, too." Haley nodded gratefully and followed Ms. Cantore to the front table, where they searched together through the collages without names and eventually located Haley's in the stack. As Ms. Cantore illustrates in this example, when teachers' willingness to assist was more explicit, students from working-class families were more comfortable seeking help, as they could rest assured they would not be reprimanded for their requests.

Certainly, the teachers I observed did not mean to confuse or frustrate students. Rather, ambiguities in teachers' expectations resulted, in large part, from the dynamic and interactive nature of today's elementary school classrooms. Teachers used their professional judgment to adjust their standards around help-seeking,



doing so for different activities (e.g., tests versus in-class projects), for the time constraints they were facing (e.g., "We have to move on or we won't have time to finish"), and even in response to the appropriateness of particular requests (e.g., "We'll talk about that later"). And yet, when teachers did not make expectations around seeking help extremely explicit, students were left to determine whether and how to make requests. Such decisions, in turn, tended to exacerbate social class differences in student help-seeking.

By no means do teachers intend to respond to students in different ways. Such actions are more often than not inadvertent and unintentional. Outside pressures like testing and paperwork, for example, take teachers' time and attention away from their students. These factors are often outside of the control of teachers.

Yet, they can still take steps to control how they respond to students' requests for help. Teachers can be cognizant of the need to make clear their expectations for fielding questions in the classroom. They can take time—when possible—to check on students as they work and offer assistance to those who appear to be struggling. They can also reassure their students that questions will not result in reprimand, that directions cannot cover all situations, and that confusion is normal. Even beyond these concrete steps, simply being aware of the differences that students bring with them to school can help level the playing field. It is important that teachers realize the power they have to prevent students' social class backgrounds from determining who receives support in managing challenges at school. □

(Endnotes on page 44)

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Help-Seekers

(Continued from page 31)

Endnotes

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8. Tiffani Chin and Meredith Phillips, "Social Reproduction and Child-Rearing Practices: Social Class, Children's Agency, and the Summer Activity Gap," *Sociology of Education* 77 (2004): 185–210.
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11. Doris R. Entwisle, Karl L. Alexander, and Linda Steffel Olson, *Children, Schools, and Inequality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).