

## **Want Students to Ask for Help? Talk to Parents.**

By Sarah D. Sparks on September 2, 2014

Parents are less likely to encourage their child to reach out for help in class if their own school experiences were frustrating, according to a forthcoming article in the October American Sociological Review.

More educators and researchers are becoming interested in how and why students ask for help as a window on their broader academic mindsets. A new report by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Jessica McCrory Calarco suggests students' behavior may reflect not just their own academic approach, but how connected their family is to school, too.

In prior research, Calarco found that children of working-class parents were more reluctant to ask for help than classmates of professional-class parents; teachers thought the more-assertive students sometimes asked for too much help, but in the end these "squeaky wheels" got more help and completed assignments faster than more reticent peers.

In the current study, Calarco observed and interviewed students and parents from working-class and middle-class families and their teachers from 3rd through 5th grades, finding that students' behavior in the classroom was often the result of parents' direct instructions at home:

"Working-class parents stressed 'no excuses' problem-solving, encouraging children to respect teachers' authority by not seeking help. Middle-class parents instead taught 'by any means' problem-solving, urging children to negotiate with teachers for assistance. These ongoing and often deliberate coaching efforts equipped even reluctant children with the tools needed to activate class-based strategies on their own behalf. Such activation, in turn, prompted stratified responses from teachers and thus created unequal advantages in school."

The class differences seemed to come in part from parents' own experiences with education. There were both single- and two-parent families in both the middle- and working-class groups, but the middle-class families had at least one parent with a four-year degree and a professional job, while the working-class parents had high school diplomas at most. Middle-class parents, Calarco found, were more comfortable negotiating with teachers and viewed interventions as intended to benefit their students. By contrast, working-class parents often reported not being as involved in school and feeling that teachers knew what was appropriate for their child better than they did. Moreover, they recalled difficulty asking teachers for help during their own schooling, and, "assumed that teachers would perceive requests as disrespectful," so they taught their children to "rely on their own resources" when they ran into difficulty.

Neither parent style is perfect—teachers were more likely to help middle-class students, but more likely to praise the work ethic of working-class students. Calarco said she found middle-class parents focused on—and focusing their students on—“getting the right answer” even in homework, and being reluctant to struggle or learn from failure.

But the study does suggest that educators hoping to improve students' help-seeking behavior should bring parents into the conversation. Calarco saw that teachers actively tried to check on more-reticent students, but, “if kids were calling out, teachers felt drawn to the kids who were actively asking for help, rather than the ones who just looked like they needed help.”

She said teachers generally were not aware of how much parents were coaching students' help-seeking behavior at home, and she suggested schools could do more to bring both working- and middle-class parents into the conversation around help at school.

“I think the key is to make parents feel comfortable in engaging with them, and to let them know what school expectations are today, to make clear that help-seeking is a valued skill and critical for students to feel valued in school and to succeed academically,” Calarco said.

She is continuing to follow four classes of students—they are starting high school this year—and hopes to learn more about whether being the squeaky wheel or the head-down driver benefits students more as they move into upper grades.