Middle-class elementary school students ask for help more often than their working-class peers

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Middle-class children ask their teachers for help more often and more assertively than working-class children and, in doing so, receive more support and assistance from teachers according to a study from the University of Pennsylvania.

The findings are reported in the December issue of the American Sociological Review in a paper entitled, "'I Need Help!' Social Class and Children's Help-Seeking in Elementary School" by Jessica McCrory Calarco, a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology in Penn's School of Arts and Sciences.

The paper is based on Calarco's dissertation research, a longitudinal ethnographic study of students in one socioeconomically diverse, public elementary school.

For three years, she followed a cohort of students as they progressed from third through fifth grade, observing them regularly in school and interviewing teachers, parents, and students to show that children's social-class backgrounds shaped when and how they sought help in the classroom.

"We know that middle-class parents are better able than working-class parents to secure advantages for themselves and their children, but not when and where they learned to do so, or whether they teach their

children to do the same," Calarco said. "My research answers those questions by looking at children's role in stratification—how they try to secure their own advantages in the classroom."

Her study showed that middle-class children regularly approached teachers with questions and requests and were much more proactive and assertive in asking for help. Rather than wait for assistance, the middle-class children called out or approached teachers directly, even interrupting to make requests. Working-class children, on the other hand, rarely asked for help from teachers, doing so only as a last resort. Furthermore, when working-class children did ask for help, they tended to do so in less obvious ways (e.g., hanging back or sitting with their hand raised), meaning that they often waited longer for teachers to notice and respond.

"Teachers want kids to ask for help if they are struggling, but they rarely make those expectations explicit. That leaves kids to figure out when and how to ask for help," Calarco explained.

In another related project, Calarco found that children learn whether and how to ask for help at school, in part, through the training that they receive from their parents at home. She noted that, "unlike their working-class counterparts, middle-class parents explicitly encourage children to feel comfortable asking for help from teachers, and also deliberately coach children on the language and strategies to use in making these requests."

As a result, middle-class children came to school better equipped to secure the support that they needed to complete their assignments quickly and correctly, and also appeared more engaged in the learning process.

Calarco said that while teachers don't mean to privilege some children

over others, they tend to be more responsive to middle-class children's help-seeking styles, giving those who ask for help more attention and support in the classroom, and also seeing them as more "proactive" learners.

"What that means is that middle-class kids' help-seeking skills and strategies effectively become a form of 'cultural capital' in the classroom—by activating those resources, middle-class kids can secure their own advantages in the classroom," she explained. "It also means that children play a more active role in stratification than previous research has recognized."

The *ASR* study concludes that inequalities in education are not just the product of differences in the resources that families and schools provide for children; they also reflect differences in the resources that children can secure for themselves in the classroom.

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