



Students' Help-Seeking Strategies Offer Clues for Educators

By Sarah D. Sparks

If you need help, raise your hand. It's one of the first lessons of school, but as more students learn 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, teachers may see some students who raise their hands constantly, while others try to overhear the response to another student's question without ever asking their own. Some students online 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, 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 policymakers 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," said Sarah M. Kiefer, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of South Florida, in Tampa. While it's difficult to nail down what "perseverance" looks like in a classroom, she said studying help-seeking can provide not only clear measures of students' mindsets, but also an opening to strengthen students' learning skills. ...

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, said Stuart A. Karabenick, a research professor studying help behaviors at the University of Michigan school of education, in Ann Arbor. Some students ask for help before they even start thinking about a problem, while others 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 own personality.

"The term 'help-seeking' suggests a deficit, but we need students to think of this as managing resources to solve a problem," Mr. Karabenick said. "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," Ms. Kiefer of the University of South Florida said.

As students move from elementary to middle and high school, the costs of looking foolish in front of their teacher and classmates starts to weigh heavily in their decisions about how and when to get help. 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. ... Expedient help "is not cheating exactly, but they are like, 'I just want to get the homework done,'" Ms. Kiefer said. "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.

Ms. Kiefer's research has found 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. 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. ...

"We have to figure out, what are students really striving for in the classroom, not just academically but also socially?" Ms. Kiefer said. "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," she said.

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," said Ido Roll, a researcher on students' help-seeking behavior and the senior manager for research and evaluation in the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology in the University of British Columbia, in Canada. "We do know that students kind of like to ask for too much help; over and over again [in online systems], students will ask all the way up for all the help they can."

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

In one study published this past spring in the *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, Mr. Roll and colleagues at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City and Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University tracked when high school students with high and low math skills asked for help on a computer-based geometry-tutoring program.

As might be expected, the students who overused the 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. ... "I'm all for giving help, but giving help is not telling you what to do; it's giving resources to help you make sense of it yourself." ...

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