

**COACHED FOR THE CLASSROOM  
HOW PARENTS AND CHILDREN NEGOTIATE THE TRANSMISSION OF CLASS  
CULTURES**

Abstract

How are class cultures transmitted across generations? Through in-school observations and in-depth interviews with elementary students, parents, and teachers, I examined how children learned to problem-solve at school, and how those lessons varied across social classes. I found that cultural transmission was a more explicit, goal-oriented, and negotiated process than scholars recognize. Middle-class and working-class parents actively worked to equip children for success, but believed in different paths to success, and thus taught children different problem-solving strategies. The outcomes of parents' efforts were contingent on children's willingness to utilize learned-at-home strategies, and were mediated in part by teachers and peers.

## **COACHED FOR THE CLASSROOM HOW PARENTS AND CHILDREN NEGOTIATE THE TRANSMISSION OF CLASS CULTURES**

How is culture acquired? Research shows that class cultures help reproduce inequalities (Bourdieu 1984, 1990; Lareau 2011). While scholars operationalize this concept in different ways, I view class cultures as “tool kits” (Swidler 1986) of knowledge, skills, strategies, and beliefs that vary with social class and provide resources for social interaction. Less clear is how class cultures are transmitted across generations. Socialization is typically presented as an involuntary process in which children automatically mirror behaviors and beliefs that parents subconsciously model for them (Arnett 1995; Maccoby 1992). In keeping with such arguments, scholars show that adult-child interactions vary with social class and that children’s behaviors are class-patterned (Lareau 2011; Streib 2011). Yet, by not examining what compels to parents interact with children in different ways, they portray cultural training as an implicit, uncalculated process. Furthermore, by not showing how children actively adopt or resist adults’ instructions, these authors imply that cultural learning is seamless and automatic. Scholars of childhood critique socialization models (Elder 1974; Thorne 2003) and emphasize children’s agency (Corsaro 2005; Pugh 2009). Yet, in focusing on homogeneous peer groups, they cannot say how cross-generational interactions shape children’s acquisition and activation of class cultures.

This study examined the cultural transmission process. Cultural tools can be acquired in various settings, including schools and workplaces (Gatzambide-Fernandez 2009; Stuber 2011). I focused on families, which are likely to have early and lasting influences (Bourdieu 1990; Bronfenbrenner 1958). To understand how parents transmit class cultures to children, I conducted in-depth interviews with middle-class and working-class children, their parents, and their teachers, and in-school observations of the children during third, fourth, and fifth grade. I

found that working-class and middle-class parents both wanted their children to succeed and taught children skills and strategies for managing problems at school. They did so by modeling behaviors and giving explicit instruction. However, because these parents held different beliefs about the skills and strategies necessary for success, the content of their lessons varied. Working-class parents encouraged *independent problem-solving*—children dealing with challenges on their own or waiting for others to offer assistance—while middle-class parents promoted *supported problem solving*—children dealing with challenges by verbally seeking help. In the classroom, children often complied with parents’ instruction, but sometimes resisted.

These findings suggest that cultural transmission is not simply implicit or automatic; rather, it also involves more goal-oriented, explicit, and negotiated processes. These patterns illuminate key socialization mechanisms, but also have broader implications. First, they reaffirm the importance of values and beliefs in creating class-stratified patterns of social interaction (Bourdieu 1990; Kohn 1969). Second, they demonstrate children’s agency (Corsaro 2005; Pugh 2009) and show how such agency can be facilitated or constrained by parents, teachers, and peers. Third, they highlight the stratified consequences of children’s class cultures (Calarco 2011; Streib 2011) and the role that schools play in mediating these outcomes. Such patterns imply that inequalities arise not in single settings, but through interwoven interactions across multiple domains.

## **CULTURE AND INEQUALITIES**

Sociologists conceptualize culture in myriad ways (Wuthnow & Witten 1988). I focus on class cultures, as they show how culture and structure together produce social inequalities. Class

cultures provide “tool kits” (Swidler 1986) of resources that facilitate interactions within particular social spheres (Lareau & Weininger 2003). Because different spheres have different norms, tool kits will be more valuable in some spheres than in others (Bourdieu 1990). Middle-class tool kits, for example, are closely aligned with dominant institutional standards, and thus yield profits in schools (Lareau 2000; Stuber 2011) and in other similar settings (DiPrete & Eirich 2006; House 2002).

### *Modeling and Mirroring Culture*

Cultural acquisition processes have long intrigued sociologists. We know that parents, peers, and institutions teach children to participate in gendered (Martin 1998; Raffaelli & Ontai 2004), racial/ethnic (Demo & Hughes 1990; Stanton-Salazar 1997), and religious cultures (Myers 1996). Cultural transmission is of particular interest to scholars of class, who seek to explain why inequalities persist across generations (Breen & Jonsson 2005).

Scholars of class culture tend to adopt a traditional socialization model. In this view, parents subconsciously model behaviors, which children automatically mirror (Arnett 1995; Maccoby 1992). Research on class and language socialization, for example, describes how middle-class families expose children to more words than do working-class families, and how these differences are reflected in children’s language use (Hart & Risley 1995; Heath 2012). Similarly, research on family life shows that middle-class children mirror the entitlement their parents display in interactions with service professionals, while working-class children mirror parents’ constraint (Lareau 2011; Williams 2006). Although these studies offer compelling evidence that

class cultures are learned at home, they do not investigate the possibility of cultural transmission mechanisms other than subconscious modeling and automatic mirroring.

### *Transmission through Teaching*

Class-based cultural transmission might also involve parents' deliberate instruction and children's active acceptance or resistance. If so, then socialization processes might be more goal-oriented (rather than subconscious), more explicit (rather than implicit), and more negotiated (rather than automatic) than scholars recognize. While scholars have not examined these possibilities directly, prior studies offer tentative insights.

Studies of class and family life suggest that parents may shape children's cultural capacities through explicit instruction as well as through modeling. Lareau (2011) provides two examples of (middle-class) parents directing children on how to interact with professional authorities (see also Streib 2011). Edwards (2004:519) finds that working-class mothers instruct children to uphold "the family's reputation," and Williams (2006) finds that parents use toy store interactions to develop children's class-based tastes (see also Pugh 2009). These authors, however, do not focus on parental teaching, and thus give little attention to the processes by which children acquire skills and strategies. Nor do they examine how children utilize or resist such lessons in their parents' absence. Still, these findings provide tentative evidence that parents may transmit class cultures not only by role-modeling, but also by instructing children to behave in particular ways.

Other work suggests that parents may use cultural training to help children achieve certain goals. Luster, Rhoades, and Haas (1989), for example, find that middle-class and working-class

parents have different values, and use different parenting practices to promote these values. Nelson (2010) finds that middle-class parents' anxieties about children's achievement fuel intensive school involvement. Such research does not consider how parenting impacts children's behaviors but does suggest that parents' goals for children may guide their cultural training efforts.

Finally, cultural transmission may be a negotiated process. Scholars of childhood stress that children are not simply the "passive recipients of adult training and socialization" (Thorne 1993: 5; Elder 1974). Instead, children play an active role in creatively re-interpreting adult cultures they encounter (Adler & Adler 1998; Corsaro 2005). Pugh (2009) notes that children do not always share their parents' cultural orientations. Chin and Phillips (2004) find that parents planning summer activities have to combat resistance from children who prefer "fun" activities over "beneficial" ones like reading. While these scholars do not set out to examine how parents teach culture, their findings indicate that cultural transmission may be a more negotiated and contingent process than socialization models imply.

## **RESEARCH GOALS AND METHODS**

Building on existing insights, this study examined how class cultures were transmitted across generations. As outlined in the research questions below, I focused on parents' lessons about managing problems at school.

1. How did parents teach children to problem-solve?
2. How did children respond to these lessons (utilizing or resisting what they learned)?
3. How did the nature and content of these lessons vary along social class lines?

I sought to answer these questions with data from a longitudinal, ethnographic study of middle-class and working-class, white families whose children attended the same elementary school.

### *Research Site and Sample*

Maplewood (all names are pseudonyms) is a public elementary school located near a large, Eastern city (see Figure 1). While most of Maplewood's families are middle-class, many (~30%) are working-class. This allowed me to compare how middle-class and working-class parents and children interacted with each other and with the same teachers. My connections to the community (a close relative is a Maplewood employee) helped me gain access to the site and facilitated acceptance of the project.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

At Maplewood, I chose one cohort (four classrooms) of students to follow from third to fifth grade. The minority population at Maplewood was small and stratified, including middle-class Asian Americans and working-class Latino students. Thus, to avoid conflating race and class, I focused on white students in the cohort. I also excluded students who moved away. See Table 1 for the sample characteristics and recruitment procedures. See Table 2 for descriptions of each family discussed in this analysis.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

While scholars debate conceptualizations of social class (Lareau & Conley 2010), I focused on parents' educational and occupational status (Aschaffenburg & Maas 1997; Condron 2009). Middle-class families had at least one parent with a four-year college degree and at least one parent in a professional or managerial occupation. Working-class families did not meet these criteria; parents typically had high-school diplomas, and worked in blue-collar or service jobs. These were "settled-living" families (Edwards 2004; Rubin 1976) with steady jobs, stable relationships, and neat, clean homes. There were, however, a few single-parents in both groups. While these parents sometimes felt overwhelmed with responsibilities, their efforts to teach children closely paralleled those of two-parent families from similar class backgrounds.

### *Research Methods*

The three-year study included in-school observations, in-depth interviews, parent surveys, and analyses of students' school records. Table 3 provides details. I observed the students during their third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade school years. During this time, I visited Maplewood at least twice weekly, with each observation lasting approximately three hours. I divided time equally between the four classrooms in each grade and rotated the days and times I observed each class. I kept jottings during observations and expanded them into detailed fieldnotes.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

While it would have been ideal to supplement the extensive, longitudinal school observations with home observations, it was critical to show how children shaped their own



destinies in school, where parents could not directly oversee their efforts. Still, I was able to observe parent-child interactions during school events and during interviews in family homes. These observations corroborated the numerous reports of parent-child “coaching” that I gathered from interviews with children, teachers, and parents.

I used these interviews to understand children’s home lives, school experiences, and interactions with parents, teachers, and classmates. I also asked participants to give open-ended responses to vignettes describing typical classroom challenges. I read these vignettes to participants and gave them copies to reference while responding. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Additionally, I had countless informal discussions, which I recorded in fieldnotes.

### *Data Analysis*

I conducted an ongoing process of data analysis, regularly reviewing fieldnotes and interview transcripts, writing analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995), and identifying emerging themes in the data. I used the memos to reflect on preliminary findings, highlight connections to existing research, and pose additional questions.

After creating a preliminary coding scheme from themes in the memos, I used ATLAS.ti to code sections of fieldnotes, interview transcripts, documents, and seating charts. While coding, I also developed data matrices (Miles & Huberman 1984) to clarify comparisons and identify disconfirming evidence. In one set of matrices, I coded and compared parents’ and children’s responses to interview vignettes. Below, I include the results of these comparisons and discuss them in the context of my larger ethnographic analysis of cultural transmission processes.

## **PROBLEM-SOLVING 101: PARENTS, CHILDREN, AND CULTURAL TRAINING**

The Maplewood parents I interviewed all wanted their children to succeed. As I will show, middle-class and working-class parents had different beliefs about how to achieve success. Yet, both groups took deliberate actions to equip their children with tools for meeting these goals. While the content of parents' lessons varied with social class, the transmission mechanisms were similar. Middle-class and working-class parents both offered explicit instructions about problem-solving and both modeled preferred strategies for meeting challenges. As findings from interviews and classroom observations (presented below) made clear, parents' lessons had a powerful impact on children's classroom interactions. This effect, however, was not automatic. Rather, cultural transmission was a negotiated process. The outcome of parents' lessons hinged on children's willingness to activate strategies they learned. Such willingness, in turn, was mediated by children's temperaments and by interactions with teachers and peers.

### *Parents' Goal-oriented Messages*

*Working-class parents' messages and children's responses.* Working-class parents wanted their children to succeed, and generally had clear beliefs about the tools necessary for success. Sadie Webb's mother wanted her children to thrive.

I don't expect my kids to be president. You've gotta be realistic. Would I love for them to be president? Yes! But we just want them to do better than we did. If they can go a mile farther than we did, great!

Ms. Webb also felt that dependence and disrespect would undermine these goals. Ms. Webb made this clear while I was interviewing her in the kitchen of the Webb's small mobile home.

Sadie entered the room to ask (politely) for the powdered iced tea mix:

Ms. Webb gives Sadie a skeptical look and laughs, "Get it yourself! What're you asking me for?" Sadie nods and pulls a chair out from the kitchen table, using it to climb up and retrieve the can of iced tea mix from the cabinet over the refrigerator. As Sadie does this, Ms. Webb, turning to me, says playfully, "She's a spoiled brat. Not gonna make it in the real world."

As a group, working-class parents seemed to believe that children could achieve success by being deferent to but not dependent on authorities.

These beliefs prompted working-class parents to teach their children *independent problem-solving*. This strategy involved children dealing with problems on their own or, sometimes, waiting for others to offer support. Ms. Webb, for example, actively discouraged "bratty" behavior. Similarly, when Sadie asked for help with homework, her mother usually told her to "skip it [the difficult part] and come back to it later." Explaining her strategy, Ms. Webb said:

For the most part, Sadie will come back and say she figured it out by just going on. My kids know that I will not just give them the answer. Cuz I don't think they're learning if I give 'em the answers.

Working-class parents were willing to help with homework, but like Sadie's mother, often discouraged their children from being overly dependent.

These exchanges usually led working-class children to adopt their parents' beliefs about problem-solving. Answering my question about what it takes to do well in school, Sadie said unhesitatingly,

You need to work hard and learn things. Like, teachers give you homework to learn things. And then if you get help from your mom and dad, you're not learning that stuff. And if you get it from a calculator, you still don't learn it.

Like her mother, Sadie saw help-seeking as both detrimental to success and disrespectful to authorities:

If you have a question about homework, you should just skip it. You don't wanna go up and bug the teacher. And then, if she [the teacher] says: "Did anybody have any problems with the homework?" Then you can raise your hand.

Working-class families recognized that assistance was sometimes necessary, but they felt that waiting for others to offer support was more respectful than proactively making requests.

These parallel beliefs also emerged in parents' and children's responses to common classroom challenges. Table 4 includes only families discussed in this article, and provides their detailed responses to Vignette 1. Tables 5, 6, and 7 summarize parents' and children's responses to Vignettes 1-3. In Vignette 1, fifth-grader "Jason" grapples with a question on a science test. When asked what Jason should do, none of the working-class parents suggested that he should go directly to the teacher. Instead, they often said Jason should just "try his best," stressing that it is important for students to learn to "work hard" and to avoid "bothering the teacher." A few parents recognized that "Jason" might need help, but explained that he should signal his struggles only non-verbally and wait for the teacher to offer assistance. Working-class students gave similar but not identical answers. Two, for example, felt that "Jason" should seek help. Responses to the other vignettes produced similar patterns; working-class parents and children both typically suggested that children should use independent problem-solving to resolve issues like forgotten homework assignments (Vignette-2, Table-6) and being "bored" in math

(Vignette-3, Table-7). Like their parents, working-class students seemed to believe that such strategies would pave a path to success.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE]

*Middle-class parents' messages and children's responses.* Middle-class parents cared deeply about children's success, but had different beliefs about how to achieve those goals. Ms. Dobrin summed up her expectations for her son Ethan:

He needs to keep getting good grades, and he needs to complete college. Nobody gets anywhere these days without a college degree.

Ms. Dobrin also felt that support from others would help Ethan to achieve these goals. With a worried frown, Ms. Dobrin described how she and her husband regularly remind Ethan of the importance of help-seeking:

Ethan's teacher evaluations always said, "He's a joy. He's bright. He's making great grades, but he needs to ask for help sometimes." Now, I don't think asking for help is comfortable for Ethan, but what we try to impress on him is, "Think about how *important* it is that you get that information. If you *need* that information to do the job correctly, then you *need* to ask the teacher."

Unlike their working-class counterparts, middle-class parents at Maplewood did not equate help-seeking with dependence or disrespect. Rather, they seemed to see question-asking as both expected and essential for success in a competitive world.

In light of those beliefs, middle-class parents taught their children *supported problem-solving*. This involved children seeking help in confronting challenges. Ethan's parents, for example, regularly coached him to "flag a teacher down, or get up and go talk to the teacher during a test." They stressed to Ethan both the importance of help-seeking and the strategies to use in making requests.

These lessons helped shape middle-class children's attitudes toward problem-solving. From grades three to five, I watched Ethan become increasingly confident in seeking help. In the spring of fifth grade, Ethan and the other students in Mr. Fischer's class were taking a math test. Mr. Fischer circled, glancing at students' work and answering questions about the test.

Ethan taps his pencil eraser lightly against his cheek, frowning. As Mr. Fischer circles past, Ethan calls out quietly but hopefully, "Mr. Fischer?" Mr. Fischer immediately stops and turns toward Ethan, asking with genuine concern, "You okay?" Ethan shrugs and admits that he is not sure if he is interpreting a question correctly. Squatting down, Mr. Fischer does not give Ethan the answer, but helps him recognize his mistake. Ethan nods, quickly finishing the problem correctly.

Like his parents, Ethan recognized help-seeking as a key to success. Answering my question about why he asked for help on occasions like that one, Ethan explained:

I didn't want to guess and risk getting it wrong. I don't want to get it wrong, because then I won't get as high a grade as I should have gotten. So it's just better to go up and ask the teacher. And then normally I would get it right.

Ethan also linked these beliefs to his exchanges with his parents. Ethan recalled having trouble with a research project, and remarked that even with his parents “actually doing the research for me,” questions remained unanswered:

...so they told me to ask Mr. Fischer. And so I asked [the next day, saying], “I couldn’t figure, like, I couldn’t find it on the internet. Can you help me find it?”  
And he... got me to the right website that actually showed me the right information.

Regular and emphatic coaching from parents helped bolster middle-class children’s understanding of the benefits of help-seeking and their comfort in using those strategies.

A similar pairing of parents’ and children’s beliefs could be seen in responses to the vignettes. All middle-class parents and most middle-class children responded to Vignette 1 by saying that Jason should “go to the teacher” for help (see Tables 4 and 5). Other vignettes showed similar patterns; middle-class parents and children generally saw supported problem-solving as the best approach for managing challenges like forgotten homework assignments (Vignette-2, Table-6) and being “bored” in math (Vignette-3, Table-7). Like their parents, middle-class children saw such strategies as critical for navigating a path to success.

### *Parents’ Explicit Instruction*

*Working-class parents' direct coaching and children's responses* Working-class parents often used explicit instruction to develop their children's skills for independent problem-solving. When working-class children came home complaining of problems, their parents urged them to "try their best" rather than ask for help. Ms. Compton, for example, felt that her son Jesse "can be lazy. He's very 'I can't do it. I don't know what I'm doing.'" She coaxed Jesse toward independence, explaining to me that

...he just needs a push to do it on his own. I just tell him, "You can do it. I know you can do it. I've seen you do this. I want you to try." Then he gets his confidence up and he snaps out of that low moment.

This coaching typically led working-class children to deal with problems on their own or wait for others to offer assistance. Jesse, for example, often felt frustrated with schoolwork and homework. Nevertheless, he rarely asked for help. He told me, his eyes fixed on the floor, that

Some of the stuff Ms. Dunham told me, it didn't really make sense, but I just had to say: "Okay, I'll try." Like, sometimes I feel like I can't do it, but my mom says I can't say that. And I don't wanna get in trouble.

Jesse's remark, "my mom says I can't say that," revealed the powerful impact his mother's messages had on his willingness to request support.

Jesse's reluctance to seek help was evident with homework and at school. As I learned from a conversation with Ms. Dunham, she took her fifth-graders to the school library one Monday to take out books on African American historical figures. She gave her students until Thursday to find ten facts for a biography project. Jesse was absent on Monday, so Ms. Dunham left the assignment on his desk. On Tuesday, however, he did not ask for permission to go to the library. Instead, Jesse asked his mother to take him to the public library. Ms. Compton did not have time;



she said he would “just have to get it done at school.” At school on Thursday, Jesse appeared very upset about his incomplete homework:

Jesse is slumped low in his seat, his shoulders sagging. When Ms. Dunham [who is checking students’ homework] approaches, she asks, “Do you have your facts?” Jesse shakes his head but does not look up. Sensing that something is wrong, Ms. Dunham squats down next to Jesse, asking softly, “You okay?” Jesse waits for a long moment, and then whispers, “I tried to do them, but my mom got mad, cuz I said we needed to go to the library.”

Ms. Dunham, remembering that Jesse had been absent when the class went to the library, reassured him. She promised to “give mom a call” to explain the mix-up, and she gave Jesse a library pass to get the books he needed. Jesse appeared grateful for Ms. Dunham’s assistance, responding with a tentative smile and an earnest “Thank you.” Yet, Jesse’s problems with his mother and with the assignment could have been avoided if he had felt more comfortable acknowledging to Ms. Dunham that he needed help.

Working-class parents’ instructions about independent problem-solving reflected, at least in part, their concerns about respect for authority. Many working-class parents worried that teachers would perceive help-seeking as disrespectful and thus explicitly discouraged children from making requests. Teachers at Maplewood rarely yelled, and often urged children to seek help. Working-class parents, however, were generally unaware of these expectations. During an interview, Amelia Graham’s father remembered his own fifth-grade experience:

...the teacher gave us a test and *none* of us understood. We were like, “What are you talking about?” I mean, it was like she thought she explained it clear as day. And we read it, but it just didn’t *jive*.

When I asked Mr. Graham what happened next, he continued,

Well, she was upset because we asked her about it. She yelled at us, cuz she just didn't understand why we didn't get it! That was a rough little time in school. I mean, a number of us were upset about it, crying upset about it. I think I probably took the brunt of it, cuz I was the one that challenged her.

From this angry response, Mr. Graham deduced that teachers might perceive help-seeking as disrespectful. So, he instructed his own children to avoid asking questions. For instance, when Amelia was confused by a comment on her third-grade report card, Mr. Graham told her “not to ask” about it, because the teacher “probably wouldn't be too happy.”

Amelia followed her father's instructions, rarely asking for help at school. Explaining how she felt about help-seeking, Amelia spoke cautiously, but with a sense of frustration:

Sometimes it makes me nervous. Like, if you ask a question about something, the teacher might say, “You should have been listening. I just said that.” But I'm thinking in my head, “I was listening, I just didn't catch that.” But I don't say that. I just think it in my head, because I might get in trouble.

Amelia also linked her beliefs to her father's coaching. She recalled feeling reassured by her father's advice on how to behave during parent-teacher-student conferences:

Like, with conferences, I told my dad, “I'm nervous.” And he's like, “You don't have to be. Just be respectful. She'll ask questions, and you just answer her honestly.” And it actually went really well. But I'm glad my dad was with me.

Like Mr. Graham, many working-class parents taught their children that respect involved speaking only when spoken to. Although these messages were somewhat inconsistent with

teachers' expectations, they led working-class children to avoid provoking teachers with requests.

*Middle-class parents' direct coaching and children's responses.* Although the content of their lessons differed, middle-class parents also used explicit instruction to develop their children's skills for supported problem-solving. Near the end of the year, the fifth- graders invited their parents to attend an outdoor "rocket day" event marking the culmination of their study of space exploration. The students had spent class time assembling and decorating their own plastic model rockets, readying them for launch at the event. On the big day, the students, giddy with excitement, waited in four lines on the field behind the school. Teachers and parent volunteers helped them load tubes of explosives into their rockets. The children launched the models using a remote device. After watching their rockets fly about 100 yards across the playground, they retrieved them and re-joined the line to try again. As I watched, Ted Peters, a middle-class student, ran back toward the line, but then veered off, approaching his mother, who was chatting with other parents.

Ms. Peters turns, smiles broadly, and praises Ted for a "great flight." Ted, frowning, holds out his rocket and explains that the string attaching the rocket's parachute has broken. After inspecting the broken string, Ms. Peters says encouragingly, "Go ask Mr. Fischer for a new string. I'm sure he'll be able to help." Ted's grim expression brightens. He turns and dashes toward his teacher. When Mr. Fischer sees the broken string, he retrieves an extra string from a supply bin and helps Ted reattach the parachute. Ted then immediately rejoins the line to launch his rocket again.

Unlike Ted, working-class student Amelia Graham (whose father was at work) sought no help when the string on her rocket broke. Sitting down in the grass, she mended the string by carefully tying the two broken ends. Ted's mother might have encouraged Ted to see what he could do with the string on his own. Instead, she sent him to Mr. Fischer for assistance.

Middle-class parents' lessons about supported problem-solving seemed to reflect their strong desire to shield their children from failure. Ms. Peters emailed Mr. Fischer nearly every week. In a whispered hallway conversation, Mr. Fischer told me that there was a "lot of pressure" on Ted to "do well," and that Ms. Peters tended to "over-manage" Ted, limiting her son's ability to develop "independence." His frustration evident, Mr. Fischer said, "Like, Ted comes in without getting all of his stuff done, and then his mom just emails me afterwards with an excuse." Ms. Peters, however, could not manage every moment of Ted's school day, and thus urged him to reach out to others for assistance, as well. Ted followed her instructions readily. I often observed him asking for help, including in situations where teachers seemed frustrated by the frequency of his requests.

Like Ms. Peters, middle-class parents used explicit instruction as one strategy to develop children's problem-solving skills and protect them from failure. When children came home with complaints, middle-class parents often urged them to "use their resources" and reach out for help. For example, Gina Giordano struggled with ADHD; she got Bs and Cs in school. Ms. Giordano described how she taught Gina to overcome academic challenges:

We always tell her, "You go up and you talk to the teacher. You find out – you don't use your friends. You go to the teacher and find out." Like, Gina was [struggling]...and I told her, "Well, go ask your teacher what that means. That's your resource."

Ms. Giordano could have contacted the teacher for Gina. Instead, she coached Gina to seek support herself.

Gina was aware of these efforts and recognized that they increased her comfort in asking for help. She described a related coaching incident in our interview:

Like, I was having trouble staying organized, and I kinda talked to my parents about it. They told me to go talk to my teacher, Ms. Hudson. ....[So] I asked her if she could help me with my organization and stuff, [and] ... she just brought me to the back of the class and showed me a few things.

I regularly observed Gina enacting these strategies at school. During a fifth-grade math class, Gina was working with her (middle-class) partner Beth. Following instructions, Gina and Beth found a recipe (for six servings), and using what they had learned about multiplying fractions, tried to determine how much of each ingredient they would need to feed 25, 80, and 100 people. These complex calculations soon had the girls arguing in hushed voices. Frustrated, they sought out Ms. Dunham.

As they approach, Gina calls out loudly, “Ms. Dunham!” Ms. Dunham turns, and Gina begins to explain. “We don’t really get how to do this. We don’t know what we need to multiply by to get to twenty-five servings.” Ms. Dunham walks them through the process of multiplying the amount of each ingredient by  $\frac{25}{6}$ , and then reducing each fraction to its simplest form.

Gina could have continued working, or even asked a nearby peer for help. Instead, she went straight to the teacher. In doing so, Gina drew on the skills for supported problem-solving that she learned from her parents’ instruction at home.

## *Parents' Modeled Behaviors*

*Working-class parents' modeled behaviors and children's responses.* Parents' modeled actions were also influential in cultural transmission. Jeremy Trumble's mother, for example, shaped her son's problem-solving efforts in both direct and subtle ways. Describing the lessons she teaches her children about "respect" and "responsibility," Ms. Trumble commented that Jeremy, like "Kelly" in Vignette 3, sometimes "will forget stuff."

And I'll say, "You have to tell your teacher that you forgot it, and stay in for recess and get it done then." And that's what he ends up doing. Because I tell him, "There's nothing I can do. You forgot your homework. I don't know what it was."

Ms. Trumble could have urged Jeremy to call a friend, or even email the teacher. Instead, she instructed him to take responsibility for actions. These lessons were very explicit. Yet, like other working-class parents, Ms. Trumble also taught problem-solving indirectly. When Jeremy exhibited signs of learning difficulties as a young child, Ms. Trumble worried, but she did not intervene:

I thought maybe there was something wrong, but I didn't wanna say anything. I think the teachers are pretty good. If there's any kind of problem, I think they'd jump on it right then and there to help. Like they figured out that Jeremy had some speech problems and they got him into speech therapy. And his teacher was helping him after school and stuff like that.

Even when their children were struggling, working-class parents "didn't wanna say anything." Instead, they usually waited for teachers to offer assistance and, in doing so, demonstrated independent problem-solving.

When managing problems at school, working-class students seemed to draw on their parents' messages and their modeled behaviors. Jeremy, for example, accepted his mother's lessons about responsibility. In fifth grade, the day his book report was due, Jeremy arrived without it.

Slumping into his seat between Riley and Alan (both middle-class students), Jeremy laments, "I finally finished my book report last night, and then I left it at home..." Riley, head cocked, looks at Jeremy. She asks, puzzled, "Can't your mom bring it for you?" Jeremy drops his chin down and shakes his head. "She has to work, so if I forget things, she says it's my responsibility." Riley blinks, bewildered. Later, when Ms. Dunham checks his homework, Jeremy apologizes and admits that he does not have his project. Ms. Dunham says disappointedly: "You'll have to stay in for recess."

Jeremy followed his mother's instructions, accepting his punishment without complaint. He also tended to adopt her style of waiting for unsolicited assistance. One afternoon, Ms. Russo read two chapters aloud from the novel *Frindle*. She then instructed her fourth-graders to use their copies of the book to find evidence that "Nick" (a character) either was or was not a "troublemaker." As the students worked, Zara, Maureen, and Cole, all middle-class students, raised their hands. Ms. Russo circled around, answering their questions.

Meanwhile, Jeremy looks perplexed. He is chewing on the end of his pencil. He glares down at his book, frowning. When Ms. Russo announces three minutes left to work, Jeremy glances anxiously at the clock. He has not written anything. A few moments later, Ms. Russo circles past Jeremy and notices his blank paper. Pausing, she asks, "You okay?" Jeremy shrugs. Without looking up, he explains

quietly, “I wanna say that he’s not a troublemaker, but I don’t know if this counts as evidence.” Ms. Russo nods and squats down beside Jeremy. He talks through his example and she shows him which quote to write as evidence.

Although other students asked for help, Jeremy seemed reluctant to do so. Instead, like his mother, he waited for his teacher to notice his difficulties and offer assistance.

Working-class parents also modeled independent problem-solving through their responses to children’s requests for help at home. With homework, for example, working-class parents often had difficulty providing assistance. When I talked to Zach Campitello, he admitted, with a timid shrug, “Homework is really frustrating. Cuz it’s hard, and I’m pretty much wiped out at the end of the school day.” Ms. Campitello wanted to help Zach, but struggled to do so. Close to tears, she recalled: “It was really, really hard. It got to the point, honestly, where I just gave up.”

Despite these challenges, however, Ms. Campitello did not contact the teachers or encourage Zach to seek assistance at school. As a result, Zach often failed to complete his homework. Teachers interpreted this as an indication of uninvolved parenting. In the teachers’ lounge, Mr. Fischer described Zach to me as a student who “needs someone constantly monitoring him and watching him and helping him” while he is doing his homework. Mr. Fischer recalled phoning Ms. Campitello and urging her to be more involved with Zach’s homework, but he noted that this “didn’t seem to change anything.”

Ms. Campitello’s reluctance to acknowledge her struggles seemed to shape how Zach managed similar challenges at school. Earlier that same day, Mr. Fischer had circled the room, checking homework. He stopped at Zach’s desk.

Mr. Fischer sees that Zach’s packet is not complete. He asks Zach to follow him to the back of the room. Sitting nearby, I can hear the exasperation in Mr.



Fischer's voice, though he speaks softly. Mr. Fischer asks beseechingly, "Why don't you have your homework? What were you doing all night?" Zach shrugs and looks down at the floor. Sighing disappointedly, Mr. Fischer says Zach will have to miss recess.

Zach could have admitted that he was struggling with his homework and asked for help. Instead, like his mother, he said nothing. He simply dealt with the problem on his own.

*Middle-class parents' modeled coaching and children's responses.* As in working-class families, middle-class parents' modeled actions also seemed to influence their children's problem-solving. These parents wanted their children to seek help on their own behalf. If, however, they felt their children's best interests were in jeopardy, they often intervened. Middle-class parents reported talking openly with their children and even consulted them about these efforts. As one parent recalled, "I wanted to write a note to Ms. Phillips [about a bullying incident], but I had to convince Mandy to let me." These interventions complemented parents' verbal messages about supported problem-solving. When Aidan Bell was younger, his mother often intervened at school on his behalf. She sent the following email to Aidan's third-grade teacher when he accidentally left his homework at school:

Dear Paula,

Aidan forgot his homework folder yesterday. As a result, he was not able to do his homework last night. I will have him complete it this evening. I apologize for the inconvenience. Last night I had him read and do math problems from a workbook to replace homework time. Again, sorry he won't be prepared today.

Susan

Over time, Ms. Bell increasingly encouraged Aidan to handle such requests on his own. In fourth grade, when he was having trouble with writing, she urged him to seek help. She recalled telling Aidan at the time, “Why don’t you go and ask Ms. Nelson for help. Just say, ‘I don’t understand this.’”

Together, these actions and messages seemed to shape Aidan’s own problem-solving efforts. Responding to the forgotten homework dilemma described in Vignette 3, Aidan said with certainty,

[“Kelly”] should tell the teacher that she forgot it at school, and that she would've finished it. And say that she can finish it tonight. And the teacher will just say it’s okay.

At Maplewood, students who forgot their homework were usually denied recess. It was not standard practice for teachers to “just say it’s okay.” Yet, Aidan learned from his mother’s interventions that it was advisable to seek individualized accommodations, as in this instance from fifth grade, when he forgot to write his name on a test:

Two minutes after turning in his test, Aidan realizes his mistake. He jumps up from his seat and dashes to Ms. Hudson’s desk, explaining apologetically that he “completely forgot” his name. While Ms. Hudson usually deducts points for this, she allows Aidan to find his test and write in his name without penalty.

Aidan could have simply accepted being docked points for his mistake. Instead, following the example Ms. Bell set, he successfully requested an exemption.

Middle-class parents also supported children’s independent problem-solving by demonstrating their own willingness to seek help. Like working-class parents, middle-class parents sometimes struggled to help with homework. Julie Crawford’s mother, despite being a

former teacher, felt perplexed by Julie's fourth-grade math homework. Julie made this clear as her teacher was starting a lesson:

As the students settle into their seats, Brian and Ethan (both middle-class students) call out, complaining about how "hard" the homework was. Hearing this, Ms. Phillips smiles and reassures them, "This is a two-day concept, so we'll go back over it. No stressing!" The students continue to volley complaints. Julie flings her arms out dramatically and exclaims in a pained voice, "My mom *tried* to help, but she doesn't remember!" The other students laugh, and a few nod understandingly.

In the face of continued struggles, Julie's parents encouraged her to ask her teachers for homework help. Ms. Crawford recalled a pivotal evening:

There was one time in fourth grade, I was helping her with [math], and I was like, "Oh, it's all coming back to me." And then Julie went in to school, and got everything wrong. And I said, "I'm sorry. I can't help you with math anymore. You have to go to Ms. Phillips." And Ms. Phillips was wonderful, and gave her some extra help.

Unlike Ms. Campitello, Ms. Crawford modeled a willingness to seek help in overcoming challenges.

Julie adopted a similar approach. During a fifth-grade math test, she was having trouble with a complicated word problem.

Julie gasps loudly and thrusts her hand in the air, calling out, "Mr. Potter!" Mr. Potter heads over to Julie, squatting beside her. Julie points at one of the problems, saying, "For this one, I multiplied by the tax amount. Is that right?" Mr.

Potter pauses and then asks, “If something costs a hundred dollars, and the tax is six percent, how much do you have to pay?” Julie replies confidently, “Six dollars.” Mr. Potter helps Julie work backward from that answer, as she will need to do in the test problem.

Like Aidan and Julie, middle-class students were very comfortable calling for help, even during tests. These supported problem-solving efforts, in turn, seemed to reflect the lessons they learned from their parents’ words and actions at home.

This does not mean, however, that children always followed their parents’ example. Despite internalizing parents’ messages, both working-class and middle-class children sometimes departed from their parents’ problem-solving recommendations, but they did so for different reasons.

#### *Cultural Contingencies: Children’s Agency*

*Working-class students’ resistance.* Working-class students occasionally resisted their parents’ lessons by asking for help at school. They did so, at least in part, because of alternative messages they received from teachers and middle-class peers. Teachers, for example, regularly encouraged help-seeking, reminding individuals and the class as a whole to “Let me know if you have questions,” and “Please come to me if you have problems with this.” Such messages conflicted with working-class parents’ lessons, and prompted some working-class students to question their wariness of help-seeking. For instance, while Shawn Marrone’s mother preferred an independent problem-solving approach (see Table 4), Shawn was aware of the benefits of seeking support. During our interview, he recalled,

Like, we were reading this book, and this girl [in the story], she didn't want anyone to know that she didn't get this thing that they were learning. So she didn't ask any questions, and then she ended up doing really bad. And then the teacher talked to her about it after, and the teacher told her she should ask. And then she wasn't afraid to ask questions, cuz she thought that she would rather ask questions and have everyone know that she didn't get something, than to do really bad.

Positive scenarios like this led Shawn to sometimes make proactive requests for help. More often, though, Shawn waited for teachers to offer assistance before acknowledging his struggles. Smiling, he explained, "I liked it best when Ms. Dunham would call us up or come over and ask us if we needed help." For Shawn and other working-class students, teachers' direct encouragement and unsolicited offers of assistance seemed to signal that help-seeking was appropriate and that requests would not result in reprimand.

At Maplewood, working-class students also resisted parents' lessons because of alternative messages from middle-class peers. During fifth-grade art class, the students were creating collages from magazine pictures. Amelia Graham (working-class) was working with Bella (middle-class), Aidan (middle-class), and Carlos (working-class). Their table had only two pairs of scissors in the supply bucket. Bella and Aidan were using these while Amelia and Carlos looked for pictures.

Having accumulated a small pile of torn-out pictures, Amelia quietly asks Bella, "Can I use the scissors?" Bella is busy cutting out a picture of her own. Distractedly, she replies, "I'm using them. Can you go ask if we can get some more?" Amelia gulps, nodding hesitantly.

The art teacher was working with another student. Amelia approached slowly and hung back to avoid interrupting:

After thirty seconds, Ms. Cantore notices Amelia, gives her a warm smile and asks, “What’s up?” Amelia steps forward tentatively, wringing her hands as she explains, “We don’t really have enough scissors. Could we, uh…” As Amelia trails off, Ms. Cantore nods, explaining that Amelia can find more scissors in the supply cabinet.

In this case, a middle-class classmate’s casual instruction to “go ask” prompted Amelia to set aside her father’s advice. Such peer influences could also be seen in the fact that working-class students tended to ask for help only after seeing numerous middle-class students successfully make similar requests.

Working-class parents were generally unaware of children’s resistance at school. These parents took a mostly hand-off approach to education, rarely asking children to recount daily experiences. Yet, as with Ms. Webb calling Sadie a “spoiled brat,” when working-class parents witnessed children’s resistance, they usually reinforced preferred views.

*Middle-class students’ resistance:* Middle-class students, despite recognizing the importance of help-seeking, were sometimes reluctant to seek assistance. As I will show with examples below, they resisted parents’ lessons not because of alternative messages, but because of their temperaments, or because their parents were less confident in the lessons they taught.

Temperamentally, stubbornness sometimes prevented (especially high-achieving) middle-class students from seeking help. As a fifth-grader, Joanna Walker went on a week-long family trip during the school year. While she was away, Mr. Fischer gave the class a rubric for a social

studies project that involved making “trading cards” describing important people, places, and events of the Progressive Era. When Joanna got back from her trip, she met with Mr. Fischer to discuss the project. At home, when she started working, Joanna struggled to recall the number of trading cards required. Joanna’s mother repeatedly pushed her to ask Mr. Fischer for a copy of the rubric, but Joanna refused. Ms. Walker recalled,

I kept saying, “Do you have the rubric? Ask your teacher for the rubric.” And she just kept saying, “No, no, I know what it is.” And she would not ask for it. I don’t know why—I guess her stubborn streak came out. And it turns out she misunderstood what she needed to do, and instead of doing... twelve note cards and drawings, she did twenty. It took her ages.

When I questioned Joanna about the trading card incident, she admitted with a sheepish smile, “My mom kept pushing me, but I guess I thought I knew what to do.” Ms. Walker, who blamed Joanna’s behavior on her “stubborn streak,” told me that she repeatedly reminded Joanna of this incident.

In light of such coaching, Joanna usually overcame her stubbornness. In the classroom, Joanna regularly asked her teachers for assistance. In an interview, Mr. Fischer recalled with a smile:

Like, Joanna emails me last night, asking, “I don’t have my social studies book. Is it okay to get the [definitions of the] words from a dictionary instead of from the social studies book?” And I use the term “be a problem-solver instead of an excuse-maker.” And I said, “That sounds like being a problem-solver.”

Joanna herself described help-seeking as “easy,” noting, “It was easy to talk to the teachers if I had questions.” Like Joanna, however, even students who seemed very comfortable asking questions sometimes resisted doing so.

Shyness generated more lasting resistance among middle-class students. Keri Long’s mother, for example, realized early on that Keri was reluctant to seek help from teachers. She recounted this incident:

Keri was doing well in third grade. She had straight As until this one math test [on which Keri got a C]. She came down [from studying in her room] and said, ‘I’m confused about this.’ And I said, ‘Go talk to your teacher about it! You need to tell your teacher this is what you need help with.’

Despite this encouragement, Keri did not ask for help. Ms. Long, shaking her head in exasperation, continued:

She didn’t have the power in her to do it. To say: ‘I need help.’ ... And that brought her grade down! She got a C on the test and it brought her down... Which, to me, was very upsetting, because I told her, ‘Go! Get help!’ And she just... I dunno. Keri’s very timid, very shy. I’m trying to teach her to look up and shake hands. That adults aren’t scary and that the teachers are there to help her.

It’s getting better, but it’s taken her a really long time.

Ms. Long could have contacted the teacher herself. Particularly when Keri was younger, her mother regularly intervened for her. Yet, Ms. Long also felt that Keri needed to be comfortable seeking help. She stressed the importance of these skills in her career, noting: “Like, sometimes I have to go to my boss with questions about what I’m supposed to do, and I can’t be shy.”



Middle-class parents were often perplexed by children's resistance. However, because of their staunch beliefs about supported problem-solving and their concerns about their children's well-being, they were not deterred by it. Like Ms. Walker and Ms. Long, these parents continued to work with shy and stubborn children to reinforce important messages. These efforts, in turn, often helped children to overcome their reluctance. Ms. Long's encouragement, for example, led Keri to recognize the importance of help-seeking. During our interview, I asked if she had ever been in a situation like "Jason's" in Vignette 1. Keri nodded tentatively, responding,

That happens to me sometimes [asking for help]. My mom tells me that I should do it. And so I usually go up and ask Ms. Dunham, but sometimes I just try to figure it out myself.

From third to fifth grade, I watched Keri grow more confident. One day, Ms. Dunham's fifth-graders were working on a social studies test, using their books to answer short-essay questions about the Civil War. One question asked students to identify a main event and describe its significance.

Before setting the students to work, Ms. Dunham calls out "Use your resources. But it's open book, not open neighbor!" After working for a few minutes, Keri picks up her textbook and carries it with her as she approaches Ms. Dunham's desk. Pointing at a passage in the book, she asks quietly, "Does this count as a main event?" After glancing at the book, Ms. Dunham explains, "This is a good event, but you probably want to look for something larger." Ms. Dunham then helps Keri recall some significant events they discussed in class.

With time and intensive coaching from their parents, shy middle-class students like Keri became more comfortable seeking help.

Unlike with working-class students, teacher and peer interactions tended to deter middle-class students' resistance. When middle-class and working-class students worked together on projects, middle-class students typically asked teachers for help if need-be. Keri, for example, told me that in fifth grade, she usually worked with Sadie (working class) on partner activities. Keri was still shy about seeking help, but when she and Sadie had questions or problems, it was Keri who went to Ms. Dunham. Despite Sadie's outgoing personality, as Keri put it, Sadie "really doesn't like to ask [for help]." Similarly, teachers' statements like "Let me know if you have questions" tended to reinforce middle-class parents' lessons about supported problem-solving.

Beyond temperament and peer influences, parents' certainty and persistence also influenced middle-class students' willingness to utilize lessons from home. Ben Healey's parents were upwardly mobile, and offered less definitive messages about problem-solving. Although Ben did very well in school, his teacher, Mr. Potter, felt that Ben was not sufficiently comfortable seeking support. Mr. Healey was skeptical:

Mr. Potter kept saying, "Ben needs to come to me for help." He thought that was really important for Ben, but I don't really know. Mr. Potter wanted Ben to open up: "When he needs help, come to me for help." He said that in every conference we had with him. But Ben wasn't struggling.... So I didn't quite get it.

In response to Mr. Potter's suggestions, the Healeys did encourage Ben to ask questions, but they did so "only a couple times," far less often than most middle-class parents.

In light of these less consistent messages, Ben sometimes asked for help at school, but did so less frequently and more reluctantly than other middle-class students I observed. For instance, when Mr. Potter's fifth-graders were working on book reports, they had to choose two projects

from a list of options. After finishing his first project, Ben joined the line of students waiting to talk to Mr. Potter.

Seeing Ben's carefully drawn poster, Mr. Potter offers sincere praise. Ben smiles shyly. He then tells Mr. Potter that he is "having trouble" choosing an event to use for his second project (a comic strip). Mr. Potter nods, thinks for a moment, then lists a series of events from Ben's book. He and Ben then discuss which would make the best comic strip.

Ben tended to seek support only after other students had done so. Compared to other middle-class students I observed, he seemed more apprehensive about asking teachers for help. When I asked Ben why students seek support, he answered haltingly:

Because they want to get a good grade. And I want to ask, but I think it's kind of cheap. Like, it's your work, you have to do it. Instead of having the teacher check it to see if it's wrong. And asking feels like you're having someone else do your work.

Ben's lukewarm acceptance of help-seeking seemed to reflect, at least in part, the fact that his parents—by virtue of their upward mobility—were less persistent in coaching supported problem-solving, and more skeptical of its benefits.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, all middle-class students were not as nonchalant as Ted, nor all working-class students as anxiety-ridden as Amelia, about making requests. Furthermore, regardless of class background, some students' shyness inhibited help-seeking. In general, however, parents' persistent coaching efforts eventually prompted children to problem-solve in class-patterned way.

*Mediated Messages: The Role of Teachers and Peers*

Parents' lessons clearly shaped children's problem-solving, but classroom contexts also mediated these messages. The Maplewood teachers I observed wanted to students to acknowledge their struggles, and were usually were very willing to provide support. Yet, they also recognized that some students were less comfortable than others in seeking assistance. Ms. Russo explained,

I have a couple, like Jeremy and Shawn and Sadie, who are a little reluctant to come up and say that they don't understand something. Because as soon as you stand up in the classroom or raise your hand, all eyes are on you. Everybody's looking at you. What don't you get? So, I think that inhibits them from coming and asking me questions about things that they don't really understand. Because they don't want to appear as being stupid, or not knowing.

Such insights led teachers to regularly encourage question-asking, to watch for non-verbal signals of struggle, and to offer unsolicited support. These efforts reinforced middle-class parents' messages about supported problem-solving, and (as with Shawn) sometimes helped working-class students to overcome their concerns.

Contrary to the conclusions of existing research on class bias and teacher expectations (Bowles & Gintis 2001; Rist 1970), Maplewood teachers I observed did not discriminate against working-class students. They cared deeply about all of their students. As Ms. Dunham remarked in a hallway conversation we had the day Jesse came to school without his biography project, "I really feel for Jesse, since things are so tough at home. ...Kids like Jesse, they need stability, consistency, and they don't get it at home." She and the other teachers I observed almost always

responded warmly to working-class students' requests for help. Teachers occasionally became frustrated with excessive questions, and working-class students were keenly aware of these outbursts. Teachers' frustrations, however, were almost always directed at middle-class—not working-class—students.

These patterns did not seem to vary with teachers' own backgrounds. Upwardly mobile teachers did empathize with their working-class students. Mr. Fischer, for example, was a first-generation college student. "I get it," he told me during our interview. "My family didn't have it easy growing up, and I get how hard it is on these kids." Research suggests that teachers from working-class backgrounds tend to evaluate and treat their students more equally (Alexander, Entwisle, & Thompson 1987). Yet, I saw no evidence of more privileged teachers favoring middle-class students or promoting stereotypical behaviors and aspirations. Nor did they seem less apt to notice working-class students' non-verbal signs of struggles. Rather, the teachers at Maplewood worked hard to support all students on their paths to success.

The peer context of the classroom also mediated parents' lessons. Classmates often encouraged each other to seek help. Criticisms for such behavior were rare, and usually involved working-class students playfully teasing middle-class peers. Such teasing, however, did not seem to signal cross-class animosity, as most working-class students had middle-class friends. Working-class students were sometimes jealous of their friends' iPods and vacations, but middle-class students—although aware of the idea of socioeconomic disadvantage—did not see class differences as stigmatizing (Neitzel & Chafel 2010). They did not tease working-class students for living in mobile homes, or for receiving free or reduced-price school lunches. As with Bella and Amelia, middle-class students also modeled help-seeking and encouraged their working-class classmates to do the same. Such peer support did not completely supplant

working-class parents' messages, but it did help working-class students to—temporarily and occasionally—overcome their concerns.

Overall, then, while the outcomes of children's problem-solving efforts varied with social class, these variations seemed to result not from bias but from an alignment between class cultures and classroom constraints. While teachers felt a strong responsibility to meet each child's learning needs, they rarely had time for individualized instruction (using instead teacher-centered and small-group activities). Large class sizes (~25 students), mountains of paperwork, and strong accountability pressures left teachers overwhelmed (Hallett 2010). Mr. Potter, for example, assigned his fifth-graders three tests during one week (more than the norm). When a middle-class student called this "unfair," Mr. Potter apologized, explaining to his class: "It's not that we [teachers] don't care. It's just that we've got our heads down trying to get things done." Multiple demands on teachers' time kept their "heads down" and made it easy to miss working-class students' non-verbal signs of struggle. In such contexts, it was not surprising to find squeaky wheels getting the grease.

## **DISCUSSION**

While we know that children behave in class-patterned ways (Calarco 2011; Lareau 2011; Streib 2011), existing research offers little evidence of how class cultures pass between generations. Childhood scholars (Corsaro 2005; Thorne 1993) critique traditional socialization models (Arnett 1995; Kohn 1969) as deterministic. However, it remains unclear how children acquire the class-based tools they use. Agency arguments draw attention to children's resistance

(Chin & Phillips 2004; Pugh 2009) but say little about how parents combat such resistance or how children respond to these efforts.

This study helps resolve these lingering issues. Middle-class and working-class parents wanted their children to succeed. To support children's success both groups of parents engaged in explicit, goal-oriented efforts to teach problem-solving strategies. Yet, the content of parents' instruction differed by class. Working-class parents felt that children needed to be independent problem-solvers, while middle-class parents believed that children needed ample support to succeed and thus taught their youngsters to deal with problems by seeking help. Despite their different emphases, parents conveyed these messages in similar ways, using both explicit instruction and more subtle modeling to shape children's behaviors and orientations.

Children generally adopted their parents' beliefs about and approaches to problem-solving. Nevertheless, cultural transmission was a negotiated process. The success of parents' efforts depended both on the intensity of their coaching and on children's willingness to use what they learned. Shyness, stubbornness, and mixed messages sometimes made children reluctant to use learned problem-solving skills. Children's resistance, however, did not deter parents. They (and especially middle-class parents) increased their training efforts rather than conceding their goals.

One of this study's strengths is that it traced class cultures from their origins in the home to their consequences at school. The depth of data needed to capture such processes—years of observations coupled with lengthy interviews triangulating key patterns—necessarily involved tradeoffs (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). It would have been ideal, for example, to have a more racially diverse sample. At Maplewood, however, there were few African American students, and the other minority groups (Asian American and Latino) were divided along social class lines. Thus, with reluctance, I focused only on whites. Given these limitations, I can only speculate

about cultural transmission processes in minority families. Scholars show, for example, that class-based parenting patterns often persist across racial and ethnic lines (Lareau 2011), but that there are also important cultural differences between African American and white parents from similar class backgrounds (Diamond 1999). Thus, more research is needed to understand how cultural transmission operates in other settings.

### *Implications and Considerations*

Despite its limitations, this study does have important implications. First, it suggests that cultural transmission is a more goal-oriented and explicit process than scholars recognize. In recent years, scholars have often been reluctant to view values as a central component of class cultures. I found, however, that value-driven goals and beliefs played an important role in driving class-stratified action (Bourdieu 1990; Kohn 1969). There were meaningful social class differences in parents' beliefs about the tools children needed to succeed. These beliefs, in turn, prompted parents to engage in deliberate, calculated efforts—not just subconscious modeling—to both develop children's problem-solving skills and increase their awareness of the value of those skills.

While this study could not directly pinpoint the origins of these class differences, it seems likely that parents' educational and employment experiences shaped their beliefs about the tools needed for success (Kohn 1969; Wright & Wright 1976). Some readers might see supported problem-solving as contradictory to a middle-class emphasis on self-direction (Kohn 1969). These two orientations are not necessarily incompatible, however. Weininger and Lareau (2009) found that middle-class parents encouraged self-direction even while micro-managing children's



activities. Similarly, the middle-class parents at Maplewood seemed to view help-seeking and self-direction as compatible for two reasons. First, middle-class parents were primarily concerned with ensuring children's success in an increasingly competitive environment (Nelson 2010), and felt that encouraging children to seek help on their own would promote more self-direction than simply intervening on their behalf. Second, these parents saw help-seeking as a critical strategy for success in self-directed occupations, often recalling incidents in which help-seeking benefitted them in their own careers.

Less clear is how employment affected the working-class parents' efforts. Since the 1960s, service-sector employment has increased substantially among working-class workers (Zweig 2012; see also Williams 2006). At Maplewood, working-class fathers often had traditional blue-collar jobs (e.g., transportation, construction), while mothers had service jobs. Despite this split, working-class families continued to discourage dependence and stress deference to authority (see also Edwards 2004; Lareau 2011). Three possible explanations emerge. First, education may matter more than occupation in shaping parenting practices. Second, if class cultures do stem from work experiences, these patterns might reflect the fact that service sector jobs continue to offer working-class workers few opportunities for autonomy and self-direction (Leidner 1993). Third, they might also mean that class cultures are sticky and hard to change. Upwardly mobile families, for example, struggled to choose between parenting strategies they had experienced and those promoted by their peers (see also Reay 1998). While this study cannot directly assess these different possibilities, future research should consider how particular employment and educational experiences shape the lessons parents teach children at home.

My findings do suggest, however, that cultural transmission is a negotiated process rather than an automatic one. Children's cultural learning happened gradually, and many middle-class

children became comfortable seeking help only after years of diligent coaching. Children also controlled the outcomes of parents' lessons, determining when and how to activate skills they had learned. Thus, the transmission of cultural skills was contingent on the active participation of parents and children. These contingencies are important for two reasons. First, they clarify both the importance of agency and its constraints in social interaction. While parents could push back, children actively shaped their own experiences (Corsaro 2005; Pugh 2009). Yet, children's agency was also limited—mediated, in part, by parental messages and teacher responses. Second, these contingencies may also explain high levels of parental anxiety among competition-minded middle-class parents (Nelson 2010). Seeing children's outcomes as the result of "concerted cultivation" (Lareau 2011), these parents might have been troubled by the uncertainties inherent in a contingent cultural transmission process. Working-class parents, who saw children's development in terms of "natural growth," might have been less concerned with children's moments of resistance.

By examining the origins of children's pushback, this study also suggests that cultural transmission is a mediated process. Working-class children's resistance to parental messages, for example, often resulted from alternative socialization messages. These findings highlight the importance of studying the multiple contexts of and influences on children's development (Bronfenbrenner 1958). Furthermore, because social class differences in children's classroom behaviors are closely linked to inequalities (Calarco 2011; Streib 2011), these findings also imply that scholars need to give more attention to the ways in which stratification processes play out simultaneously across multiple domains, including families, schools, and peer groups.

Such inequalities, however, were neither inherent in children's problem-solving strategies nor the result of overt discrimination at school. Supported and independent problem-solving had

different consequences mainly because teachers responded to them in different ways (see also Nelson & Schutz 2007; Streib 2011). Yet, teachers' responses were not the result of bias, as scholars like Rist (1970) might predict. Rather, accountability pressures (Hallett 2010) and large class sizes (Blatchford, Bassett and Brown 2011) made it difficult for teachers to recognize and respond to children's individual needs.<sup>2</sup>

Despite middle-class parents' endorsement, however, supported problem-solving also carried risks. Maplewood teachers sometimes became frustrated with "excessive" requests and were concerned that a lack of independent problem-solving skills might hinder students in high school and beyond. Relatedly, research on college students shows independent studying as the most effective form of learning (Arum & Roksa 2011) and links "helicopter" parenting to student depression (LeMoyne & Buchanan 2011). Certainly, colleges (Lane, Wehby & Cooley 2006) and white-collar employers (Eisner 2010) expect high levels of independence. However, used strategically, help-seeking might be advantageous in highly autonomous settings. In college, students who ask faculty for support might avoid bureaucratic pitfalls and appear more engaged. In the workplace, help-seeking could reduce mistakes among loosely supervised individuals—or lead to more timely fixes. In a more supervised environment, on the other hand, supervisors might chastise struggling workers, making independent problem-solving an attractive alternative. These possibilities point to the need for a deeper understanding of how parents' lessons about problem-solving play out for students over time.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the process of cultural transmission, focusing on the class cultures that children acquired from their parents at home. Families were not the only source of socialization. The lessons children learned at home were often mediated by messages from teachers (Bowles & Gintis 2002; Gatzambide-Fernandez 2009) and peers (Carbonaro 1998; Kreager & Haynie 2011). Nevertheless, this study confirms that children's earliest lessons have an important and lasting impact (Stuber 2011). Furthermore, an exploration of home-based lessons points to the conclusion that in any setting, cultural transmission is likely to be goal-oriented, explicit, and contingent on children's willingness to make use of what they learn.

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<sup>1</sup> While upwardly mobile parents can adopt the parenting strategies of more-privileged parents (Attewell & Lavin 2007; Roksa & Potter 2011), they often struggle to do so (Reay 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Such findings might also help to explain why reducing class sizes improves achievement (Shin & Raudenbush 2009)

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