

“I Need Help!”

Social Class and Children’s Help-Seeking in Elementary School

Abstract

Sociologists have analyzed how schools and families influence children’s learning opportunities, but have not adequately considered the role of children in this process. Through a longitudinal, ethnographic study of middle-class and working-class, white students in one socioeconomically diverse, suburban, public elementary school, I examined social class differences in how children influenced their own learning opportunities. I found that children activated their cultural capital in choosing when and how to seek help in the classroom, and that doing so yielded different interactional profits. Compared to their working-class peers, middle-class children asked for more help from teachers, and did so using different skills and strategies. Rather than wait for assistance, they called out or approached teachers directly, even interrupting to make requests. In doing so, middle-class children received more help from teachers, spent less time waiting, and were better able to complete assignments. I conclude that by activating their cultural capital in the classroom, children created their own advantages, and thus actively contributed to inequalities in the classroom.

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Social Class and Children’s Help-Seeking in Elementary School

It is well documented that social class has an important impact on students’ learning and achievement (Jencks & Tach 2006; Sirin 2005). However, while researchers have examined how parents and schools create these inequalities (see Mehan 1992 for a review), they have largely ignored children’s contributions to this process. Even when scholars have considered children’s role in social stratification, they have focused either on (older) students’ aspirations (MacLeod 1995; Willis 1981), or on the differential treatment afforded students by schools (Rist 1970), and thus have not explored whether children’s class backgrounds provide them with different interactional resources for shaping their own classroom opportunities. Finally, while some theoretical and empirical research has looked at class differences in *children’s* behaviors and orientations (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2003; Nelson & Schutz 2007), these studies neglect to consider the profits that children derive from activating their cultural capital in school settings. This study reveals that stratification results from not only the learning opportunities that parents and schools provide to children, but also those that children secure for themselves in the classroom (i.e., by requesting assistance, clarification, or information from teachers).

Research indicates that teachers expect students to seek help when they need it (Patrick et al. 2001), and that doing so bolsters students’ learning and achievement (Ryan, Hicks & Midgley 1997; Gall 1985; Newman 2000).¹ Using data from a longitudinal, ethnographic study of middle-class² and working-class, white students who attend the same suburban, elementary school, I discuss how, compared to their working-class peers, middle-class students made more and more diverse requests for help from teachers, and also approached these interactions more proactively and assertively. In doing so, middle-class children not only received more help from teachers, but also received it more quickly.

These findings are significant in that they suggest that social class differences in children's opportunities for learning do not simply reflect differences in what schools provide to children, or what parents secure on their children's behalf. Rather, children actively create their own advantages in the classroom. They do so by activating the cultural capital—"micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation" (Lareau & Weininger 2003: 569)—that they bring to the classroom. Because schools privilege middle-class styles and strategies over those of the working class (Bourdieu 1973, 1984; Lareau 2000, 2003), middle-class children's activation of cultural capital yields meaningful micro-interactional profits in the classroom, allowing them to secure additional advantages and opportunities for learning.

The Stratification of Opportunities and Children's Role in this Process

Sociologists generally agree that families' social positions have a substantial impact on children's life chances (Duncan et al. 1998; Sirin 2005; McLeod & Shanahan 1994; Kalmijn 1994). Most also agree that these inequalities arise from cultural differences between social classes in society, suggesting that individuals from different class backgrounds acquire, usually in early life, different "tool kits" (Swidler 1986) of micro-interactional resources—knowledge, skills, and strategies—for securing advantages in institutional settings. In this view, middle-class individuals have more opportunities not because their cultural styles and strategies are *better*, but because of their close alignment with institutional standards (Bourdieu 1973, 1984; Lareau 2000, 2003).

Despite general agreement on the nature of inequality, sociologists offer competing views on the processes by which class impacts children's outcomes. Some have looked at schools, arguing that these institutions sort students by social class—whether through segregation or

tracking/ability-grouping—and then offer them different learning environments and cultural training (Anyon 2007; Apple 1979; Bowles & Gintis 2001; Gamoran 1992; Hedges & Rowley 1994; Oakes 2005; Rist 1970; Rumberger & Palardy 2008). Others instead focus on families, arguing that parents socialize children differently (Bronfenbrenner 1958; Kohn 1959, 1963; Bernstein 1971; Lareau 2003; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn 2002) and provide them with different resources and opportunities for learning (Teachman 1987; Duncan et al. 1998; Lareau 2000; Buchmann & DiPrete 2006; Nelson 2010).

Implicit in both models is the assumption that *children* will be socialized (at school or at home) to develop class-based cultural capital, and will use these resources to reproduce their parents' class status. These assumptions are problematic, however, in that prior studies have not demonstrated whether children activate the cultural capital they acquire and what profits they derive from doing so. Existing research is flawed, then, in that it positions children merely as passive recipients of advantages that others create for them, and does not consider the possibility that children might also be active cultural agents who can influence their own learning opportunities. Furthermore, while the growing body of research on childhood emphasizes children's agency (Corsaro 2005; Adler & Adler 1994; Thorne 1994), it does not explore how children's social class backgrounds provide them with different resources for securing their own opportunities.

While Lareau (2003) does highlight class parallels in parents' and children's interactions with institutions—the sense of “entitlement” or “constraint” that they display in exchanges with professionals like doctors and coaches—she says little about children's agency in these interactions or the profits they gain from them. She also cannot determine whether class differences in children's behavior persist away from parents' watchful gaze or in one crucial

setting—the classroom. Even when Lareau (2000, 2003) does observe in schools, she does not investigate how children activate cultural capital in this setting or what advantages this generates. Thus, while we know that social class shapes *parents'* interactions with schools (Baker & Stevenson 1986; Brantlinger 2003, Domina 2005; Lareau 2000, 2003; Lareau & Horvat 1999; Useem 1992; Nelson 2010), it is unclear whether children can also activate their own cultural resources to shape their learning opportunities; and, if they can, *how* they do so.

Nelson and Schutz (2007) examine class differences in children's classroom behavior, but do not link these variations to differences in children's cultural resources or discuss the profits that children derive from them. For example, they find that, compared to children in working-class preschools, those in middle-class preschools have more interactions with teachers and make more requests from them, particularly for attention. They attribute this variation to differences in teaching styles across the two schools. It is unclear, however, whether these variations would also emerge in settings where middle-class and working-class children are subject to the same expectations.³ By comparing middle-class children in middle-class schools to working-class children in working-class schools, studies like theirs cannot fully consider whether class differences in children's behavior result from differences in expectations that schools hold for students, or differences in the cultural resources that children bring with them to school.

Even if children do activate different cultural capital in the same school settings, we know relatively little about how teachers respond to these differences. Rist (1970) does assess teachers' reactions to class differences in children's appearances and behaviors, finding that teachers judge students on these attributes and then provide them with different opportunities for learning. Rist's study, however, is not only dated, but also very partial in that it does not develop its analysis of children's interactions or the opportunities that children try to secure for themselves.

Mehan (1992) criticizes scholars like Rist and Bowles and Gintis (2001) for taking an overly structural and deterministic view of educational inequalities and for neglecting to consider how social interaction contributes to stratification. He also critiques Bourdieu (1973, 1984) for failing to illuminate *how* schools privilege the cultural capital of the dominant class, and for treating social actors “mainly as bearers of cultural capital” (4). Mehan commends ethnographers for showing how culture “mediates” structure and agency, and suggests that “until we examine the mechanisms of cultural and social reproduction via a close interactional analysis of social practices, especially school practices, we will be left with only a highly suggestive view of the relations between social origins, schooling, and subsequent achievement” (4). While Mehan urges greater recognition of the role of human agency in creating and maintaining inequalities, he provides little discussion of class differences in children’s classroom behaviors and their consequences for learning.⁴ And yet, if children do activate cultural capital in the classroom, and if teachers “constitute” and respond to these displays in different ways, then social inequalities derive not only from the actions of parents and schools, but also from children’s own actions.

In sum, while existing research has shown that parents and schools create and maintain social and educational inequalities, scholars have not adequately considered children’s role in this process. Heeding Mehan’s call for greater ethnographic insight into the black box of schooling, this study explores children’s contribution to educational inequalities. It does so by looking at one area of children’s lives—elementary school—and by comparing the skills, styles, and strategies that middle- and working-class, white students activate in this setting.⁵ It also explores the micro-social profits that children derive from displaying particular forms of cultural capital in the classroom, examining how efficacious different behaviors are for convincing teachers to

provide children with extra opportunities for learning (e.g., additional assistance, clarification, or information).

Methods

Research Site

I selected Maplewood Elementary (all names are pseudonyms) as the research site because it serves students from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds. Maplewood is a neighborhood public school that serves approximately 500 K-5 students in a distant suburb of a large, Eastern city. While the brown brick building itself is old, Maplewood's classrooms are clean, colorful, and brightly lit; the wide hallways are adorned with inspirational posters (with messages about "respect" and "responsibility") and large displays of students' projects. The school has a vibrant community of dedicated teachers and active parents who provide many after-school and evening activities for children and their families. There are also numerous support programs for students who are struggling with academics, language barriers, behavior and social issues, and parental divorce.

While the majority of Maplewood's students are middle-class, a substantial minority are from working-class families.⁶ This allows me to compare how middle-class and working-class students respond to the same teachers, peers, settings, and activities, as well as how teachers and classmates respond to these students. Maplewood is predominantly white (82%), but also has growing populations of (primarily middle-class) Asian-American (6%) and (primarily poor or working-class) Latino (9%) students.

Research Sample

The project followed four classes (20-22 students per class) of Maplewood students from third to fifth grade. To avoid conflating race and class, I focused on the fifty-six middle-class and working-class, white students in this group who completed fifth grade at Maplewood in June 2010.⁷ This included forty-two middle-class and fourteen working-class students. I identified students' social class by their parents' educational attainment and occupational status.⁸ Middle-class children had at least one parent with a four-year college degree, and at least one parent employed in a professional or managerial occupation (excluding lower-level white-collar workers). Typical jobs included teacher, doctor/registered-nurse, lawyer, and office manager.⁹ Working-class children did not have at least one parent with a four-year college degree, or did not have at least one parent employed in a professional or managerial occupation. Typical jobs included food-service worker, store clerk, daycare provider, and transportation worker.¹⁰

The project included observations of seventeen teachers: twelve third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers, and five teachers of "enrichments" (Art, Music, Gym, Library, and Spanish). These teachers varied in their demeanors and instructional styles. Nonetheless, class-based patterns of student help-seeking were consistent across all of the classrooms and teachers that I observed.¹¹ To avoid potential bias, I did not share my results with teachers during the project.

Classroom Observations and Interviews

I collected data using participant observations, interviews, and surveys. From March 2008 through June 2010, I visited Maplewood approximately twice weekly for about three hours per visit. I divided my time equally between the four classes in each grade, and rotated the days and times that I observed each class to see students in various settings and activities. I observed

during regular (mixed-ability) classes, ability-grouped math classes, and enrichments. I also visited during lunch, recess, and other school activities (assemblies, field-days, etc.).

My role in the field was primarily one of observer. I listened and watched, sitting in empty seats or walking around the classroom, and sometimes assisting teachers with organizational tasks. I made it clear to students and teachers that I would not reprimand or “tell on” children for bad behavior unless they were threatening another student’s life, and I never had to do so. Many of the students seemed to enjoy having me around—they liked to tell me stories,¹² proudly show me their work, or even invite me to sit with them at lunch—while others would just say hello or ignore me entirely. My familiarity with the setting (a close relative is a district employee) and my status as a young, white woman (like many Maplewood teachers) facilitated access to the school and seemingly increased the comfort and trust of students, teachers, and families in interacting with me. During my observations, I kept jottings (including records of the duration of interactions—e.g., how long students sat with their hands raised), which I expanded into detailed field notes upon completing each session.

Throughout the project, I conducted audio-recorded in-depth interviews with the twelve third, fourth, and fifth-grade teachers, asking about teaching styles and expectations for students, and about students’ home lives, academic strengths/weaknesses, and progress over time.¹³ I also had countless informal discussions with teachers, using them to clarify my observations and obtain information about specific students. In September 2008, to gather information about children’s family backgrounds, I sent surveys to all study families.¹⁴ In June 2010, I collected data from students’ school records (grades, standardized test scores, and teacher evaluations).

I analyzed my observational and interview data in two ways. With ATLAS.ti software, I tagged, coded, and linked sections of field notes, interview transcripts, documents, and diagrams

(e.g., seating charts). This allowed me to identify and trace common themes in the data, and assess how themes occurred and related to one another. I also carefully read and re-read field notes, memos, and interview transcripts, identifying patterns and developing data matrices (Miles & Huberman 1994) to look for disconfirming evidence.

Systematic Count Data

Having completed two years of observations at Maplewood, and documented ample evidence of class differences in children's help-seeking behaviors, I sought in 2010 to assess the frequency with which these interactions occurred. I began by defining specific types of help-seeking requests that had emerged from the data: requests for assistance, clarification, information, and checking of work (See Table 1). My goal was to count and compare middle-class and working-class students' requests across classrooms and activities. Thus, in addition to my regular observations, I chose sixteen observational periods during which to systematically count students' help-seeking efforts (four hour-long sessions per classroom).¹⁵ I conducted these systematic counts during similar subject/activity periods in each of the four classrooms: during science periods in which students were working on in-class projects, during language arts periods in which students were working on independent writing activities, during math periods in which the students were taking a test or quiz, and during flex-time periods in which students were working individually at different stages on different activities.

During each (hour-long) period, I counted all of the requests that middle-class and working-class students made to teachers for assistance, clarification, information, and checking of work.¹⁶ In some cases it was difficult to determine the number or nature of requests (e.g., when crowds of students were gathered around the teacher, or when it was difficult to hear). Given my conceptual focus, I prioritized documenting requests by working-class students, even asking

teachers after-the-fact to describe particular exchanges. Thus, while my counts accurately document working-class students' requests, they may underestimate requests by middle-class students. With these counts, I compared the number and types of requests made by working-class and middle-class children. While the counts varied somewhat across different classrooms, activities, and periods, the overall patterns that I found were the same.

The Poorly-Lit Path to Success

Teachers at Maplewood cared deeply about their students and wanted them to succeed, frequently praising them for their efforts. Students, in turn, generally celebrated their own accomplishments and those of their peers. Overt misbehavior was rare, though teachers did reprimand students for talking out-of-turn and for being disrespectful, off-task, or unprepared.

Teachers at Maplewood also had beliefs about student behaviors that promote success in school (Patrick et al. 2001; Rist 1970). They explained in interviews and informal conversations that they expected students to be "proactive learners," which meant not only paying attention, working hard, and thinking critically, but also seeking help when they were struggling. During class, these expectations were sometimes explicit, but often left unsaid. After going over directions, teachers generally asked: "Any questions?" In doing so, however, teachers typically waited only two or three seconds before moving on. This brief timeframe required children to anticipate that teachers would ask for questions and be ready to respond. And yet, students often became aware of questions and problems only after starting an activity, leaving them to choose both whether to seek help and how to do so.

While Maplewood teachers generally granted students' requests for help, their willingness to do so was not always explicit. Even when teachers did offer reminders like: "Let me know if you get stuck," such statements did not give clear direction about how to proceed. Should students

ask for help the moment they “get stuck,” or should they try to work through it first? Should they raise their hands, call out, or go up to the teacher’s desk? Such ambiguities put the burden on students to choose when and how to seek help from teachers. As my observations consistently suggested, when faced with such ambiguities, middle-class and working-class children activated different skills and strategies, and thus behaved in very different ways.

Choosing When to Seek Help

Throughout the more than two years I spent at Maplewood, I consistently observed that middle-class and working-class students took different approaches to questions and challenges they faced in the classroom. While middle-class children actively voiced their struggles and sought help from teachers, working-class students generally did not.

Middle-Class Students

Middle-class girls and boys often admitted when they were struggling or confused, and regularly turned to teachers for assistance. In Mr. Fischer’s fifth-grade class, for example, the students were using their textbooks as a resource to make “baseball cards” with pictures and descriptions of important people of the Progressive Era. Mr. Fischer was talking with a few students about their projects. Meanwhile, Ethan, a bubbly, middle-class boy with a mop of red hair, and Ted, a small, quick-witted middle-class boy with close-cropped brown hair, were having trouble finding people for their cards on “the super rich.”

A hard-set frown on his face, Ethan sits up tall in his seat and looks around for Mr. Fischer. Spotting him, Ethan calls out loudly: “Mr. Fischer! I can’t find any really rich people!”

At this, Ted eagerly sits up and adds: “Yeah! That’s what I’m having trouble with, too!”

Hearing his name, Mr. Fischer looked up at Ethan and Ted. He then told them where to look in their books for the answer, but they still could not find it.

Ethan scans the page with his eyes, and then looks over at Mr. Fischer, saying insistently: “But it doesn’t say they’re rich!”

Mr. Fischer moves quickly toward Ethan. Reaching down over Ethan’s shoulder, Mr. Fischer points at a page in Ethan’s book. He reads aloud quietly: “Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst both owned major newspapers in New York.” As Ethan and Ted listen intently, Mr. Fischer explains that if these men own newspapers, they were probably very, very wealthy.

Throughout my time at Maplewood, I regularly observed middle-class children actively voicing problems and questions that they encountered at school, even interrupting teachers to address these needs. These students chose to seek help in situations where they would benefit from the teacher’s assistance and, in doing so, learned that teachers could often be persuaded to provide the help that they desired.

After choosing to seek help from teachers, middle-class students generally persisted in these requests until they were satisfied with the outcome. Like Ted and Ethan, middle-class students often made a series of escalating requests, prompting teachers to provide more active assistance. Ms. Dunham’s fifth-grade math class provides another example. The students were working on practice problems that required using protractors to draw various angles. While Ms. Dunham was writing the homework assignment on the overhead, Anna, an athletic middle-class girl with dark eyes and long, dark hair, called out for assistance:

Anna looks up at Ms. Dunham and calls out loudly: “Ms. Dunham! I need help! Ms. Dunham!”

Ms. Dunham glances over at Anna, who is sitting on the rug at the back of the room, struggling to draw the angles. Ms. Dunham nods, noting distractedly: “I’ll be there soon.”

Anna, however, does not give up, adding: “I can’t get it to stay so I can do 170 degrees!”

At this, Ms. Dunham immediately moved over toward Anna, squatting down beside her and showing her how to hold the protractor in place while marking the angles. While Ms. Dunham initially responded that she would “be there soon,” Anna did not accept this. She continued to press Ms. Dunham, prompting her to provide immediate assistance. By choosing to seek help from teachers, and by persisting in these requests, middle-class children (like Anna, Ted, and Ethan) were generally able to get the help that they wanted or needed, and get it in a timely manner. As a result, they could move quickly through assignments and activities and complete them correctly.

Working-Class Students

Unlike their middle-class peers, working-class students rarely admitted they were struggling. As a result, both the teachers and I found it difficult to determine when these children were having problems with assignments or activities. In Ms. Nelson’s fourth-grade math class, for example, the students were working in pairs to identify patterns on a multiplication worksheet. Two working-class students, Sadie (tall and outgoing, with a heart-shaped face) and Carter (quiet, with a stocky build and red hair), were working together. Sitting a few feet away, I could hear them whispering together as they worked:

Sadie and Carter are both bent over their worksheets, frowning. Carter grumbles quietly that he can't find any patterns. They begin to argue in hushed voices about what kind of patterns they are supposed to find.

Despite the trouble they were having, Sadie and Carter did not admit that they were struggling or ask for help. During this period, Ms. Nelson helped three groups of middle-class students who called out or raised their hands to request her assistance, but never helped Sadie or Carter. Fifteen minutes later, Sadie and Carter were the only students still working:

Ms. Nelson says gruffly to Sadie and Carter: "You guys! Time's up. You were the only group that didn't finish. You guys need to work better together." Sadie and Carter appear to be upset, but do not say anything. Hanging their heads, they get up silently and go back to their seats.

Sadie and Carter could have asked for help with the worksheet, but they did not. This kind of silence often prevented teachers from realizing when working-class students were struggling.

Even when it was clear that working-class students would benefit from the teacher's assistance, they still generally did not ask for help. In Ms. Phillips's fourth-grade class, the children were painting pumpkins for Halloween. Many of the squeezable puff-paint bottles were clogged, and Riley, Kyle, Diana, Ricky, Lisa, and Bradley (all middle-class children) went to Ms. Phillips to ask for help getting the paint "un-stuck." Meanwhile, Amelia, a high-achieving working-class girl with light hair and thin-rimmed glasses, was struggling with a paint bottle.

Her face set in a grimace, Amelia turns the bottle over and squeezes hard, but nothing comes out. Then, frowning, with the bottle still upside-down, she gives it a good shake. All of a sudden, about a half-cup of red, glittery paint explodes out

of the bottle and onto Amelia's paper. Amelia's eyes open wide and fearful as she looks down at the paint.

Ricky, a middle-class boy who sat across from Amelia, and who was known for ridiculing other students, began to tease Amelia, saying mockingly that she was going to "get in trouble" for "spilling" paint. He did this quietly enough that Ms. Phillips, on the other side of the room, was unable to hear:

Amelia tries to explain, her voice breaking, that she was just trying to get a little paint out, but that it was stuck. Ricky continues to pester her, and Amelia begins to cry silently, her face getting redder and redder. She buries her face in her fists and drops her head down on her desk.

Kyle, another middle-class boy at the table, began to defend Amelia, yelling at Ricky for making her cry. Ms. Phillips heard the boys yelling and went over.

As Amelia sits with her face in her hands, Kyle explains the situation to Ms. Phillips. Ms. Phillips squats down beside Amelia, saying: "I understand—it was stuck. You were just trying to get it out." Hearing this, Amelia looks up timidly. Ms. Phillips then offers to help Amelia with the other paint bottles, and Amelia nods gratefully.

Rather than asking for help like their middle-class peers, working-class students usually tried to deal with problems on their own, activating interactional skills like work-ethic and self-reliance that research typically associates with the working class (Lamont 2000). Similarly, when Jared, a working-class boy, was having trouble with a math problem, he did not ask for help. Instead, he got up to listen (hanging back and not approaching) while Mr. Potter explained the problem to another middle-class student who actively asked for help. While this kind of initiative was

sometimes successful, it often prevented working-class students from getting the help that they needed to complete assignments and activities correctly, promptly, and without incident.

Similarly, during Ms. Dunham's Language Arts class, the students were taking turns reading aloud from a novel. When Sadie finished reading, she picked Jesse, an easy-going, working-class boy with close-cropped, light-brown hair, to continue for her:

Jesse has been leaning over to show something in his book to Sammy [a middle-class boy], who is sitting next to him. When Jesse hears his name, he immediately turns his gaze back to his book. He frantically scans the page, his eyes growing big and fearful. A long moment passes as he tries unsuccessfully to figure out where Sadie left off.

Ms. Dunham, meanwhile, has been watching Jesse skeptically. Glancing down at her own book, Ms. Dunham reads the first two words of the paragraph that Jesse is supposed to read, saying: "Mercy went... page 206." Jesse responds softly but gratefully: "Oh! Okay." He then quickly finds the paragraph (he is on the right page) and begins reading aloud to the group.

When he finished reading, Jesse picked Riley, a bubbly, athletic, middle-class girl, to continue:

Riley was picking at her shoelace, but now looks up wide-eyed. She immediately turns her head toward Ms. Dunham, calling out loudly and pleadingly: "Wait! Where are we?!?!?"

Ms. Dunham reminds Riley that they are on page 206. She then reads the first few words of the next paragraph so that Riley can figure out where to read.

While Jesse was usually outgoing and eager to participate (volunteering to read or do problems), he, like his working-class peers, generally did not admit when he was struggling in the classroom, though he did seem to appreciate when teachers came to offer him help.

Frequency and Scope of Help-Seeking

Throughout the more than two years that I spent at Maplewood, and across all of the classrooms that I observed, I found consistent class differences in the frequency of students' help-seeking. Such variations were apparent not only in my field notes, but also in my systematic counts of students' classroom behavior, which I completed near the end of the field work. Table 1 displays class differences in the frequency of students' requests for help from teachers during four different hour-long subject-periods in each of four fifth-grade classrooms. While the specific counts varied somewhat across classrooms, the overall patterns were the same. Thus, for clarity, I aggregate requests across the four classrooms within each period. As Table 1 indicates, middle-class children consistently asked for help from teachers more often than did their working-class peers. Across the four subject periods, the average middle-class fifth-grader at Maplewood made more than seven requests for help from teachers, while the average working-class fifth-grader made only one.

[Table 1 About Here]

Table 1 also highlights class differences in the scope of children's requests for help from teachers. Through both my observations and strategic counts of children's classroom behavior, I found that middle-class children asked not only for more help, but also for a wider range of help, including assistance, clarification, information, and checking of work. Middle-class children regularly made all four types of requests; while working-class children occasionally made

requests for assistance and clarification, it was extremely rare to see them request information or ask teachers to check their work (as Table 1 highlights, I did not witness any requests for information or checking by working-class students during the sixteen hour-long counting sessions).

While the overall patterns were the same, the nature and frequency of students' requests did vary across classrooms, subjects, and activities. For example, requests for help (especially clarification) were particularly common during tests and when students were working independently on projects. While some teachers were more available to students, and while some more often granted requests, all were generally willing to provide assistance to students who were struggling, and all welcomed clarifying questions about tests and assignments (though teachers sometimes refused to provide assistance or check work during tests). Because teachers responded in this way, middle-class students also *received* more assistance, clarification, information, and checking than did their working-class peers.

Class differences in decisions about when to seek help were particularly apparent in students' requests for clarification. During a science quiz in Ms. Hudson's fifth-grade class, for example, eight of the ten middle-class children got up (sometimes repeatedly) with requests, while none of the four working-class students did the same. The quiz instructed the children to look at a black and white drawing of a terrarium, and identify the "environmental factors" in the picture and the relationships between them. The black and white image was somewhat blurry, and Aiden, Lizbeth, Gina, Drew, Kyle, Bailey, and Allison, all middle-class children, got up almost immediately to ask questions about the image and the directions for the quiz.

The children form a line at Ms. Hudson's desk, and Aiden steps up first, asking pointedly: "Do you have to put *all* of them?" Ms. Hudson shakes her head and

explains matter-of-factly: “No, just as many as you can.” Lizbeth steps up next, pointing at her quiz and asking curiously: “Is that a shell or a snail?” Ms. Hudson peers down at the image, scrunches up her face thoughtfully for a moment, and then responds briskly: “A Snail.” Gina marches up next. Thrusting out her quiz, she points at one of the questions and states firmly: “I really don’t get what this means.” Ms. Hudson nods, explaining: “It means how do they *influence* each other.”

Because teachers controlled assignments, requests for clarification and checking helped middle-class students to complete their work more quickly and correctly. Working-class children, on the other hand, rarely requested detailed explanations of classroom tasks, and thus did not have the same advantages in meeting teachers’ often unclear or unstated expectations.

Choosing How to Seek Help

Swidler (1986) suggests: “culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles, from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (273). Concurrently, I found that children’s class backgrounds not only influenced their decisions about when to seek help from teachers, but also provided them with different sets of skills, styles, and strategies for use in these interactions. Activating these resources also yielded different micro-interactional profits in the classroom.

Middle-Class Students

When middle-class students approached teachers with requests for help, they did so very assertively, moving quickly, speaking loudly and clearly, and making direct eye-contact. Like the

middle-class children in other studies (Nelson & Schutz 2007; Rist 1970), and like the middle-class parents in Lareau's (2000, 2003) work, middle-class students at Maplewood were assertive in their interactions with teachers. During math class in fourth grade, for example, Ms. Burns put three measurement problems on the board and told the students to take out their math journals and "get started." Ms. Burns then went over to her desk, leaning down and flipping through her plan book. Almost immediately, Gina, a precocious but low-achieving middle-class girl with long curly hair, got up to ask a question.

Gina jumps up from her seat and loudly calls out Ms. Burns's name as she approaches, causing Ms. Burns to turn toward her. As she gets closer, Gina looks up and asks: "It says to measure in centimeters. How do we do that?" Ms. Burns nods, quietly reminding Gina where to find the metric measurements on her ruler.

Meanwhile, Haley, a working-class student, had been sitting with her hand raised, but Ms. Burns did not notice. As Haley continued to wait, two other middle-class students, Christian and Edward, called out with questions, and both got help right away. Three minutes later, Ms. Burns finally noticed Haley's hand and went over to help. Overall, middle-class students were very assertive in making their requests, speaking loudly and calling the teachers by name. By activating these particular styles in this setting, middle-class students could also effectively secure the help they desired.

Middle-class students were also direct and proactive in their requests, often calling out or approaching the teacher rather than raising their hands. By displaying this sense of entitlement (Lareau 2003) in the classroom, middle-class children not only got more help from teachers, but also spent less time waiting for help than did working-class children. Ms. Hudson's students, for example, were working independently on a note-taking packet, using their books to find and fill

in information about the Industrial Revolution. Ms. Hudson was at her desk, typing on her laptop. Aidan, an athletic but shy middle-class boy, was having trouble with one of the questions.

Aidan stops suddenly, peering down at his book with a puzzled frown. Aidan then raises his hand high, twisting in his seat and looking over at Ms. Hudson. From where Ms. Hudson is sitting, however, and with the way that she is turned to face her computer, she can't see Aidan's hand.

Rather than waiting for Ms. Hudson to see his hand, Aidan changed his approach:

Aidan takes his packet and gets up, making a beeline for the front of the room. He stops at the side of Ms. Hudson's desk and waits, an expectant look on his face. When Ms. Hudson does not immediately notice Aidan, he calls out in a loud whisper: "Ms. Hudson?" Hearing this, Ms. Hudson turns abruptly, swiveling her chair around to face toward Aidan, a startled look on her face.

Before Ms. Hudson could say anything, Aidan stepped in closer, pointed at his packet, and asked a clarifying question, which Ms. Hudson promptly answered. Even shy middle-class children like Aidan recognized that adopting proactive help-seeking strategies would allow them not only to get the help they desired, but also to spend less time waiting for it. Similarly, and as in the examples with Ted, Ethan, and Anna, middle-class children were also very persistent in their requests, pressing teachers to provide them with additional help or clarification, and to provide it more quickly.

By utilizing these skills, styles, and strategies, middle-class students helped to ensure that teachers were aware of and responsive to their needs. There were also times when middle-class students actively tried to get help before someone else. For example, when teachers were moving to help a student who appeared to be struggling but had not actively asked for help, middle-class

students would intervene, calling out to get the teacher's attention. In these situations, teachers would generally help the middle-class student first, as there was no one else technically "ahead" of them in line. Even when there was a "line" of students waiting for help, middle-class students would often step to the front to interject with "quick questions." Middle-class children realized that by strategically timing and performing requests, they could get the help they needed without having to wait. They were also willing to do so even if it meant diverting the teachers' attention away from other children who might also need help and clarification, but who were more patient and less proactive in seeking them.

While middle-class children's help-seeking styles provided clear advantages in the classroom, such efforts also had drawbacks. In interviews and informal conversations, for example, teachers often noted that students who depended too much on teachers (e.g., by relying on teachers to check their work for errors rather than checking it themselves) were "not good problem-solvers." One day in Mr. Potter's advanced math class, for example, the students were working on a particularly difficult word problem. All seven of the middle-class, white students (but not the two working-class students, Jared and Amelia) got up repeatedly to ask for help (saying things like: "I don't get this!" and "Can you help me?" and "Is this right?"). Mr. Potter (who was usually calm and soft-spoken) was initially very patient in answering these requests. As the requests continued, however, Mr. Potter became increasingly agitated until, ten minutes later, he declared: "I've had it!" chastising the students for their lack of effort and for acting like "crybabies who don't wanna do the work." By making incessant requests (particularly for "checking" and clarification), middle-class children risked not only being seen as "lazy," but also provoking the teachers' frustrations.

Such overt expressions of frustration, however, were extremely rare; usually they were more subtle. During Language Arts, for example, Ms. Dunham read aloud to the class while the students worked on various projects. As she was reading, Ms. Dunham noticed that Jesse, a working-class student, was struggling with the stapler. When Ms. Dunham stopped reading to go help Jesse, Mandy, a precocious, middle-class girl with a blonde ponytail and a broad smile, jumped up from her seat and trotted after Ms. Dunham:

Coming up behind Ms. Dunham, Mandy thrusts out her poster, looking up at Ms.

Dunham eagerly and asking hopefully: “Is this okay so far?”

Ms. Dunham glances over her shoulder at Mandy’s poster. She scans it quickly and nods, whispering encouragingly: “Looks good!”

Ms. Dunham gave Mandy a reassuring smile, but Mandy persisted. She pressed on with a series of clarifying questions: “Are we supposed to type the captions?” “Could I print them out and glue them on?” While Jesse waited quietly, Ms. Dunham answered each of Mandy’s queries, her responses becoming shorter with each reply. Through their proactive and insistent help-seeking efforts, middle-class children risked frustrating teachers and having teachers perceive them as lacking in “problem-solving” skills. Despite the risks, however, middle-class children generally persisted in their requests—they seemed to have learned that asking for help allowed them to avoid mistakes and proceed more quickly and efficiently down the poorly lit path to success.

Working-Class Students

When working-class students did ask teachers for help, they approached these negotiations less assertively than did their middle-class peers, moving slowly, speaking quietly, and making only limited eye contact. While Mr. Fischer was introducing the Progressive Era “baseball card” project, for example, Zach, a short but athletically built working-class boy with dark hair and

brooding eyes, was in the bathroom. When Zach returned, he realized that he missed most of the directions. Zach initially tried to ask his friend, Tyler (middle-class) to explain, but Tyler, who was busy working, replied distractedly: “Go ask Mr. F.”

Zach sighs heavily, almost groaning, and pushes his chair back hard away from his desk. He sits there for a long moment, but eventually gets up slowly, flapping his arms, his whole body jiggling with the effort.

Zach continued to flap nervously as he looked around for Mr. Fischer, who was talking with a group of students at the back of the room:

Zach trudges heavily and slowly toward Mr. Fischer. Instead of going straight up to him, however, Zach hangs back, a few feet away. He waits there, still shaking his fists lightly, looking uncomfortable.

When Mr. Fischer turned to go back to his desk, he saw Zach, who was still waiting behind him:

Mr. Fischer looks down at Zach and smiles pleasantly, asking: “What’s up?” At this, Zach glances up quickly, startled, and then back down at the floor. He starts to swing his arms like helicopter blades, twisting his body from side to side. Zach continues this motion as he starts to mumble, asking haltingly: “So... uh... like, how long do the, uh... captions have to be?”

While Mr. Fischer was more than willing to help (explaining the directions Zach missed), Zach, like other working-class students at Maplewood, approached this interaction less assertively than did his middle-class peers.

Similarly, during a Social Studies test, Mr. Potter was sitting at the front of the room, grading papers. Meanwhile, Ashleigh, a very tall, lanky working-class girl with long, light-brown hair,

had been sitting and not working for four minutes, slumped forward, frowning at her test. Ashleigh glanced up as other students started to go up to Mr. Potter to turn in their tests:

Finally, Ashleigh gets up slowly, taking her paper and shuffling toward Mr. Potter. Once she gets close, Mr. Potter looks up, raising his eyebrows in a curious expression. Ashleigh steps forward timidly, glancing up quickly at Mr. Potter and saying softly and haltingly “I don’t get this one.” Mr. Potter glances down at the paper and nods, giving Ashleigh a brief explanation. Mr. Potter then gives Ashleigh an encouraging smile as she nods and heads back to her seat.

While working-class children like Zach and Ashleigh were often loud and playful with friends during free periods, when asking for help, they generally approached teachers slowly, spoke in quiet or mumbled voices, and avoided direct eye-contact. These styles were very similar to those that Lareau (2000, 2003) describes working class parents using in their interactions with the school. It seems possible then, that, like working-class parents, working-class children were less comfortable approaching teachers with requests. Regardless of their motivations, however, the styles that working-class children activated in the classroom were often less efficacious in securing the help that they needed to proceed quickly and correctly through assignments and activities.

Working-class students also tended to be more patient and less proactive in making requests, raising their hands or waiting for the teacher to offer help rather than calling out or approaching the teacher directly. During science, for example, Ms. Hudson explained to her fifth graders (all of whom were sitting on the rug up front) that they were going to be doing an activity arranging cards to form a “food web.” Jared a short but athletic, outgoing, and high-achieving working-class boy, was absent the day that the class first learned about “food webs.”

As Ms. Hudson explains all of this, Jared, who is sitting off to the side of the rug, out of Ms. Hudson's direct eye line, scrunches up his face thoughtfully. He tips his head to the side, but hesitates a moment. After a long pause, Jared raises his hand slowly, only halfway, with his elbow bent. At the same moment, however, Jamie, a middle-class girl, calls out curiously, asking: "Do we have to draw [the food web]?" Ms. Hudson turns toward Jamie, explaining: "No, just arrange the cards."

As Ms. Hudson was answering Jamie's question, Jared let his hand droop, resting his forearm on the top of his head. Not seeing Jared's raised hand, Ms. Hudson then told the children to head back to their seats and get to work.

While Jared still has a puzzled look on his face, he hears this announcement and drops his hand down by his side. He gets up and heads back to his seat with the rest of the class.

Jared was confused about the assignment—going back to his desk, he arranged his cards in a long line instead of in a "web" like the other students, and never completed the assignment correctly. Despite this lack of understanding, however, Jared did not call out his question, even after watching Jamie do the same. When teachers did not notice their efforts to seek help, working-class children generally did not persist or try a more proactive help-seeking strategy (e.g., calling out or approaching the teacher). While some just tried to deal with problems on their own, others fell off-task, getting neither the help they needed nor their work completed.

Some working-class students did wait longer for teachers to notice their raised hands. During a Social Studies test in Mr. Potter's class, for example, Shannon, a shy but friendly working-class girl with a round face and shoulder-length brown hair, raised her hand timidly to ask a

question. Mr. Potter, however, was standing at the other side of the room, eating an orange, and could not see Shannon's raised hand. As Shannon sat with her hand raised, Owen, an average-height middle-class boy with thick brown hair, jumped up, grabbed his test, and went to Mr. Potter to ask for help.

Owen slides out of his chair at the back of the room, a determined look on his face. Owen grabs his test and scurries up toward Mr. Potter, who sees Owen approaching and smiles warmly. Stepping up next to Mr. Potter, Owen anxiously asks him to explain the directions for the essay question on the test. Mr. Potter smiles reassuringly and leans down to explain in a low but pleasant whisper.

Owen listens intently, nodding appreciatively.

Shannon, meanwhile, continued to sit with her hand raised halfway. She occasionally glanced toward Mr. Potter, but did not get up. Four minutes later, when Mr. Potter went to throw away his orange peel, he finally noticed Shannon's hand and went over to help. Compared to their middle-class peers, working-class children tended to take a less proactive and assertive approach to help-seeking. As a result, working-class students often spent a great deal of time waiting for teachers, and sometimes gave up entirely, going without the help that they needed.

Alternative Explanations

Although I found consistent, class-based patterns in children's help-seeking behaviors, I also looked for other sources of variation (age, gender, academic ability, personality, etc.).¹⁷ While requests for help became more common as children moved from third to fifth grade, class-based help-seeking patterns were similar across all three grades. Likewise, while I did notice some gender differences in children's classroom behavior (boys, for example, tended to joke more with teachers), I did not observe systematic gender differences in children's help-seeking. Class-

based help-seeking patterns also did not seem to reflect class differences in children's temperaments or academic abilities: among both middle-class and working-class students, there were high-achieving students (like Mandy and Jared) and lower-achieving students (like Gina and Zach), shy students (like Aidan and Shannon) and more assertive ones (like Anna and Jesse). I also looked for differences between teachers: some were more sarcastic while others were soft-spoken and warm; some spent more time at their desks. Despite these variations, however, I observed the same class differences in help-seeking across all of the classrooms that I observed. Taken together, these results suggest that children's class cultures were the most prominent mediator of children's help-seeking styles and strategies.

Some scholars might assume that class differences in children's behaviors would reflect systematic variations in students' school experiences. Unlike Rist (1970), however, I did not find substantial class differences in the treatment that children received from teachers or peers. Teachers, for example, did not group students by social class—seating arrangements rotated at least monthly, work-groups were usually self-selected or randomly assigned, and ability groups did not divide along social-class lines. The working-class students at Maplewood, unlike those in Rist's study, also were not ostracized by teachers or peers—they generally had middle-class friends, participated actively in class, and were not teased for their socioeconomic status.¹⁸

Working-class students often volunteered eagerly to help the teacher, read aloud, share their work, and answer questions. Teachers, in turn, welcomed working-class students' participation and also went out of their way to check on and provide unsolicited assistance to students they thought might be struggling. This suggests that class-based help-seeking patterns did not reflect any differential treatment that students received at school.

While I did not observe any systematic class differences in children's misbehavior, working-class students may have tried to signal their need for help by acting out in class (Metz 1978). And yet, because teachers did not "constitute" (Mehan 1992) misbehavior as "help-seeking," they did not respond to such actions by offering assistance or clarification. Teachers expected students to be "proactive" learners, seeking help when they needed it, and middle-class students' help-seeking styles gave them an advantage in meeting these expectations. By activating their interactional resources (Lareau 2000, 2003), middle-class students could successfully influence their own opportunities for learning, obtaining extra assistance, clarification, information, and checks of their work.

Discussion: Consequences of Culturally Mediated Help-Seeking

While scholars of stratification assume that children will embrace class-based strategies and use them to influence their own life chances (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2000, 2003), they offer little evidence to support these claims. Instead, they view children merely as passive recipients of opportunities that parents and schools provide. Furthermore, while some sociologists do recognize children's agency (Corsaro 2005; Thorne 1994; MacLeod 1995; Willis 1980), they fail to explore how children's behaviors vary along social class lines, and what consequences this has in the classroom. This study suggests that class differences in children's opportunities for learning reflected not only class differences in the opportunities that parents obtained for their children, or that schools provided to them, but also the opportunities that children secured on their own behalf. More specifically, I found that by activating cultural capital in the classroom, middle-class and working-class children garnered very different social and educational profits. Children's cultural resources shaped their decisions about when to seek help from teachers and the skills and strategies that they used in doing so. Compared to their working-class peers,

middle-class children made more and more diverse requests for help from teachers and approached these interactions more assertively and proactively.

This study has clear implications for our understanding of the educational importance of cultural capital. While scholars often posit that differences in cultural capital contribute to social inequalities (DiMaggio 1982), they rarely describe how profits can be gained from activating cultural capital in institutional settings. While I did not investigate the effect of help-seeking on student achievement, I did find evidence to suggest that class differences in help-seeking may have meaningful consequences for students in the classroom and beyond.¹⁹ I observed, for example, that the help-seeking skills and strategies children activated in the classroom influenced their ability to complete assignments. Because they sought help more frequently, assertively, and proactively, middle-class children received more assistance, clarification, and answers to questions. They had teachers check their work before turning it in. They avoided problems and being chastised by teachers. In sum, they gained meaningful advantages in completing their work more quickly and more accurately than could their working-class peers.²⁰ Middle-class children's help-seeking styles and strategies may also offer additional advantages as they move into middle-school and high-school, where students are expected to make decisions about course-taking and college-going, decisions once made by school officials (Stevens 2007; Lucas 1999). These decisions, in turn, have far-reaching implications, affecting future course-placement, college attendance, and employment opportunities (Stevenson, Schiller, and Schneider 1994; Schneider, Swanson, and Riegle-Crumb 1998; Eccles, Vida, and Barber 2004). Thus, if middle-class students are more willing and able to ask for help and clarification in choosing courses, colleges, and careers, they might also be more successful in navigating a path toward future success.

It is important to recognize, however, that middle-class help-seeking styles were more effective not because they were inherently better, or because (as Rist 1970 would suggest) teachers were biased against working-class students, but because of their alignment with the social-historical conditions that exist in contemporary elementary classrooms. The constraints (Mehan 1992) of the classroom (e.g., limited time and lots of demands on teachers' attention) prompted teachers to respond more quickly and completely to more assertive and proactive help-seeking efforts. I would also contend, however, that children play a more active role in this process than even Mehan has recognized. Middle-class children, for example, seemed to have learned that by strategically activating particular cultural resources in the classroom, they could not only meet teachers' expectations for "proactive" learning, but also secure additional opportunities on their own behalf. And yet, while these middle-class styles provided clear advantages in the classroom, as we saw with Mr. Potter's math class, these strategies also had drawbacks. Thus, future research should examine whether overreliance on teachers may limit children's development of self-discipline and problem-solving skills.

Although I observed seventeen different teachers (with varying teaching styles), I was surprised to find that children's class backgrounds did not influence teachers' treatment of them. As a result, I concluded that class differences in help-seeking likely reflected not differences in the expectations that teachers set for students, but rather differences in the cultural resources that children brought with them to the classroom—resources that I define as forms of cultural capital. Nonetheless, Maplewood is not a typical school. Thus, some scholars might question whether these class-based help-seeking patterns would emerge in a predominantly working-class school. However, it seems that if there was any setting in which working-class students would actively seek help from teachers, it would be in a school like Maplewood. Because the majority of

Maplewood's students were middle-class, requests for help from teachers were both very common and widely accepted. Teachers generally welcomed and responded positively to students' requests for help. Students did not stigmatize each other for seeking help in the classroom, and often encouraged their peers to ask for help. And yet, working-class students at Maplewood rarely sought help from teachers, and did so less proactively and assertively than did their middle-class peers. Thus, while future research should consider these class-based help-seeking patterns in other settings, it seems possible that they might be even more pronounced in more socioeconomically homogeneous schools.

In conclusion, this study also has important implications for our understanding of the reproduction of social inequalities. While scholars have long assumed that children will use the cultural capital they acquire to reproduce their parents' class status, there is little evidence of the mechanisms by which this reproduction occurs (Mehan 1992). This study builds on Mehan's call for further exploration of the role of agency and culture in reproducing social inequalities. Like Willis (1980) and MacLeod (1995), it focuses specifically on children's agency and its contribution to this process. Unlike Willis and MacLeod, however, I suggest that the reproduction of inequalities hinges not only on children's development of class-based aspirations, but also on their actions and interactions in institutional settings. By activating their cultural resources in the classroom, children themselves generated unequal social profits.²¹ In repeatedly saying "I need help!" middle-class children gained advantages that helped to reinforce existing social and educational inequalities.

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Table 1: Students' Requests for Help From Teachers, by Social Class and 60-Minute Subject Period ^a

	<u>Math</u> (Test/Quiz)		<u>Language Arts</u> (Writing Activity)		<u>Science</u> (In-Class Project)		<u>Flex Time</u> (Various Activities)		<u>Total</u>	
	MC	WC	MC	WC	MC	WC	MC	WC	MC	WC
Students Present	41	11	38	11	38	14	41	14		
<u>Types of Requests</u>										
Assistance^b										
Requests per Student (Requests)	0.88 (36)	0.27 (3)	0.34 (13)	0.18 (2)	0.34 (13)	0.00 (0)	0.27 (11)	0.14 (2)	1.83 (73)	0.59 (7)
Clarification^c										
Requests per Student (Requests)	1.05 (43)	0.18 (2)	0.76 (29)	0.18 (2)	0.82 (31)	0.21 (3)	0.73 (30)	0.00 (0)	3.36 (133)	0.57 (7)
Checking-of-Work^d										
Requests per Student (Requests)	0.56 (23)	0.00 (0)	0.34 (13)	0.00 (0)	0.18 (7)	0.00 (0)	0.46 (19)	0.00 (0)	1.54 (62)	0.00 (0)
Information^e										
Requests per Student (Requests)	0.12 (5)	0.00 (0)	0.29 (11)	0.00 (0)	0.26 (10)	0.00 (0)	0.20 (8)	0.00 (0)	0.87 (34)	0.00 (0)
Total Requests per Student (Total Requests)	2.61 (107)	0.55 (6)	1.74 (66)	0.36 (4)	1.61 (61)	0.21 (3)	1.66 (68)	0.14 (2)	7.62 (302)	1.26 (15)

^aWithin each subject-period, requests are aggregated across the four classrooms in fifth grade.

^b**Assistance:** direct (“Can you help me?”) and indirect (“I don’t get this”) requests for interactive support for problems students are having with projects, activities, assignments, and physical aspects of the classroom environment.

^c**Clarification:** direct (“What does this mean?”) and indirect (“This doesn’t make sense”) questions about general classroom instructions, directions for specific activities, and questions on tests, worksheets, and assignments.

^d**Checking-of-Work:** direct (“Can you check this?”) and indirect (“Is this right?”) requests for teachers to look over or judge the accuracy of students’ actions during classroom activities and their completed work on assignments, projects, and tests/quizzes.

^e**Information:** requests for teachers to provide additional knowledge or instruction (e.g., “Did they find water on the moon?” “How do you use a protractor to draw 420 degrees?”).

¹ These studies are limited in that they rely on students' self-reports of help-seeking behavior and do not consider social-class differences in help-seeking or their role in stratifying opportunities

² I initially identified three groups—working-class, middle-class, and upper-middle-class. Upper-middle-class families had at least one parent with an advanced degree, and had family incomes over \$100,000. Like other researchers (in the United States), however, I found no systematic differences in the behaviors of middle- and upper-middle-class families (Baker & Stevenson 1986; Epstein 1986; Lareau 2000, 2003; Lewis 2001). Such differences in class status may matter more where class divisions are clearer, as in some European countries (Nakhaie & Pike 1998; Jones 2001).

³ Elementary and secondary teachers are generally of middle-class status, and thus expect students to exhibit middle-class behaviors and orientations (Rist 1970; Lareau 2000).

⁴ Mehan does recognize that teachers may “constitute” *students* in particular ways (e.g., as “gifted” or “special-needs”), but does not go far enough. We must also examine how teachers constitute students' *behaviors*, and how this influences the opportunities that teachers provide.

⁵ Like most ethnographies, this study is a case study of a non-random sample of individuals in a particular setting. Although the findings are neither broadly generalizable nor directly representative of universal patterns of behavior, they can provide evidence of important processes (Burawoy et al. 1991).

⁶ Approximately 13% of children ages 5-18 in the community attend private schools.

⁷ I solicited parental consent for all children enrolled in the target cohort at Maplewood, excluding those in full-time special-education. I received permission to observe all but 19 students (12 refused, and 7 never returned the consent forms despite repeated attempts at contact). For this analysis, I exclude 6 students Asian-American students (all middle-class) and 4

Latino students (all working-class), though I found little evidence of systematic racial/ethnic differences in students' help-seeking. I also exclude 12 additional students because they moved away during the study (4 white, working-class; 5 white, middle-class; 2 Latino, working-class; 1 Asian-American, middle-class).

⁸ These are particularly important for students' educational outcomes (Condrón 2009; Kalmijn 1994).

⁹ Middle-class families lived in (owned) mid- to large-sized, single-family homes, and had household incomes ranging from \$50,000 to more than \$200,000. The lower end of the income distribution included two single-mother families and one family in which the father lost his high-paying job in sales.

¹⁰ Working-class families lived in (rented) apartments or mobile homes, or in smaller single-family homes (3 families owned their homes), and had household incomes ranging from \$15,000 to \$75,000.

¹¹ Differences in teaching styles and their relationship to children's help-seeking are beyond the scope of this analysis (see Blumenfeld et al. 1978, and Good 1987 for relevant research).

¹² This was especially true for working-class students, though some middle-class students also liked to share stories about things that were happening at home. This aligns with Miller and colleagues' (1990) discussions of the importance of personal narrative in working-class families.

¹³ Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and took place in teachers' classrooms. Some teachers were interviewed twice.

¹⁴ With repeated attempts at contact, I eventually collected surveys from all but two families (both middle-class). In these cases, I determined children's social-class backgrounds by talking with teachers and administrators.

¹⁵ I selected observation periods during which all working-class students were present.

¹⁶ Counts of different subject periods in a given classroom were not always collected on the same day.

¹⁷ Different teaching styles did somewhat influence the overall frequency of help-seeking, and I hope to explore these variations in future research.

¹⁸ While teachers knew that some students, particularly those who lived in mobile homes, had “tough home lives,” they never spoke about students in social-class terms.

¹⁹ Because research has shown that working-class and middle-class students make similar learning gains during the school year (Condrón 2009; Entwisle et al. 1997), some scholars might conclude that class differences in help-seeking do not matter. Yet, because working-class students’ absolute scores remain lower despite similar in-school learning gains, such results could also indicate that schools are unable to close class-based gaps in student achievement. Thus, given research showing that help-seeking predicts school achievement (Ryan et al. 1997; Newman 2000), class differences in help-seeking could explain why working-class students are unable to recover knowledge lost during the summer and “catch up” with their middle-class peers.

²⁰ Coupled with the increasing use of “cooperative learning” in schools (Slavin 1980), this questions Dreeben’s (1968) argument about the extent to which schools try to develop children’s independence.

²¹ In doing so, they may contribute to achievement differences that Willis argues create divergent aspirations in adolescence.