

“I Need Help!”

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

Abstract

What role do children play in educational inequality? Are they merely passive recipients of unequal opportunities that schools and parents create for them? Or do they actively shape their own opportunities? Through a longitudinal, ethnographic study of one socioeconomically diverse, public elementary school, I show that children's social-class backgrounds affected when and how they sought help in the classroom. Compared to their working-class peers, middle-class children requested more help from teachers, and did so using different 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. By demonstrating their cultural capital, middle-class children created their own advantages, and thus actively contributed to inequalities in the classroom.

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The great irony in American education is that while children are the principal beneficiaries of schooling, their role in this process is under-studied and poorly understood. This is particularly true regarding the creation of educational inequalities, where schools and families are seen as primary players and children are often viewed merely as passive recipients of opportunities that others provide to them (see Mehan 1992 for a review). This study explores children's role in educational stratification. It examines how students' class backgrounds equip them with different micro-interactional resources (e.g., propensities and strategies) for meeting teachers' expectations, and considers the profits children derive from using these resources in the classroom (Lareau 2000; Lareau & Weininger 2003).

Using data from a longitudinal, ethnographic study of one suburban, public elementary school, I compare middle-class¹ and working-class (white) students' classroom behaviors and teachers' responses to them. In doing so, I focus specifically on students' help-seeking, using fieldnotes and counts of interactions to examine whether, when, and how they asked for help from teachers. The classrooms I studied had no explicit “rules” for help-seeking. In this context middle-class children made more requests for help from teachers, and did so using different strategies than did their working-class peers. Rather than wait for assistance, middle-class students called out or approached teachers directly, even interrupting to make requests. Because teachers expected students to seek help, and because they were more responsive to proactive requests, middle-class students received more help from teachers, spent less time waiting, and were better able to complete assignments.

These findings reveal that stratification results from not only learning opportunities that parents and schools create for children, but also those that children secure for themselves. Because children's behaviors yielded different responses from teachers, demonstrating them in this setting had meaningful but stratified micro-interactional consequences, and thus contributed to social inequalities. In light of such findings, I conceptualize middle-class children's help-seeking propensities and strategies as forms of cultural capital. While scholars have debated the meaning of cultural capital,² I adopt Lareau and Weininger's (2003) definition, which:

emphasizes micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutional standards of evaluation. These specialized skills are transmissible across generations, are subject to monopoly, and may yield advantages or "profits" (569).

Middle-class culture closely aligns with the standards of dominant institutions (Bernstein 1971; Bourdieu 1977; Lareau 2000, 2003). In these settings (what Bourdieu calls "fields"), middle-class knowledge, skills, and competences thus become forms of cultural capital that can be used to produce meaningful situational advantages (Bourdieu 1977,1985).

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

Sociologists generally agree that families' social positions dramatically impact children's life chances. Inequalities arise from class differences in the material resources that families can invest in children (Buchmann & DiPrete 2006; Duncan et al. 1998; Teachman 1987; Sirin 2005; McLeod & Shanahan 1994; Kalmijn 1994) and the quality of schools that children attend (Lee & Burkam 2002; Hedges & Rowley 1994; Kahlenberg 2003; Rumberger & Palardy 2008). Even in the same schools, middle-class and working-class students often receive different resources and opportunities (Gamoran 1992; Oakes 2005; Rist 1970). Less attention is paid, however, to

stratification resulting from class differences in the “cultural capital” that families activate on children’s behalf (Bourdieu 1977, 1985; Lareau 2000, 2003). That said, empirical research does support cultural capital theory, revealing that middle-class parents who demonstrate cultural capital in interactions with schools are better able than working-class parents to comply with teachers’ expectations and secure individual advantages for their children (Baker & Stevenson 1986; Brantlinger 2003, Domina 2005; Lareau 2000, 2003; Lareau & Horvat 1999; Useem 1992; Nelson 2010).

Research also shows that parents transmit cultural dispositions and competencies to their children (Heath 1983; Kohn 1963; Lareau 2003). In light of such findings, theorists suggest that middle-class children bring to the classroom the resources needed to meet teachers’ expectations, while working-class students must obtain these resources in school (Lamont & Lareau 1988; Bourdieu 1977). Furthermore, theorists posit that even if working-class students do acquire middle-class knowledge, skills, and strategies, “they can never achieve the natural familiarity of those born to these classes and are academically penalized on this basis” (Lamont & Lareau 1988:155). These theories imply that children’s use of cultural capital will yield meaningful social profits in the classroom and thus contribute to educational inequalities. Empirical research, however, has neglected to explore these possibilities, viewing children merely as passive beneficiaries of others’ efforts.

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 equip them with different resources for securing opportunities. Willis (1981), McRobbie (2000), and Carter (2003), do show (adolescent) students actively adopting particular interactional styles and drawing on class-based orientations (or, in Carter’s case, racial

orientations) to make choices that reproduce their parents' social status. This research, however, focuses on students' overt resistance to dominant norms, and not on their efforts to secure opportunities for learning (e.g., by seeking help from teachers). Furthermore, because these studies rarely observe students in classrooms,³ they cannot describe how students use cultural capital in this setting, or what consequences they face in doing so.⁴

Some scholars have found evidence that middle-class and working-class children interact differently with adults. Lareau (2003) highlights class differences in the sense of "entitlement" and "constraint" children display in interactions with doctors and coaches. This study, however, says little about the advantages children gain from these interactions. It also cannot determine whether children's class-based behaviors persist away from parents' watchful gaze or in one crucial setting—the classroom. In a study of two preschools, Nelson and Schutz (2007) do explore class differences in classroom behavior, finding that children in the middle-class preschool had more interactions with teachers and made more requests from them. Like Lareau, however, Nelson and Schutz do not link these variations to children's cultural capital or consider the profits that children derive from them. Instead, they attribute their findings to differences in teaching styles. It is unclear, however, whether these patterns would emerge in settings where middle-class and working-class children are subject to the same expectations.⁵

Even if middle-class and working-class children do behave differently in the same school settings, we know relatively little about teachers' responses to these differences. One exception is Rist's (1970) influential study of early-elementary classrooms. He finds that teachers immediately judged students on class differences in appearance and behavior, putting more privileged students at a table of "fast" learners, and less privileged students at a table of "slow" learners, and then providing "fast" learners with higher expectations and more attention. Thus,

while Rist does find evidence of class differences in children's behavior, he considers only their influence on teachers' perceptions of student competence. He does not examine how class backgrounds differentially equip children to secure their own learning opportunities. Rist's study also focuses primarily on very low-income African American children. It seems possible that children from "settled living" (Rubin 1976) working-class families would be more similar to middle-class students, and would be subject to fewer negative judgments from teachers. This may be particularly true for working-class white students, as teachers may equate whiteness with middle-classness (Lewis 2001). Thus, while Rist sees unequal opportunities as a function of teachers' class-based biases, the reality is likely more complex.

In a review of research on culture and education, Mehan (1992) criticizes scholars like Rist and praises studies examining how culture operates at both individual and institutional levels to create and maintain inequalities. This study heeds Mehan's call for more ethnographic insight into the black box of schooling. I consider both how social origins shape the culture that students bring with them to the classroom and how schools privilege some cultural forms over others. I also go beyond Mehan's call by looking not only at families and schools, but at class differences in the cultural competencies children exhibit and the profits they generate. I do so by comparing the propensities and strategies that middle-class and working-class, white students demonstrate in one particular setting—the elementary school.⁶ I also consider the meanings that teachers assign to these behaviors, and the unequal profits that result when teachers privilege some behaviors over others. While I speculate about dispositions that guide children's interactions (what Bourdieu 1985 calls "habitus"), I primarily discuss the behaviors that I observed, as these behaviors directly impacted children's opportunities.

The Importance of Help-Seeking

While children can influence their learning opportunities in numerous ways, I focus on help-seeking: children's requests for assistance, clarification, information, and checking-of-work from teachers. Research indicates that teachers expect students to seek help when needed (Patrick et al. 2001), and that doing so bolsters learning and achievement (Ryan, Hicks & Midgley 1997; Gall 1985; Newman 2000).⁷ More broadly, however, help-seeking is also a critical mechanism for accessing support from teachers and other "institutional agents" (Stanton-Salazar 1997).⁸ While students can also seek help from family and friends, help from teachers is especially useful, as teachers "have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities" (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch 1995:117). Little is known, however, about how children's class backgrounds influence help-seeking or the profits it generates. As I will show, teachers provided little explicit guidance to students about when and how to seek help, leaving children to draw on their class backgrounds to guide their responses to problems at school. Furthermore, because teachers expected students to seek help, and because they were more responsive to proactive efforts, middle-class children's help-seeking propensities and strategies became a form of cultural capital that, when used in the classroom, yielded meaningful situational advantages.

Methods

Research Site

I selected Maplewood Elementary (all names are pseudonyms) as the research site because it serves students from middle-class and working-class backgrounds. Maplewood is a neighborhood public school serving 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 posters (bearing messages about "respect" and "responsibility") and 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 families. There are also numerous support programs for students struggling with academics, language barriers, behavior and social issues, and divorce.

Maplewood is predominantly white (82%), but also has growing populations of (primarily middle-class) Asian-American (6%) and (primarily working-class) Latino (9%) students. While the majority of Maplewood's students are middle-class, a substantial minority (approximately 25%) are from working-class families. This allows me to compare how middle-class and working-class students responded to and influenced the same teachers, peers and activities in a setting where middle-class norms guide expectations.

Research Sample

The project follows four classrooms (20-22 students each) of Maplewood students from third to fifth grade. To avoid conflating race and class, I focus on the fifty-six middle-class and working-class, white students in this group (forty-two middle-class; fourteen working-class).⁹ I identify students' social class by their parents' educational attainment and occupational status.¹⁰ Middle-class children have at least one parent with a four-year college degree, and at least one parent in a professional or managerial occupation (excluding lower-level white-collar workers), such as teacher, doctor, engineer, lawyer, and office manager.¹¹ Working-class children's parents generally had at most a high-school diploma or some college, and worked in blue-collar or service jobs, such as store clerk, food-service worker, daycare provider, and transportation

worker; two were self-employed.¹² One student, Jesse, was difficult to classify in class terms, as his family income (about \$15,000 annually) could be seen as “poor” (for debates about conceptions of social class, see Lareau & Conley 2010).¹³ Because I observed few differences between Jesse and his working-class peers, I (like Lareau 2000, 2003) discuss them here as members of one group.

The project includes 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.¹⁴ To avoid potential bias, I did not share these results with teachers during the project.

Classroom Observations and Interviews

I collected data using participant observations, interviews, and surveys. Between March 2008 and 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 activities (See Appendix A for a table showing observations per classroom). 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.).

At Maplewood, I was primarily an observer. I listened and watched, sitting in empty seats or walking around the classrooms, and sometimes assisted teachers with organizational tasks. I informed students and teachers that I would reprimand or “tell on” children only in life-threatening situations, and I never had to do so. Regardless of social class, many of the students seemed to enjoy having me around—they told me stories, proudly showed me their work, and

invited me to sit with them at lunch—while others merely said hello or ignored me. My familiarity with the setting (a 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 observations, I kept jottings denoting the participants in and the nature and duration of classroom interactions (e.g., how long a student sat with her hand raised). I also wrote down important pieces of dialogue. After each session, I spent five to twelve hours expanding these jottings into detailed fieldnotes describing the interactions that I had observed and the settings in which they occurred. Throughout the project, I also interviewed the twelve third, fourth, and fifth-grade teachers, asking about their expectations for students, and about students' home lives, academic strengths/weaknesses, and progress over time.¹⁵ In addition to in-depth interviews, I had countless informal discussions with teachers, using them to clarify observations and obtain information about specific students. Early in the project, I also sent surveys to all study families to gather information about children's family backgrounds. With repeated attempts at contact, I collected surveys from all but two families (both middle-class). In these cases, I determined children's social-class backgrounds by talking with teachers. Finally, to determine students' achievement levels, I also collected data from students' school records, including 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 fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and other documents. This allowed me to identify common themes in the data (e.g., seeking assistance, seeking clarification, raising hands, interrupting, etc.), and to assess how themes occurred in relation to situations and participants. I also carefully read and re-read fieldnotes, memos, and interview transcripts,

identifying patterns and developing data matrices (Miles & Huberman 1994) to look for disconfirming evidence.

Count Data

As an ethnographer, my primary goal was to examine the meanings associated with children's classroom behavior. My ethnographic work allowed me to identify help-seeking as an important component of classroom interactions, recognize help-seeking patterns, and determine which behaviors "counted" as help-seeking. Thus, while I collected fieldnotes throughout the more than two years that I spent at Maplewood, I conducted counts of students' classroom interactions (Rist 1970; Nelson & Schutz 2007) only during the last six months of observations (in the same classrooms) as a supplement to the ethnographic data.

To collect these counts, I first defined specific types of help-seeking that I had observed: 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, during my regular observations at Maplewood, I chose sixteen periods (four hour-long sessions per classroom)¹⁶ in which I carefully counted students' help-seeking and later wrote fieldnotes describing my observations. I conducted these counts during similar subject/activity periods in each classroom: during science periods involving in-class projects, during language arts periods involving independent writing activities, during math periods involving a test or quiz, and during flex-time periods in which students were working individually on various projects.

During each count period, I tallied middle-class and working-class students' requests to teachers for assistance, clarification, information, and checking-of-work.¹⁷ In some cases it was difficult to determine the number or nature of requests (e.g., when students were crowded 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 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 being disrespectful, off-task, or unprepared.

Teachers at Maplewood had clear beliefs about student behaviors that promote success in school (Patrick et al. 2001; Rist 1970). In interviews, they described expecting students to be "proactive learners," which meant not only paying attention and working hard, but also seeking help when they were struggling. During class, however, these expectations were stated only indirectly, if at all. On the second day of school, for example, Mr. Fischer explained to his fifth-graders: "I don't think we've talked about this yet. I expect there are times that fifth graders can work independently and be 'in the zone.' But if you need me... I'm up here." Saying this, Mr. Fischer pointed at his desk, where he was sitting. Similarly, after going over directions, teachers generally asked: "Any questions?" In doing so, however, they typically waited only two or three seconds before moving on. This brief timeframe required children to anticipate teachers' calls for questions and be ready to respond. In reality, however, students often became aware of questions

and problems only after starting an activity, leaving them to choose both whether and how to seek help.

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? What if the teacher is busy working or helping another student?

Classroom rules provided little guidance on these matters. Teachers did not explicitly require students to raise their hands or remain in their seats (though there were some situations in which teachers asked students to do so).¹⁸ Thus, when students called out or got up to make requests, and even when they interrupted the teacher, they were not technically “misbehaving.” Reprimands for such behaviors were also extremely uncommon—in rare cases when teachers asked students to wait, they generally did so apologetically and with promises of assistance (“Just wait a sec, and I’ll be right there”). As Stevenson (1991) suggests, teachers “clarify the rules and procedures of the classroom and the arenas in which they apply” (128) through reprimands. Without them, the appropriate strategies for help-seeking remained largely inexplicit. Such ambiguities put the burden on students to choose when and how to seek help from teachers. In confronting this uncertainty, middle-class and working-class children used different strategies, and thus behaved in very different ways.

Choosing Whether to Seek Help

Despite the ambiguities around help-seeking, such requests were a regular component of classroom interaction at Maplewood. While the turbulent, busy, and buzzing nature of contemporary elementary classrooms made it impossible to keep track of every interaction I observed, I estimate that roughly one-quarter to one-third of student-initiated, teacher-student

interactions involved requests for help.¹⁹ Within these interactions, there were also consistent class differences in the nature and frequency of students' help-seeking, with middle-class children making more, more diverse, and more proactive requests.

Middle-Class Students

Middle-class children regularly voiced their problems and turned to teachers for help. Mr. Fischer's students, for example, 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, across the room, Ethan, a bubbly, redheaded middle-class boy, and Ted, a petite 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!"

Mr. Fischer heard his name. Looking up at Ethan and Ted, he called out to them, telling 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 back 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 owned newspapers, they were probably very, very wealthy.

Middle-class children regularly voiced such questions, even occasionally interrupting teachers with requests. Because teachers expected students to seek help when they were struggling, and because they legitimated these efforts (providing students with help), middle-class students’ help-seeking propensities became a form of cultural capital that allowed middle-class students to generate meaningful profits in the classroom. These included completing work quickly and correctly and deepening their understanding of key concepts.

Like Ted and Ethan, middle-class students who chose to seek help generally persisted until they were satisfied with the outcome. Ms. Dunham’s fifth-grade math class provides another example. The students were working on practice problems, using protractors to draw angles. While Ms. Dunham was writing the homework assignment on the overhead, Anna, an athletic middle-class girl with 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 toward Anna, squatting down and showing her how to hold the protractor. While Ms. Dunham initially responded that she would “be there soon,” Anna 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 generally succeeded in getting help, and getting it right away. This persistence, in turn, seemed to demonstrate middle-class children's "sense of entitlement" (Lareau 2003) to have teachers meet their needs fully and immediately.

Working-Class Students

Unlike their middle-class peers, working-class students rarely admitted they were struggling. In Ms. Nelson's fourth-grade math class, for example, 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:

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 they were confused or ask for help. During this activity, Ms. Nelson helped three groups of middle-class students who requested 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, but they did not. This kind of silence seemed to reflect working-class students limited sense of entitlement to assistance from teachers, and also prevented teachers from being fully aware of working-class students' needs.

That said, teachers did occasionally realize that working-class students were struggling and offer unsolicited assistance. In Ms. Phillips's fourth-grade class, for example, the children were painting pumpkins for Halloween. Many of the squeezable puff-paint bottles were clogged, and, over the course of several minutes, Riley, Kyle, Diana, Ricky, Lisa, and Bradley (all middle-class children) went to Ms. Phillips to ask for help getting paint "un-stuck." Meanwhile, Amelia, a high-achieving working-class girl with light hair and glasses, was wrestling 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.

When Ricky, a middle-class boy, started to quietly tease Amelia for "spilling" paint, Amelia began to cry silently, putting her head down on her desk. Kyle, another middle-class boy at the table, then started yelling at Ricky, defending Amelia. Ms. Phillips heard Kyle and Ricky yelling and went over. After Kyle explained what happened, Ms. Phillips squatted down beside Amelia, reassuring her (saying "I understand—it was stuck.") and offering to open Amelia's other paint bottles. By the time that teachers came to them, working-class students' problems were often much larger than they would have been had they immediately requested help.

Unlike their middle-class peers, however, working-class students like Amelia usually tried to deal with problems on their own. 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. In some cases, then, working-class students were able to benefit from the requests of their middle-class peers. And yet, because schools did not explicitly teach students to demonstrate valued strategies (or to decode their expectations), working-class students were less able to secure these opportunities on their own behalf.

Thus, while working-class students were sometimes successful in managing problems in the classroom, their limited facility with help-seeking often prevented them from getting the help that they needed to complete assignments and activities correctly, promptly, and without incident.²⁰ In Ms. Dunham's class, for example, 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:

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), and while he seemed to appreciate the help that teachers offered to him, he rarely asked for help. In doing so, however, he created a bigger problem not only for himself, but for the class as a whole, delaying their progress through the activity. Thus, while middle-class students’ help-seeking efforts allowed them to appear “smart” and “engaged,” working-class students risked being seen as “apathetic” or “uninvolved.”

Frequency and Scope of Help-Seeking

As these examples highlight, working-class students often avoided seeking help in situations where their middle-class peers readily did so (including problems with physical objects, difficulties with in-class assignments, and uncertainty about directions or activities). These patterns were consistent in both my fieldnotes and my counts of students’ classroom behaviors, the results of which I display in Table 1 (which aggregates requests across the four fifth-grade classrooms). Taken together, these findings suggest that middle-class children consistently asked for help from teachers more often than did their working-class peers. Across the four subject periods during which I counted students’ interactions, 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 and contexts of children's help-seeking. Middle-class children asked not only for more help, but also for a wider range of help, regularly requesting assistance, clarification, information, and checking-of-work. 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 documents, I did not witness any requests for information or checking by working-class students during the counting sessions). Finally, while the overall patterns were the same across contexts, 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.

Overall, then, these counts further document class-based patterns in children's help-seeking. And yet, it is only because teachers responded positively to such efforts that middle-class children were able to reap more rewards. 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). As a result, middle-class students not only requested more help, but also *received* more assistance, clarification, information, and checking than did their working-class peers.

While the count data in Table 1 is a useful supplement to the larger ethnographic study, only fieldnotes can fully describe the process of help-seeking and the profits that children derived from these interactions. This is particularly evident in an example from Ms. Hudson's fifth-grade class. During an untimed science quiz, eight of the ten middle-class children got up (sometimes

repeatedly) with requests, while none of the four working-class students did the same. One quiz question instructed the children to look at a drawing of a terrarium, and “identify the environmental factors 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:

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.”

Questions and directions on tests and in-class assignments were often somewhat vague or confusing. The teacher, in turn, was the only person in the classroom who absolutely knew the correct answers/interpretations. Thus, by asking teachers for checking or clarification, students could wade through this ambiguity and complete their work more quickly and correctly. Working-class children 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

Children’s class backgrounds provided them not only with different dispositions for choosing whether and when to seek help, but also different strategies for use in help-seeking interactions.

Because teachers responded more fully to middle-class help-seeking efforts, their behaviors yielded meaningful profits in the classroom. Furthermore, while working-class students had acquired some valuable help-seeking strategies, they used them less often and with much less fluency and ease than did their middle-class peers.

Middle-Class Students

When asking for help, middle-class students used direct and proactive strategies, often calling out or approaching the teacher rather than raising their hands. Ms. Hudson's fifth-graders, for example, were working independently on a note-taking packet, using their books to find 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. Like Aidan, middle-class students often used multiple help-seeking tactics, and exhibited great facility in doing so. Middle-class

help-seeking strategies, then, became a form of cultural capital that yielded meaningful social profits in the classroom, allowing middle-class children to have their needs met more fully and immediately.

There were also times when middle-class students actively tried to get help before someone else. For example, when teachers were moving toward someone who appeared to be struggling but had not requested assistance, middle-class students would occasionally intervene, calling out for help. 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 (but not working-class ones) would sometimes step to the front to interject with “quick questions.” While middle-class students seemingly did not intend to disadvantage their working-class peers, they did appear to recognize that in a class of more than twenty students, they were their own best advocates. Given the constraints on the teacher’s time and attention, getting the help that they sought required a willingness to put their needs before others’.

Like middle-class children in other studies (Nelson & Schutz 2007; Rist 1970), and like middle-class parents in Lareau’s (2000, 2003) research, middle-class children demonstrated ease and fluency in their interactions with teachers: moving quickly, speaking loudly and clearly, and making direct eye-contact. During math class, for example, Ms. Burns wrote three measurement problems on the board and told her fourth-graders to “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, Christian and Edward, both middle-class, called out with questions, and both got help right away. Three minutes later, Ms. Burns finally noticed Haley and went over to help. While teachers did not intentionally privilege middle-class over their working-class peers, middle-class students’ assertive styles were often more effective in quickly capturing the teacher’s attention and securing the help that they sought.

While middle-class children’s help-seeking strategies provided clear advantages in the classroom, such efforts also had drawbacks. For example, while teachers generally equated help with motivation and proactive learning, they also felt that excessive requests undermined students’ “problem-solving skills.” 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) 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, usually calm and soft-spoken, patiently answered their questions. As the requests continued, however, Mr. Potter became increasingly agitated. Ten minutes later, he declared loudly: “I’ve had it!” chastising the students for failing to “problem-solve” and for acting like “crybabies who don’t wanna do the work.” Such overt expressions of frustration, however, were extremely rare. Usually they were more subtle, as when Ms. Dunham became increasingly short in her replies to (middle-class) Mandy’s seven questions (one after another) about a book report. In most of these cases, however, the middle-class students still got the help that they desired. Thus, while middle-

class students risked provoking the teachers' frustrations, the benefits of doing so generally outweighed the costs.

Working-Class Students

In asking for help, working-class students 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. While these strategies were sometimes effective in soliciting assistance from teachers, in other cases, teachers did not immediately notice students' needs. In these situations, and as we saw in the example with Haley above, working-class children generally did not try more alternative strategies (e.g., calling out or approaching the teacher). Similarly, during a Social Studies test in Mr. Potter's class, Shannon, a working-class girl with a round face and brown hair, raised her hand timidly. 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. 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. Unlike their middle-class peers, working-class students did not seem to feel entitled to immediate attention, or to put their needs before those of others. As a result, working-class students often spent a great deal of time waiting for teachers.

In some instances, working-class students gave up entirely, never receiving the help that they sought. During science, for example, Ms. Hudson explained to her fifth-graders (all of whom were sitting on the rug) 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 his head. Not seeing Jared’s 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 line instead of a “web,” 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.

On the rare occasions when working-class students used more proactive help-seeking strategies, they approached these interactions 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, was in the bathroom. When Zach returned, he realized that he missed the directions. Zach initially tried to ask his friend, Tyler (middle-class) to explain. Tyler, 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, shaking his fists lightly, looking uncomfortable.

When Mr. Fischer turned to go back to his desk, he noticed Zach waiting behind him:

Mr. Fischer sees 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... like, how long do the, uh... captions have to be?”

While Mr. Fischer was willing to help (readily explaining the directions Zach missed), asking for help appeared to be an extremely stressful endeavor for Zach. While working-class children did occasionally ask for help from teachers (doing so primarily as a last-resort), they exhibited the same sense of discomfort in these interactions that Lareau (2000, 2003) describes working-class parents having in their exchanges with schools.

Similarly, during a Social Studies test, Mr. Potter was sitting at the front of the room, grading papers. Meanwhile, Ashleigh, a very tall 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 going 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.

Working-class children like Zach and Ashleigh were often loud and playful with friends during free periods. When asking for help, however, they generally approached teachers slowly, spoke softly, and avoided direct eye-contact. Similarly, when working-class students “called out” for help, they often did so quietly enough that teachers did not hear them. While working-class students had acquired some middle-class help-seeking strategies (e.g., calling out and approaching teachers),²¹ they lacked fluency and ease in using them (Bourdieu 1977; Lamont & Lareau 1990), and did so less often than did their middle-class peers.

Overall, then, there were meaningful class differences in the frequency and nature of students’ help-seeking interactions. This was apparent in the types of help students requested, the strategies they used, and the contexts in which they did so. Middle-class students often created their own opportunities for help-seeking. They did so overtly, by interrupting or even stepping to the front of the line, and more subtly, by waiting for opportune moments to interject, watching teachers carefully and acting just as teachers paused or turned toward them. Working-class

students, on the other hand, tended to ask for help only when teachers were otherwise unoccupied (rare occurrences in many classrooms), only when other sources of help were unavailable (as during tests, when talking to other students was prohibited), and only after middle-class peers had made similar requests. As a result, middle-class students were better able to negotiate their own opportunities for learning, soliciting help to complete assignments quickly, accurately, and without incident.

Alternative Explanations

Overall, class-based patterns in children's help-seeking were consistent and clear. That said, there were two working-class students who asked for help somewhat more often than others (both higher-achieving students with many middle-class friends), and some middle-class students who did so less often (particularly those who were extremely shy). Thus, I also considered how help-seeking varied on other dimensions like age, gender, and achievement. While requests for help became more common as children moved from third to fifth grade, class-based help-seeking patterns were similar across grades. Likewise, while I noticed some gender differences in classroom behavior (e.g., boys joked more with teachers), help-seeking did not vary systematically by gender (See Appendix B1). As noted above, requests for help were somewhat more common among higher-achieving and more outgoing students than among their lower-achieving and less outgoing peers. That said, these variations were far less pronounced than the social-class differences that I observed (See Appendix B2 for comparisons of help-seeking by academic achievement).²² Similarly, while teaching styles²³ did impact the overall frequency of help-seeking (variations I will explore in future research), there were parallel class differences in help-seeking across all of the classrooms I observed. Taken together, these results suggest that

social-class backgrounds were the most prominent mediator of children's help-seeking styles and strategies.

Working-class students may have tried to signal their need for help in other ways. Studies suggest, for example, that students who are struggling sometimes act out in the classroom (Metz 1978). I did not, however, observe systematic differences in children's misbehavior. Furthermore, because teachers did not view misbehavior as appropriate "help-seeking," they did not respond to such actions by offering help. 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. Thus, even if working-class students who were struggling did act out rather than ask for help, these strategies would have yielded little success.

Because Maplewood's class diversity makes it a somewhat atypical school (Rumberger & Palardy 2005), some might question whether working-class students at Maplewood sought help less often because they were more isolated or mistreated in this setting. Unlike Rist (1970), however, I did not find class differences in the treatment children received from teachers or peers. Working-class students, at Maplewood, for example, were not ostracized by their classmates—they generally had middle-class friends and were not teased for their class status. They also participated actively in classrooms, often volunteering to help the teacher, read aloud, share their work, and answer questions (See Appendix C for comparisons of students' participation by social class). Teachers, in turn, welcomed working-class students' engagement and went out of their way to provide unsolicited assistance to students they thought might be struggling. Teachers also did not group students by social class—seating arrangements rotated at least monthly and work-groups were usually self-selected or randomly assigned. While Maplewood teachers seemed to assume that some of their working-class, white students were

middle-class (Lewis 2001), they were also aware that other working-class, white students received free or reduced-price lunches and had “tough home lives.”²⁴ Even in these cases, however, I did not observe teachers mistreating these students in any way. Overall, then, these findings suggest that the class differences that I observed at Maplewood primarily reflected the cultural capital that children brought with them to the classroom.

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 1977; 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 young people’s agency (Carter 2003; Corsaro 2005; Thorne 1994; MacLeod 1995; McRobbie 2001; Willis 1980), they fail to explore class-based variations in students’ behaviors and their consequences 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 those that children secured on their own behalf. Teachers and classroom rules provided little explicit guidance about when to seek help from teachers and how to do so. Thus, students drew on their class backgrounds to deal with problems at school. Because middle-class help-seeking propensities and strategies elicited a stronger and faster response from teachers, they became a form of cultural capital that, when used, yielded meaningful social and educational profits (Lareau 2000,2003; Lareau & Weininger 2003). Furthermore, while working-class children occasionally sought help, and while they had acquired some middle-class strategies (e.g., calling out and approaching the teacher), they lacked fluency and ease in using them (Bourdieu 1977; Lamont & Lareau 1990).

Unlike much research on cultural capital, this study shows the profits gained from demonstrating these propensities and strategies in institutional settings. In addition to allowing students to complete work more quickly and correctly and avoid problems in the classroom, proactive help-seeking also benefitted students by granting access to the resources and support of teachers and other powerful institutional agents.²⁵ As Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) suggest, “supportive ties with institutional agents represent a necessary condition for engagement and advancement in the educational system and, ultimately, for success in the occupational structure” (117). Thus, class differences in help-seeking have implications far beyond the elementary school classroom. In middle- and high-school, for example, children who request help may receive more guidance about course-taking and college-going, decisions that affect future course-placement, college attendance, and employment opportunities (Schneider, Swanson, and Riegle-Crumb 1998; Eccles, Vida, and Barber 2004). In high-school, college, and even in the workforce, those who proactively seek help may also be perceived by institutional agents as more driven and committed, and thus more deserving of support (Stanton-Salazar 1997). And yet, while working-class students may benefit most from the help of institutional agents,²⁶ their limited cultural capital restricts access to these critical resources, allowing middle-class students to more successfully navigate a path to success both in school and beyond.

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 numerous demands on teachers’ attention) prompted teachers to be more responsive to assertive and proactive help-seeking efforts. This

does not mean, however, that teachers and other school officials could not alleviate some of the consequences of class differences in students' help-seeking. While future research should assess this point in more detail, these results do suggest that teachers could more explicitly state their expectations regarding the appropriate times and strategies for help-seeking, make themselves more accessible to students, and actively encourage all students (and particularly those from working-class backgrounds) to feel comfortable approaching them with these types of requests.²⁷

I would also contend, however, that children play a more active role in shaping their classroom experiences than even Mehan has recognized. In addition to my observations, I also conducted interviews with the Maplewood students, asking them to discuss their classroom behaviors and those of their peers (For further details, see identifying reference). In these interviews, children described their decisions about when and how to seek help. While space constraints prevent a full discussion of these findings, I can say that both middle-class and working-class students reported wanting and appreciating teachers' help. That said, working-class also students expressed uncertainty about when and how to seek help, and concern about making teachers "upset" with their requests.²⁸ Middle-class children instead expressed little hesitation about help-seeking, expecting teachers to be responsive to their requests. Middle-class children also recognized that classroom conditions made it difficult for teachers to be aware of their needs, and described how they would carefully monitor the teacher and make strategic efforts to get the teacher's immediate attention (e.g., waiting until the teacher turned toward them to raise their hand or call out).²⁹ These findings suggest that children actively drew on their class-based dispositions to guide their classroom interactions. Regardless of children's motivations, however, it is their behaviors to which teachers respond. Thus, it is only when

students' help-seeking propensities and strategies align with institutional conditions that they become a form of cultural capital, yielding meaningful profits in the classroom and beyond.

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 culture in reproducing social inequalities. Like Willis (1980) and MacLeod (1995), it focuses specifically on young people's class cultures and their 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 attitudes and aspirations, but also on their actions and interactions in institutional settings, their choices about whether to seek help and how to do so (choices that may have important ramifications for the formation of aspirations and expectations). By using their cultural capital in the classroom, children generated unequal social profits. In repeatedly saying "I need help!" middle-class children gained advantages that helped to reinforce existing social and educational inequalities.

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¹ 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; Lareau 2000, 2003; Lewis 2001). Such differences may be more pronounced where class divisions are clearer, as in European countries (Van Zanten 2007).

² Some scholars operationalize this concept as high-status cultural consumption (DiMaggio 1982). Others discuss “dominant” and “non-dominant” forms of cultural capital (Carter 2003).

³ Carter relies exclusively on interviews; Willis and McRobbie primarily observe students outside of school.

⁴ Self-reports of behavior are also potentially unreliable (Presser & Stinson 1998).

⁵ Unlike the teachers at Nelson and Schutz’s working-class preschool, 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).

⁶ Like most ethnographies, this is a case study of a non-random sample of individuals in a particular setting (Burawoy et al. 1991). Thus, the primary goal is not to offer generalizations but to understand the meanings associated with interactions.

⁷ These studies, however, 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.

⁸ Stanton-Salazar (1997) correctly recognizes that help-seeking is a mechanism for activating social capital—the social ties an individual has and the resources available through these relationships (Bourdieu 1985). And yet, given the debates around the appropriate

conceptualization of social capital (see Portes 1998 for a review), I avoid discussing help-seeking in relation to this term.

⁹ I solicited parental consent for all children in the target cohort, excluding full-time special-education students. I received permission to observe all but 19 students (12 refused; 7 never returned consent forms despite repeated contacts). For this analysis, I exclude 6 (middle-class) Asian-American students and 4 (working-class) Latino students, though I found little evidence of systematic racial/ethnic differences in help-seeking. I also exclude 12 additional students who moved away during the study (6 working-class; 6 middle-class).

¹⁰ These are particularly important for students' educational outcomes (Condrón 2009; Kalmijn 1994).

¹¹ Middle-class families lived in owned mid- to large-sized, single-family homes, and had incomes ranging from \$50,000 to more than \$200,000.

¹² Working-class families lived in rented apartments or mobile homes, or in smaller single-family homes (3 families owned their homes), and all but one had incomes between \$25,000 and \$75,000.

¹³ Jesse's mother, a single-mother of two, works part-time while attending community college.

¹⁴ Differences in teaching styles and their relationship to children's help-seeking are beyond the scope of this analysis, but see Blumenfeld et al. (1978), and Good (1987).

¹⁵ Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted 45-90 minutes and took place in teachers' classrooms. Some teachers were interviewed twice.

¹⁶ I selected observation periods during which all working-class students were present.

¹⁷ Counts of different subject periods in a given classroom were not always collected on the same day.

¹⁸ Even in the few classrooms where “Raise your hand” was a rule, teachers frequently suspended this rule, allowing and even encouraging students to call out or approach them directly rather than waiting. As studies have shown, while teachers are the primary authority in the classroom, “the development and enforcement of rules and procedures... often proceed through an informal [and ongoing] negotiation between the teacher and the students” (Stevenson 1991: 128; see also McNeil 1986).

¹⁹ I base this estimate on fieldnotes from 345 hours of observations. During my counting sessions, I also found that students initiated, on average, 57 teacher-student interactions per hour, and that 35% of these involved help-seeking.

²⁰ Working-class students demonstrated propensities and strategies (including self-reliance, patience, and obedience) that, while less effective for negotiating opportunities at school, may have facilitated interactions in other spheres, most notably in working-class families (Kohn 1963; Lamont 2000; Lareau 2003; Willis 1981).

²¹ While it is beyond the scope of this analysis to consider how working-class students acquire help-seeking skills, it seems possible that they could learn them both from teachers’ stated expectations and from observing their classmates’ actions.

²² Among both middle-class and working-class children, 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).

²³ Some teachers were more sarcastic while others were soft-spoken and warm; some spent more time at their desks.

²⁴ This is consistent with research showing higher rates of family instability among poor and working-class families (Conger, Conger & Martin 2010).

²⁵ See Stanton-Salazar (1997) for a discussion of the forms of support that institutional agents can provide.

²⁶ Because working-class families lack direct ties to institutions, working-class children are more structurally dependent “on nonfamilial institutional agents for institutional support” (Stanton-Salazar 1997:20).

²⁷ In socioeconomically diverse schools like Maplewood, teachers could also use middle-class students’ requests as a guide to the kinds of assistance, clarification, and information that would benefit the class as a whole.

²⁸ This aligns with Lareau’s (2000,2003) findings that working-class families are both more uncertain about institutional expectations and more hesitant to question the authority of institutional agents.

²⁹ Working-class students were somewhat aware of their peers’ proactive help-seeking tactics, but viewed these strategies as disrespectful to teachers and classmates. They also seemed to define “necessary” help more narrowly.