

# Help-Seekers and Silent Strugglers

## Student Problem-Solving in Elementary Classrooms

*By Jessica Calarco*

One February morning, the students in Ms. Dunham's fifth-grade class were taking a math test. Jesse, a student from a suburban working-class family, was bent over his desk, tapping his pencil, a deep frown on his face. Ms. Dunham weaved her way around the room, glancing over students' shoulders as they worked. Sensing Jesse's frustration, she paused next to his desk. Leaning down, she whispered: "You OK?" Jesse looked up sheepishly. Pointing at question 5, he hesitated and admitted quietly: "I don't get this one." Ms. Dunham nodded and gave Jesse a quick explanation.

After Ms. Dunham finished explaining, Jesse continued to frown, but she did not notice. As soon as Ms. Dunham finished answering Jesse's question, Ellen, a student from a middle-class family, thrust her hand high in the air and whispered loudly: "Ms. Dunham!"

Ms. Dunham immediately turned toward Ellen. Ellen let her shoulders fall in a dramatic slump. "What does number 5 mean?" Ms. Dunham gave Ellen the same brief answer she gave Jesse, but Ellen was not satisfied; she immediately followed up with another question: "Wait, but does that mean we're supposed to multiply?"

Ms. Dunham went over to Ellen and squatted beside her, talking her through the

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problem with a longer, more detailed explanation. From across the room, Jesse watched Ms. Dunham for a moment and then sighed softly, sinking lower in his chair and continuing to frown at his test.

When I talked to Jesse about this incident later, he explained with frustration that although Ms. Dunham tried to help him, he “didn’t even understand what she said,” and he blamed himself for not understanding: “Ellen is smart, and when Ms. Dunham finished with me, she went over there, and Ellen got the question right.”

As Jesse and Ellen illustrate, students’ experiences and outcomes—even in the same classroom—often diverge along socioeconomic lines.\* As I will explain, students from different backgrounds tend to manage problems in contrasting ways. Those differences, in turn, have real consequences in the classroom. They show the pervasive and often nonmonetary ways that social class matters in our schools.

### **Social Class Differences in Learning and Parenting**

In attempting to explain the role of social class in the classroom, scholars typically point to schools and families. Teachers want the best for their students, but they also face real challenges in their efforts to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to succeed. We know, for example, that students from working-class families often attend schools with limited resources.<sup>1</sup> Even in the same schools, children from middle-class families tend to be assigned to higher academic tracks or ability groups.<sup>2</sup> There is also some evidence that teachers, whether they realize it or not, may hold less-privileged students to different standards than their middle-class peers.<sup>3</sup>

We also know that families from different social classes are not equally equipped to support their children’s learning, and that those differences generate advantages for students from middle-class families and disadvantages for students from working-class families at school. In her book *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, Annette Lareau shows that while middle-class and working-class parents both care deeply about their children’s academic success, middle-class parents are more familiar with school expectations and are more comfortable intervening at school on their children’s behalf.<sup>4</sup> This kind of parental involvement in schooling has positive effects on

children's learning and achievement, and thus contributes to inequalities in children's outcomes.<sup>5±</sup>

In Lareau's book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, she further shows that middle-class parents are better able to provide their children with the kinds of home environments and activities that research shows are conducive to learning.<sup>6</sup> Compared with their peers from working-class families, children from middle-class families have better access to educational resources,<sup>7</sup> participate in more extracurricular and enrichment activities,<sup>8</sup> and are encouraged to express themselves more frequently and fully at home.<sup>9</sup> As a result, they tend to start school ahead of their peers from working-class families,<sup>10</sup> and they also maintain those academic advantages over time.<sup>11</sup>

Through my research, I have found that these existing explanations for class-based inequalities in children's outcomes are important but limited. Specifically, they are limited by their lack of attention to the children themselves and how teachers respond to them. As my classroom observations show, children are not simply the passive recipients of advantages (or disadvantages) provided to them by their parents and their schools. Rather, the class-based behaviors that children bring with them to the classroom play a powerful role in generating educational inequalities.

As I will show, these unequal outcomes were particularly apparent with respect to children's efforts to manage challenges they encountered in the classroom. In such situations, children used different problem-solving strategies, depending on their families' socioeconomic level. More specifically, children from middle-class families tended to actively seek help from their teachers, while children from working-class families generally tried to manage problems on their own. I found that they did so because of contrasting lessons they learned at home, with parents coaching them to adopt class-based understandings of the "appropriate" way to problem solve. These different approaches, however, did not automatically generate inequalities. Rather, inequalities resulted because teachers—through no fault of their own—tended to respond to children's class-based problem-solving strategies in different ways.

### **A Fly on the Wall at Maplewood Elementary**

Before reviewing these findings in detail and discussing their implications, let me

first set the stage. I base my conclusions on more than three years of observations and interviews with students, teachers, and parents in one suburban, public elementary school. That school—which I call Maplewood—is located outside a large city on the East Coast. It enrolls approximately 500 students in grades K through 5, with four classrooms (and four teachers) in each grade. (The names of all students and teachers have been changed to protect their anonymity.) The low brick building is nestled in a quiet residential neighborhood, surrounded by trees and playing fields. The wide hallways constantly bustle with activity and are adorned with inspirational posters and colorful displays of student work.

Maplewood serves students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds but is also relatively homogeneous with respect to race and ethnicity. The majority of the students (80 percent) are white; the rest are mostly Latino or Asian American, with only a handful of African American students. In my research, I focused on the white students, as they included students from both middle-class (70 percent) and working-class (30 percent) families. This allowed me to compare how students from different socioeconomic backgrounds—but of the same race and ethnicity—interacted in the same classrooms and with the same teachers and peers.

I use very specific definitions of social class, which may differ in some ways from other common conceptions of class in American society. As I define them, the “middle-class” families at Maplewood were those in which at least one parent had both a four-year college degree and a professional or white-collar job (e.g., teacher, lawyer, engineer, office manager). While some of these families had experienced divorce or financial problems (e.g., a parent lost a job), they all led relatively comfortable lives. The “working-class” families, on the other hand, were less privileged overall. Parents in working-class families, per my definition, had lower levels of education and less occupational prestige: most had a high school diploma and worked in blue-collar or service jobs (e.g., food service worker, transportation worker, daycare provider, sales clerk). These working-class families, however, also differed from families living in poverty in that they typically had steady jobs, modest incomes, and stable relationships, with divorce rates similar to those of middle-class families.

At Maplewood, I focused on one cohort of students—those who were enrolled in third grade during the 2008–2009 school year. I followed that cohort of students over time, observing them in the fourth and fifth grades as well. During that time, I visited Maplewood at least twice weekly, for about three hours per visit. I

divided my observation times between the four classrooms in each grade, and I observed each class during a variety of subjects and activities. In the classroom, I was primarily an observer with a notebook—sitting in empty seats or circling around as the students worked—though I sometimes helped with organizational tasks or had informal conversations with students and teachers.

In addition, I conducted formal interviews with all of the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers at Maplewood, and with a group of students and parents in the cohort. I used these interviews to learn more about teachers' goals and expectations, about individual students and their home lives, and about students' interactions with parents and peers outside of school. And I supplemented this interview data with information from parent surveys, which included questions about students' family backgrounds, friendships, and activities, and students' academic records.

Qualitative studies like mine cannot say whether patterns observed in one school can also be observed in others. But that is not their goal. Instead, the goal is to understand the social processes and interactions that produce those patterns. In this study, for example, I show how differences in the support-seeking strategies of students from different social class backgrounds contributed to inequalities at school.

### **Contrasting Lessons about Problem Solving**

During my time with students, parents, and teachers, I found that children from middle-class families and those from working-class families came to school equipped with different beliefs about and different strategies for managing problems at school. These contrasting approaches to problem solving reflected the class-based lessons children learned from their parents at home. In other words, the children were often doing what their parents told them to do. When teaching their children how to manage challenges at school, middle-class parents encouraged a "by-any-means" approach to problem solving that involved negotiating with teachers for assistance and accommodations. In contrast, working-class parents stressed a "no-excuses" approach to problem solving that involved respecting teachers' authority by not seeking assistance.

These contrasting messages were apparent in the lessons that both middle-class and working-class parents described teaching their children at home. In

interviews, for example, I asked parents what they thought their children should do if they were confused or struggling at school. Without hesitation, one middle-class mother said:

I always tell them they should go up to the teacher and ask. Whether it's [to] raise their hand or quietly walk up to the teacher and ask. But they should ask. They should get clarification, as opposed to making a bad decision or getting it wrong. No matter what the question is, as long as they ask respectfully. I think you should always be able to ask questions in any life situation. So I always tell my kids: "The answer's always no until you ask. So you gotta ask. If they say no, then you haven't lost anything. But that doesn't usually happen. Usually they help you—you find out something. Even if it's not much more, you're better off for having asked."

Like this mother, middle-class parents taught their children to feel entitled to assistance and to recognize that asking was always better than "making a bad decision or getting it wrong."

Working-class parents, on the other hand, worried that teachers might perceive requests for help or clarification as disrespectful. As a result, they offered their children very different lessons about managing problems at school. In interviews, I asked working-class parents the same questions about what they thought their children should do if they were confused or struggling. After thinking about this question for a moment, Mr. Graham, a working-class father, carefully explained:

My kids know that you just do your best and try. I just want my kids to be respectful, responsible. I try to be on the proactive, teaching them about being responsible and just getting it done. I tell 'em to just get it done and not complain. I always tell 'em: "Look, if you've gotta give somebody a hard time, give it to me. Don't give it to your teachers." And I've never had a teacher complain. My kids are good for the teachers.

Mr. Graham went on to recall that when his high-achieving daughter, Amelia, was in third grade, she came home from school confused about a comment on her report card, telling her father that the comment "didn't seem to make sense." Recalling his response, Mr. Graham explained: "I told her not to ask about it, cuz the teacher probably wouldn't be too happy." Like other working-class parents, Mr. Graham seemed to equate questions with complaints or excuses. He wanted to protect his children from reprimand, and thus taught them that teachers would

be upset by requests for clarification. In light of these beliefs, working-class parents encouraged their children to work hard and to manage problems on their own.

### **Contrasting Problem-Solving Strategies**

Parents' lessons prompted students from middle-class and working-class families to view classroom challenges in contrasting ways. Students from middle-class families felt entitled to assistance from teachers and were very comfortable making requests. In interviews, for example, they often said things like: "It was easy to talk to the teacher if I had questions," or "I don't want to guess and risk getting it wrong, because then I won't get as high a grade as I should have gotten. So it's better to go up and ask the teacher." While shy and high-achieving children from middle-class families were sometimes nervous about speaking up or being perceived as "stupid," their parents' persistent coaching helped to reassure these children that teachers would welcome their requests and that the benefits would outweigh the risks.

Students from working-class families, on the other hand, held a very different view. Like their parents, they worried that teachers would perceive requests for assistance as a sign of laziness or disrespect. In interviews, for example, students from working-class families would often say things like: "You need to work hard and learn things. Like, teachers give you work to learn things. And if you get help, you're not learning," or "Teachers want you to be able to figure it out for yourself, because you're not always gonna be able to ask," or "If you have a question, like about homework, you should just skip it. You don't wanna go up and bug the teacher."

While students from middle-class families felt entitled to assistance and focused on the possible benefits of help-seeking, students from working-class families were deeply concerned about the potential drawbacks associated with such requests. As a result, they typically tried to deal with problems on their own rather than reaching out to their teachers.

An example from Ms. Nelson's fourth-grade math class makes these contrasting patterns apparent. At the beginning of each math period, Ms. Nelson asks her students to find their randomly assigned "math buddies" and pick a spot in the room to work. She then has each pair work together to complete a worksheet

reinforcing the concepts from the previous day's lessons.

One morning, during a unit on multiplication, Ms. Nelson handed out a worksheet that instructed students to "fill in the blanks" in various sets of multiplication facts (e.g., \_\_\_\_\_, 22, \_\_\_\_\_, 44, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, 77) and then "find the patterns" for each row. While the first task was relatively straightforward, many of the pairs found themselves confused by the second half of the directions. Brian and Kelly, both students from middle-class families, completed the facts quickly, but then began to debate what it meant to "find the patterns." Almost immediately, Brian suggested: "Let's ask Ms. Nelson." Kelly nodded and they both jumped up from their seats.

Stopping in front of Ms. Nelson, Brian thrust out the worksheet and declared breathlessly: "We got all the facts, but we don't know what kinds of patterns we're supposed to find."

As Ms. Nelson was answering this question, a number of other students from middle-class families also got up to ask for help with the directions. One of these students, Danny, was working with Tory, a student from a working-class family. While Tory waited at her seat, Danny got up to ask for help. Ms. Nelson answered the students' questions patiently, reminding them of the activity the day before.<sup>±</sup>

Meanwhile, two students from working-class families, Sadie and Carter, were also struggling with the worksheet but did not ask for help. Sitting nearby, I could hear them whispering as they bent over their worksheets, frowning. Rather than complete all of the facts and then look for patterns, Sadie and Carter had filled in only the first row and were arguing in hushed voices about what kinds of patterns they were supposed to find.

Although Ms. Nelson was circling the room, Sadie and Carter never asked for help. Fifteen minutes after the start of the math period, they were the only students still working. After glancing at the clock, Ms. Nelson turned to them and said: "You guys! Time's up. You were the only group that didn't finish. You guys need to work better together." Sadie and Carter looked down at the floor, squirming nervously, but said nothing. In that moment, they could have explained to Ms. Nelson that they were struggling to understand the directions for the worksheet, but they did not.

This reluctance to seek help was typical among students from working-class

families, and it had real consequences. Like Sadie and Carter, students from working-class families often took longer to finish their assignments or completed them incorrectly. Furthermore, because these students did not acknowledge their struggles, teachers often assumed, as Ms. Nelson did, that they were off task, and thus reprimanded them for not being more focused. Ironically, however, students from working-class families tended to avoid seeking help out of a desire to avoid frustrating the teachers with their requests. As Sadie explained in an interview, “If you have a question, like about homework, you should just skip it. You don’t wanna go up and bug the teacher.”

While the teachers at Maplewood were generally very willing to answer questions (and I never saw a teacher reprimand a student for seeking help), students from working-class families worried that teachers might respond negatively if they asked for help at the wrong time or in the wrong way. This put teachers in a bind. It was hard for them to help students if they didn’t know they were having trouble.

That said, and as we saw with Jesse, the student I mentioned earlier, children from working-class families did sometimes acknowledge their struggles. In these instances, however, they tended to be less assertive than their middle-class peers. Like Ellen, students from middle-class families would often call out to or approach the teacher directly, even interrupting to ask questions. Furthermore, if teachers tried to defer answering such questions, or if they offered only minimal information, students from middle-class families tended to continue asking for more complete or more immediate assistance.

Students from working-class families, like Jesse, on the other hand, would generally wait for teachers to approach them and offer assistance. Furthermore, when these students did try to seek help, they tended to raise their hands rather than call out to teachers or approach them with questions. As Sadie explained in her interview, “If the teacher says, ‘Did anybody have any problems with the homework?’ then you can raise your hand.” Also, like Jesse, these students rarely asked follow-up questions, even when they were still confused.

## **How Teachers Can Help**

By adopting a more assertive approach to help-seeking, children from middle-class families tended to receive more attention and assistance from teachers and,

as a result, tended to complete their work more quickly and more accurately than did their peers from working-class families. Thus, class differences in children's problem-solving strategies often resulted in unequal educational outcomes.

A key question, then, is why? While some might assume that middle-class approaches to problem solving were inherently better, I found that it was not the children's strategies themselves that led to these unequal outcomes but rather the *teachers' responses* to those strategies. I don't at all mean to imply that teachers at Maplewood were overtly biased against children from working-class families. In many ways, it was clear they cared deeply about all their students and worried about those who, as one teacher noted, were not getting enough "support at home." But despite their good intentions, the structure of the school day and the pressures they faced made it hard for teachers to provide equal support to all their students.

The teachers at Maplewood often felt overwhelmed by accountability mandates, mountains of paperwork, large class sizes, curriculum changes, and constant meeting requests. As one teacher explained, "It's not that we don't care. It's just that we've got our heads down trying to get things done." Faced with numerous demands on their time and attention, teachers often found it hard to assess and respond to each student's individual needs. There simply was not enough time in the day to repeatedly check on each student and provide him or her with personalized support and assistance.

My classroom observations suggest that teachers can inadvertently contribute to classroom inequalities, at least in part, by misreading the thinking behind students' problem-solving strategies. That said, this is not the fault of teachers. As one Maplewood teacher pointed out to his students, "I can't read minds. You have to let me know [if you are struggling]." Still, if educators are aware of their students' class-based patterns and possible misperceptions, they may be better equipped to help all their students succeed.

To avoid having social class unduly influence students' problem-solving strategies, teachers can set clear expectations for when and how students should seek help. In some situations, the teachers at Maplewood explicitly encouraged their students to ask for help and actively demonstrated their willingness to answer questions. They did this both through their words (e.g., "Let me know if you have any questions," and "Come and see me up here if you need help") and through

their actions (e.g., circling the room, checking students' progress, and watching for signs of struggle). In these instances, students from middle-class families readily sought assistance, and students from working-class families were more willing to do so.

During a fifth-grade art class, for example, the students worked on collages while the teacher, Ms. Cantore, circled the room. Meanwhile, Haley, a student from a working-class family, was struggling to find her collage, digging frantically through the project bin at the back of the room. She did not initially call out or ask for help, but as Ms. Cantore circled past, she noticed the worried frown on Haley's face and asked gently: "You OK?" Keeping her eyes down, Haley said quietly: "I can't find my collage. It's not here."

Ms. Cantore gave Haley a reassuring smile and explained: "I put the ones without names on the table up front. Lindsay [a student from a middle-class family] just found hers up there. Let's see if we can find yours, too." Haley nodded gratefully and followed Ms. Cantore to the front table, where they searched together through the collages without names and eventually located Haley's in the stack. As Ms. Cantore illustrates in this example, when teachers' willingness to assist was more explicit, students from working-class families were more comfortable seeking help, as they could rest assured they would not be reprimanded for their requests.

Certainly, the teachers I observed did not mean to confuse or frustrate students. Rather, ambiguities in teachers' expectations resulted, in large part, from the dynamic and interactive nature of today's elementary school classrooms. Teachers used their professional judgment to adjust their standards around help-seeking, doing so for different activities (e.g., tests versus in-class projects), for the time constraints they were facing (e.g., "We have to move on or we won't have time to finish"), and even in response to the appropriateness of particular requests (e.g., "We'll talk about that later"). And yet, when teachers did not make expectations around seeking help extremely explicit, students were left to determine whether and how to make requests. Such decisions, in turn, tended to exacerbate social class differences in student help-seeking.

By no means do teachers intend to respond to students in different ways. Such actions are more often than not inadvertent and unintentional. Outside pressures like testing and paperwork, for example, take teachers' time and attention away

from their students. These factors are often outside of the control of teachers.

Yet, they can still take steps to control how they respond to students' requests for help. Teachers can be cognizant of the need to make clear their expectations for fielding questions in the classroom. They can take time—when possible—to check on students as they work and offer assistance to those who appear to be struggling. They can also reassure their students that questions will not result in reprimand, that directions cannot cover all situations, and that confusion is normal. Even beyond these concrete steps, simply being aware of the differences that students bring with them to school can help level the playing field. It is important that teachers realize the power they have to prevent students' social class backgrounds from determining who receives support in managing challenges at school.

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*Jessica Calarco is an assistant professor of sociology at Indiana University and a former intern with the AFT's educational issues department. Her research focuses on social inequalities with respect to children, culture, education, and families. This article is based on research published in the American Sociological Review (2011 and 2014) and in Social Psychology Quarterly (2014).*

\*I determined students' class backgrounds using data from parent surveys. Teachers generally had only a vague sense of students' family circumstances, including knowing which students received free lunches. ([back to the article](#))

†Maplewood has very few students who live below the poverty line. Thus, I focused primarily on the differences between students from working-class and middle-class families. If the study had included more students from poor families, I suspect that the social class differences I observed in students' problem-solving would have been similar or even more pronounced. ([back to the article](#))

‡When students from middle-class and working-class families worked together, students from middle-class families would often take the lead in asking teachers for help. ([back to the article](#))

## Endnotes

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