

How Self-Regulated Learners Cope with Academic Difficulty: The Role of Adaptive Help Seeking

WHEN FACING DIFFICULT ACADEMIC TASKS, many students exert little effort. They give up prematurely, sit passively, or persist unsuccessfully on their own. Other students are actively engaged in certain classroom situations but passive in others. Still others consistently exhibit resilience. Student engagement in the face of difficulty depends on many factors, including (a) how the child has been socialized over the years and (b) how he or she is presently being taught in the classroom. Since young children are innately curious and eager to learn, two important issues emerge. First, there is the developmental question: “Why have many children become passive learners who do not take the initiative required to overcome adversity, while others remain motivated in the face of potential failure?” Second, there is the educational question: “How do classroom teachers facilitate—or inhibit—students’ efforts at overcoming adversity?” This article addresses the second question, with a specific focus on how teachers can encourage elementary and middle-school students to seek help with academic work they cannot do on their own.

The emphasis here is on *adaptive help seeking* (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Newman, 1994)—asking for the help needed in order to learn independently, not simply to obtain the correct answer. When students monitor their academic performance, show aware-

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ness of difficulty they cannot overcome on their own, and exhibit the wherewithal and self-determination to remedy that difficulty by requesting assistance from a more knowledgeable individual, they are exhibiting mature, strategic behavior. Help seeking can avert possible failure, maintain engagement, lead to task success, and increase the likelihood of long-term mastery and autonomous learning. Indeed, adaptive help seeking is a strategy of self-regulated learning. When engaged in difficult tasks on their own, students often must take the initiative to enlist the help of teachers and peers. With development and its associated expectations of independence, the responsibility for obtaining assistance falls increasingly on the students’ shoulders.

Self-regulated learners possess a “tool kit” of strategies for dealing with academic challenge and are motivated to use appropriate strategies at the appropriate time. Specific competencies and motivational resources are required for adaptive help seeking: (a) cognitive competencies (i.e., knowing when help is necessary, knowing that others can help, knowing how to ask a question that yields precisely what is needed); (b) social competencies (i.e., knowing who is the best person to approach for help, knowing how to carry out a request for help in a socially appropriate way); (c) personal motivational resources (i.e., personal goals, self-beliefs, and feelings associated with tolerance for task difficulty; willingness to express to

others a need for help; and a sense of personal agency); and (d) contextual motivational resources (i.e., classroom factors such as goals, grading systems, collaborative activities, student-teacher interaction, and teacher expectations for the child that facilitate help seeking).

This article is organized around key aspects of a self-system theory (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Newman, 2000). Children have three self-system needs that underlie self-regulated learning: relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Children have a need to, first, feel that others care about their well-being; second, feel they are in charge of their own actions; and third, feel competent. Self-perceptions of relatedness, autonomy, and competence influence the degree to which children regulate their own learning. Thus, socializers need to provide children with involvement (e.g., nurturance and affective closeness), support for autonomy (e.g., encouragement of independence), and support for competence (e.g., lessons that instill a sense of competence and an understanding that academic success is contingent on competence). In this article, I discuss ways in which teachers can satisfy students' self-system needs and thereby contribute to their competencies and motivational resources required for adaptive help seeking. I also discuss how peers—within the classroom setting—can influence students' help seeking.

Involvement With Students

Teacher influence

In classrooms in which teachers share with children their time, energy, and nurturance, students tend to be attentive, effortful, self-expressive, and interested in learning. Teacher involvement is important in adaptive help seeking because of two mediating processes: teacher-student intersubjectivity and students' personal beliefs.

Teacher-student intersubjectivity. Teachers perceived as caring and involved typically establish classrooms that are characterized by “intersubjectivity” (i.e., attunement of teacher's and student's purpose, focus, and affect). When teachers and students are “on the same page,” teachers are especially able to take the student's perspective and understand his or her thinking (e.g., regarding a particular academic task) and, based on

this understanding, appropriately guide the student's learning. Intersubjectivity may mitigate the power differential common to student-teacher relations. Teachers who are perceived as friendly and caring demonstrate “democratic interaction” styles, with lines of communication open to students (Wentzel, 1997). Caring teachers tend to listen, ask questions, inquire if students need help, make sure students understand difficult material, and provide help in a nonthreatening way. When they experience this type of communication, students learn that teachers are trustworthy helpers. For students already disengaged at school, teacher involvement may be especially important. Low achievers, who often have poor self-perceptions of ability and low self-esteem, typically are reluctant to seek academic help in class. Yet, this reluctance is reduced in classrooms in which teachers believe their responsibility is to attend to students' academic as well as social and emotional needs (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998).

Beliefs about help seeking. Teacher involvement forms the basis of students' beliefs and feelings about both the benefits and costs of help seeking. In turn, what students think and feel about seeking help may well affect actual help-seeking behavior.

Preschoolers, kindergartners, and first graders who approach their teacher for assistance generally do so because of global, affective traits of the teacher (e.g., niceness and kindness). With age, children become aware of additional ways the teacher can meet their needs. By the middle of elementary school, for example, students judge a teacher as helpful when he or she is aware of their problems and gives them advice, time, energy, and encouragement to ask questions in class. Throughout the elementary and middle-school years, perceptions of mutual liking and friendship with the teacher are important factors in students' help seeking (Newman & Schwager, 1993). But students also have negative views of teachers with regard to help seeking. As early as second grade, students fear negative reactions (e.g., “I think she might think I'm dumb”) if they ask for help (Newman & Goldin, 1990). Perceived costs are heightened when students experience teachers they perceive as unwilling to help (e.g., “If you had paid attention, you wouldn't

need to ask that question”). Because of their need for peer approval and need to protect their self-worth, older students are particularly afraid of “looking dumb” in front of their teachers.

Students integrate or weigh perceived benefits and costs of help seeking. This integration process becomes increasingly complex over the school years. Elementary and middle-school students generally are aware of the benefits (e.g., “asking questions helps you learn”) as well as the costs (e.g., “it’s embarrassing”) of going to the teacher. Yet in elementary grades, students decide whether to actually seek help depending only on the degree to which they expect benefits. At middle school, students decide based on expectations of benefits as well as expectations of costs. That is, with transition to middle school, thoughts and fears about costs compete with beliefs about benefits. Students in upper grades increasingly struggle with deciding what to do when they need assistance with schoolwork (Newman, 1990).

Peer influence

Can peer involvement also influence help seeking? Yes, as a result of friendships and social goals. Importantly, peer influences are constrained by the degree to which teachers and classroom rules permit students to work together and help one another.

Friendships. Friends, by definition, assist and support one another (see Berndt & Keefe, 1996). Among elementary and middle-school students, “quality” friendships are characterized by help and support as well as certain features, such as reliability, affection, intimacy, and lack of conflict and rivalry, that tend to mediate efforts at help seeking. In close relationships, children are relatively unconcerned about self-disclosure, threats to self-esteem, and indebtedness to those who help them. In a friendly context, children find it easier to manage and negotiate social demands of interactions and focus their mutual efforts on learning and problem solving. Among friends, help seeking is most likely to result in requested information and thereby is reinforced as an effective learning strategy. In contrast, children in conflictual relationships typically are reluctant to disclose difficulties to one another and probably would not expect help to be forthcoming even if they requested it.

Social goals. The more strongly they strive for goals of social affiliation (i.e., desire for friendship and intimacy), the more students value and use help seeking as a strategy for dealing with academic difficulties (Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997). These goals, however, do not guarantee that help seeking is adaptive. Children may appear to work together and request help from one another but are really just goofing off. Requests among friends are sometimes socially inappropriate (e.g., shouting questions across the room) and cognitively inappropriate (e.g., requesting unnecessary help). Also, social affiliation does not guarantee that help seeking leads to academic success. When working in collaborative groups, students most interested in social affiliation tend to rely on help from peers, whereas those most interested in academic success “fall back” on the teacher (Newman & Gauvain, 1996).

Teachers can encourage students’ social affiliation. They can also downplay the importance of goals of social status (i.e., desire for peer approval and popularity). The more strongly students feel that social approval from peers is important, the more they are embarrassed to ask for help in the classroom (Ryan et al., 1997). At the transition to middle school, when students tend to be especially concerned about maintaining a positive image in front of classmates, social status goals likely have a negative effect on help seeking. For example, if the student’s self-esteem is easily threatened and his or her peer group does not value academic success, these goals often inhibit help seeking. Importantly, however, inhibition seems to be buffered if the student has a strong sense of self and has a peer group that does value learning. Students who want to learn but feel peer pressure not to “look dumb” have to coordinate different goals as they decide what to do when facing academic difficulty. Goal coordination may be particularly daunting for the student who wants to learn but whose peer group exerts pressure not to “look smart” (Wentzel, 1996).

Autonomy Support for Students Teacher influence

Self-regulated learners feel autonomous. This does not mean they are self-sufficient and isolated from others. On the contrary, they feel comfortable

asking for assistance when necessary. An important way teachers can support autonomy and facilitate adaptive help seeking involves achievement-related goals.

Teachers establish different types of classroom goals (Ames, 1992). When they emphasize the importance of long-term mastery, autonomy, and the intrinsic value of learning (e.g., by using criterion-referenced grading and collaborative activities), teachers foster classroom *learning* goals. In this environment, students truly interested in understanding ask the teacher for task-related information that helps resolve difficulties; those students who choose not to seek help generally like the challenge of persevering on their own. On the other hand, when teachers stress the importance of getting good grades and looking smart (e.g., by using norm-referenced grading and competitive activities), they foster classroom *performance* goals. Here, students are likely to avoid asking for assistance in order to mask low ability; however, if they do ask for help, they exhibit nonadaptive patterns of questioning (e.g., immediately asking for a correct answer without first attempting the task on their own) (Butler & Neuman, 1995; Newman & Schwager, 1995).

Teachers also must adjust to the different personal goals students bring with them to the classroom. Some students are motivated by personal learning goals. They request hints (rather than direct answers) and feedback about whether their work is correct; presumably they want to debug errors and get it right on their own. Other students, however, especially those with personal performance goals, are not particularly interested in this sort of information. The extent to which teachers accommodate individual differences in children can influence help seeking. When both classroom and personal goals emphasize learning, students are especially likely to seek help adaptively; whereas, when both types of goals emphasize performance, students are reluctant to do so. Importantly, when students who are concerned about grades and looking smart in front of peers are placed in a learning-goal classroom, they tend to overcome—and compensate for—their personal tendencies to avoid help. By being attuned to individual student's personal goals, teachers can assist students who otherwise might give up (Newman, 1998).

Peer influence

Students can support, or undermine, one another's sense of autonomy needed for adaptive help seeking. The general mechanism of influence is social comparison.

First, comparing one's performance with that of others can have a positive influence on help seeking. Because of an overly optimistic view of competence, young children often make nondiscriminating judgments about the quality of help from classmates (Stipek & Mac Iver, 1989). Social comparison offers information about others' strengths and weaknesses and permits children to accurately evaluate peers' capacity to be effective helpers (Ruble & Frey, 1991). During the elementary and middle-school years, social comparison also helps students make realistic judgments about whether they have tried hard enough on their own before turning to others. Students are increasingly able to judge when assistance is truly necessary so they can request the right amount of help—not too little and not too much (Nelson-Le Gall & Jones, 1990). Although for students in primary grades it matters little whether they are alone or not in needing assistance, at upper grades, realizing it is normal to have academic difficulty tends to minimize embarrassment (Newman & Schwager, 1993).

Social comparison can also have a negative influence on help seeking. Starting around ages 6-7, children feel uncomfortable when receiving help from peers as well as teachers. At second grade and beyond, students are more concerned that peers—in comparison to the teacher—might interpret a request for help as a sign of being “dumb” (Newman & Goldin, 1990). On transition to middle school, when it becomes so important for students to be socially accepted by classmates, there is an increase in the degree of competitiveness in many classrooms (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). At the same time, there typically are changes in how students conceptualize ability; students come to believe that “smart” children, who do not have to try very hard, and “dumb” children, who have to work extra hard, can get a similar grade on an assignment. Thus, the implication is that students come to perceive those who need help as not very “smart” (Nicholls & Miller, 1984). By raising their hand and asking for help, adolescents put their self-worth at risk (Covington, 1992).

To the degree they manage both these positive and negative aspects of social comparison in the classroom (e.g., according to grading practices and types of classroom activity), teachers ultimately hold the key for how peers influence one another's sense of autonomy needed for adaptive help seeking.

Support for Competence

Teacher influence

Teachers can influence whether students are—and feel—competent with regard to adaptive help seeking in a variety of ways. Teachers establish, and students internalize, patterns of discourse in the classroom (Cazden, 1986). Students then learn the value, usefulness, and skills of questioning. Questions and probes that teachers use to diagnose misconceptions may eventually help students ask intelligent questions, both of themselves and of others. Teacher feedback lets students know when they need help. Giving no more assistance than is necessary may help children distinguish between adaptive and excessive help seeking. Explicitly encouraging students to strategically use the help that is given to them (e.g., going back to an incorrect problem and trying to re-solve it) may help them continue to monitor their understanding and determine if they need further assistance (see Webb & Palincsar, 1996). The frequency with which teachers call on students, the amount of time they wait for a response, and the amount and type of praise they give vary from student to student. Certain students (e.g., low achievers) often learn not to volunteer questions in order to avoid negative feedback and embarrassment (Eccles & Wigfield, 1985). Classrooms in which teachers are “experts” (e.g., who present to the class an explanation without discussion and then expect students simply to practice) arguably support students' non-adaptive, dependency-oriented help seeking (Stodolsky, 1988).

On the other hand, as a result of scaffolded experiences (e.g., teachers responding to requests for help with hints and contingent instruction rather than direct and controlling answers), students have an opportunity to master difficult tasks and learn that questioning is a valuable means for solving problems. When teachers demonstrate that dilemmas and uncertainty can be tolerated—and perhaps shared and even transformed into intellectual challenge—

students may realize that it is normal not to be able to solve all problems independently (McCaslin & Good, 1996). Moreover, when teachers demonstrate to students that they deserve, and expect, answers to their questions, it can be argued that children are socialized with a personal sense of empowerment and “voice” (Nelson-Le Gall & Resnick, 1998).

Peer influence

How might students influence one another's competence needed for adaptive help seeking? Peer influence on competency development is highly dependent on the degree to which teachers allow students to help one another.

In contrast to individual classroom activity (where teachers usually expect students not to need assistance) and whole-class activity (where questions generally flow in the direction of teacher-to-student rather than student-to-teacher), small-group activity generally reduces social comparison and promotes peer collaboration. During small-group collaboration, students can turn to one another when they need assistance. With experience working together, they gradually become better at asking each other “good” questions. For example, students request help more skillfully by checking to see if the potential helper is paying attention to them before actually making a request. They make requests that are direct, sincere, polite, and clear about what exactly is being requested (Cooper, Marquis, & Ayers-Lopez, 1982). Requests are often revised and clarified if students are initially unsuccessful in obtaining a response. When students make vague requests but persist by reformulating and clarifying the requests, academic performance tends to improve. And, when they ask for, and receive, “elaborated” help (e.g., explanations rather than direct answers), and when they then use that help in a constructive way, students are most likely to learn (see Webb & Palincsar, 1996).

Especially at upper-elementary and middle-school levels, collaborative activity provides students a chance to “think in public” and exchange their thoughts with one another (Brown & Campione, 1994). Built into many collaborative activities are opportunities for children to ask—and be asked—questions for purposes of monitoring their own and others' understanding, as well as opportunities for

requesting clarification, justification, and elaboration of other students' ideas. Questions during collaboration potentially allow an exchange of perspectives among individuals who are working on relatively equal footing. As students observe the effectiveness of peers' questions in resolving difficulties, they learn that different individuals contribute unique skills and knowledge. They may learn how, in the future, to choose helpers according to both their own needs and others' competencies.

Conclusion

Dealing with academic adversity is a critical part of the learning process. This article has focused on one particular way that self-regulated learners remain engaged in the face of difficulty and potential failure. It is important for students, after determining that they do not understand an assignment, to take the initiative to get assistance rather than give up. But many students lack the competencies and motivational resources required for adaptive help seeking. They exert little effort, sit passively, or persist unsuccessfully on their own.

Teachers and peers can facilitate adaptive help seeking by providing students with involvement, support for autonomy, and support for competence. First, sensitive and responsive teachers can buffer children from factors, such as potential embarrassment, that typically inhibit help seeking. Teacher involvement influences children's personal beliefs about the costs and benefits of going to the teacher for assistance. Peer involvement provides students opportunities to experience social aspects of learning, and friends are especially likely to ask one another for help. Second, adaptive help seeking is contingent on the student's sense of autonomy. When teachers stress in their classroom the intrinsic value of learning rather than just getting good grades, students tend to ask task-related questions in order to truly understand their work. Learning goals are especially important for those who might otherwise simply ask for an answer without trying on their own. Peers can support—or discourage—student autonomy through the mechanism of social comparison. Knowing how one is doing in relation to classmates has implications—both positive (e.g., normalcy of needing help) and negative (e.g., concern about social status)—for autonomy.

Third, adaptive help seeking is contingent on the student's sense of competence. Teachers provide opportunities for students to internalize patterns of classroom discourse (e.g., effective questioning) related to adaptive help seeking. In small-group collaborative activities, students can practice skills of self-monitoring and self-questioning. They can also question peers and learn how asking for and giving assistance to one another are keystones to academic success.

In sum, adaptive help seeking is a unique strategy of self-regulated learning. Studying, rehearsing, organizing, self-checking, and self-testing are self-regulated learning strategies that students can carry out independently. Help seeking, on the other hand, is a self-regulative strategy that students must carry out through social interaction with others; they participate in regulating their own learning by obtaining assistance from others. Indeed, "self-regulation" and "other regulation" are integrally intertwined (see Vygotsky, 1978). "Others" in the classroom (i.e., teachers and peers) play obviously important roles in students becoming self-regulated learners.

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