

WHY ASKING FOR HELP IS A NECESSARY LESSON

Vibha Sanghvi
Huffington Post
05/30/2012 1:51 pm

Antoine is a soft-spoken second grader with a wide smile, who hugs me every morning. He is quick to unpack his backpack, take out his homework, and complete his morning job. Some mornings when a student is absent, he'll even do an extra job. Antoine completes these morning chores so calmly and pleasantly that sometimes while I'm collecting homework, taking attendance, and checking in with each child, I don't even notice him.

On a recent morning, as our writing block began, Antoine arrived at the carpet and plunked down with hands folded. He was still wearing his smile as I modeled how to start a topic sentence. When I asked my students to turn and talk about topic sentences, a student turned to Antoine and began to share. As I worked with another group, I noticed from the corner of my eye that it was now Antoine's turn. He was staring down at the carpet and mumbling a few words. I made a mental note to confer with Antoine during independent work time.

As students shifted to their tables to write their own topic sentences, I explained that if they needed help, they should ask their writing partner and their table mates before asking for help from me. I kept an eye on Antoine. He found his seat quietly, and promptly took out his pencil. But there was a problem: he wasn't writing.

A few minutes passed and he still hadn't asked his writing partner, who was furiously erasing and rewriting. He hadn't tapped his table mates for help, either. I worked my way over to Antoine and glanced at his work. He had copied print from the text.

"Antoine," I said, "What are you working on today?" He replied, "The topic sentence." But he was clearly stuck.

It seems like an easy concept: if you don't know how to do something, ask for help.

But recent research by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Jessica McCrory Calarco shows that a student's socioeconomic background affects his or her strategies for seeking help in the classroom. Middle-class students tend to learn from their parents that asking for help is one way to problem-solve when completing assignments, whereas students from lower-income backgrounds tend to learn these skills from their teacher.

In the years I've spent honing my craft and managing an urban classroom, I have learned how important it is to teach my students to ask for assistance. Help-seeking is a form of active learning that students should be taught from the early grades. I can gauge from student responses during lessons and small groups when I need to re-teach or change my teacher language to ensure understanding, and check for mastery. Collecting student data on a daily basis is essential to informing my planning.

But when students take the initiative to announce they need help, it tells me something I can't learn any other way.

It shows me that the student is taking ownership of his or her learning and is as committed as I am to ensuring mastery. It also allows students to re-teach key points of the lesson to each other in their own words, which increases student engagement and offers encouragement to other students who are having trouble understanding. When this happens, I can see sparks bouncing off my students as all 23 of them follow the student speaker with their eyes, nodding and shooting their hands in the air as they wait for each other to respond. This is one way to foster a culture of trust and teamwork in the classroom.

Cultivating this culture is hard work.

For some students, school is the only place where learning is reinforced. It might be that both parents work two or more jobs, so the time to talk about learning in school is limited. Over the years, I have had many parents reveal that it is challenging to help their child with assignments at home because they don't understand the content.

To instill the positive helping-seeking behaviors that will allow my students to excel regardless of their home circumstances, we sing chants in school about asking for help. If someone doesn't know the answer to a question, they are allowed to ask for help and choose who will explain the answer. Peer tutors walk over to struggling students and offer assistance. During lunch and prep time, I make sure I am available for students who need extra support. Breaking passive behaviors like Antoine's is an on-going, vital process.

Help-seeking also builds persistence, a crucial skill in the older grades when coursework becomes more demanding. For my second graders, who will be the college graduating class of 2028, these experiences seem more like preparation for challenges to come. Until then, I want my students' educational experiences to empower them to think critically and independently, so that they will be prepared to enroll in those AP classes and seminars down the road. Preparing them to figure out the right resources to use when concepts become difficult to understand is critical to their future success.

Last week, I changed Antoine's job. He is now the chant manager. Every morning, he repeats, "If there is a problem, we look for a solution. If there is a better way, we find it. If a teammate needs help, we give it. If we need help, we ask." And when we returned to our seats to work after our first writing lesson following spring break, Antoine raised his hand to ask for help.

Vibha Sanghvi teaches second grade at the University of Chicago Charter Schools--Donoghue Elementary. She is a Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellow.

This blog post was originally published by *Impatient Optimists*.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/teach-plus/why-asking-for-help-is-a-_b_1555822.html