Who Do Students Ask for Help in Class? Peer Characteristics Associated with Changes in Help-seeking

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Background
Peers are important for shaping adolescents’ academic beliefs and behaviors (Wentzel & Muenks, 2016). In the classroom, peers are also a highly accessible source of instrumental support for learning and help-seeking (Ryan & Shin, 2011). The help-seeking process can be characterized by a set of non-linear decisions, including whether to seek help, what kind of help, and who is available to help (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981). Social learning theories suggest that peer collaboration is important for learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Yet, little is known about how the peer context relates to adolescents’ help-seeking with peers.

We examine adolescents’ friendship affiliations with peer helpers, their classroom behavior reputations (prosocial, academic, disruptive), and their perceptions of teachers’ help.

We define peer helper as a friend or a best friend in class.

Results
1a). The decision to seek help
Adolescents who did not identify a peer helper had a below average academic reputation (F(1, 1035) = 8.40, p = .004) and were more help avoidant (F(1, 1035) = 11.01, p < .001) compared to their classmates who did identify a peer for help.

1b). Student Help-seekers
Students who asked their best friend for help were more well-adjusted, with higher levels of prosocial behavior (F(2, 924) = 5.73, p = .003) and lower levels of disruptive behavior (F(2, 294) = 7.51, p < .001) than students who asked a classmate or friend for help. They also had higher peer academic reputations (F(2, 924) = 3.56, p < .03) than students who ask a classmate for help.

2.) Peer Helpers:
Peer helpers who were a best friend had slightly lower academic reputations (F(2, 924) = 9.14, p < .001) than their counterparts who were friends or classmates.

Method
Sampling
1,037 students
- 49.5% 5th and 6th grade
- 51% girls, 49% boys
- 43% White, 29% Black, 6% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 17% multiracial and other
- Nested within 57 classes

Analysis
- Descriptive means and correlations to examine characteristics of students and peer helpers in the fall
- Analysis of variance (RQ 1a, 1b, 2)
- Multilevel modelling (RQ 3)

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Discussion and Implications
Around 1 in 10 students did not identify a peer helper; these students self-reported higher levels of help-avoidance and were noticed by peers as low achievers. Teachers need to explicitly communicate the benefits and expectations for seeking help.

Among students who identified peer helpers, they selected peers who were academically well-adjusted, including reputations for academic success, cooperation, and kindness. Thus, demonstrating a willingness to seek help from non-friends, despite potential social costs (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997).

Only teachers’ provisions of help were associated with changes in adaptive help. Adaptive help with peers may be more complex and difficult to define than with teachers because peer exchanges might vary in success.

Seeking help from high-achieving peers was associated with increases in expedient help, but this was attenuated among friends and best friends.

Teachers’ facilitating opportunities for friendships (and friendship skills, like dyadic mutual) among academically diverse students may be important for the quality of help exchanged.