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.
- Friendships provide a context of mutual support and reciprocity that may mitigate the social costs of help-seeking (Roussel et al., 2011).
- Behavior reputations are also important. When peers work together through help-exchanges, these are opportunities to reinforce or deter future help-seeking behavior through modelling and information exchange (Ryan, 2000).

Research Questions

1. What are the individual characteristics related to adolescents' decision to seek help?
   a) Are there differences between students who identify a peer helper and those who do not?
   b) Are there differences between students who turn to a classmate compared to a friend, or a best friend in class for help?
2. What are the characteristics of adolescents' peer helpers? Are there differences in peer helpers' characteristics at increasing levels of friendship affiliation?
3. How do helper's characteristics, and students' perceptions of their teachers' help, relate to changes in help-seeking behavior across the school year?

Method

Sample
1,037 students
- 49% 5th and 51% 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)

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.
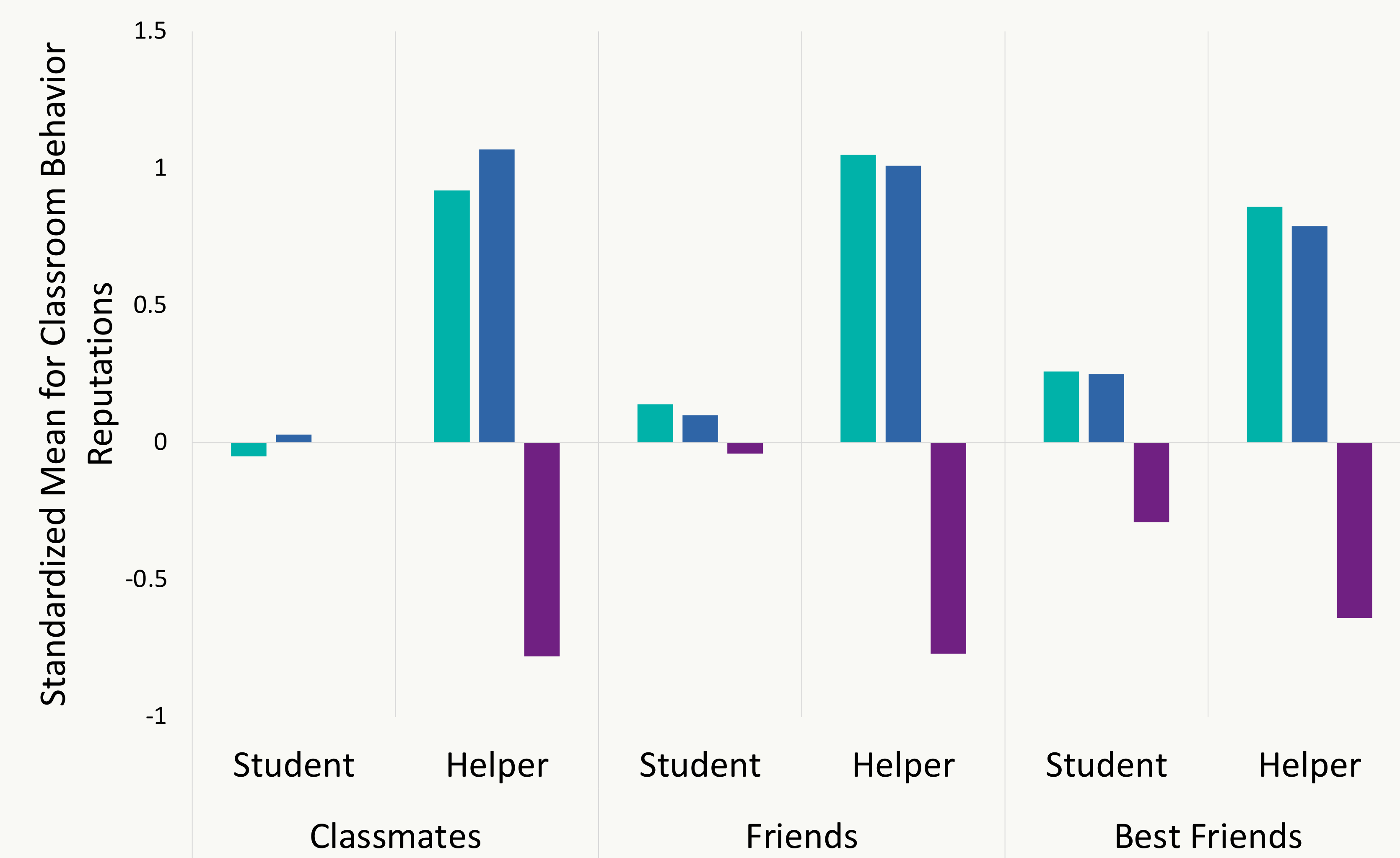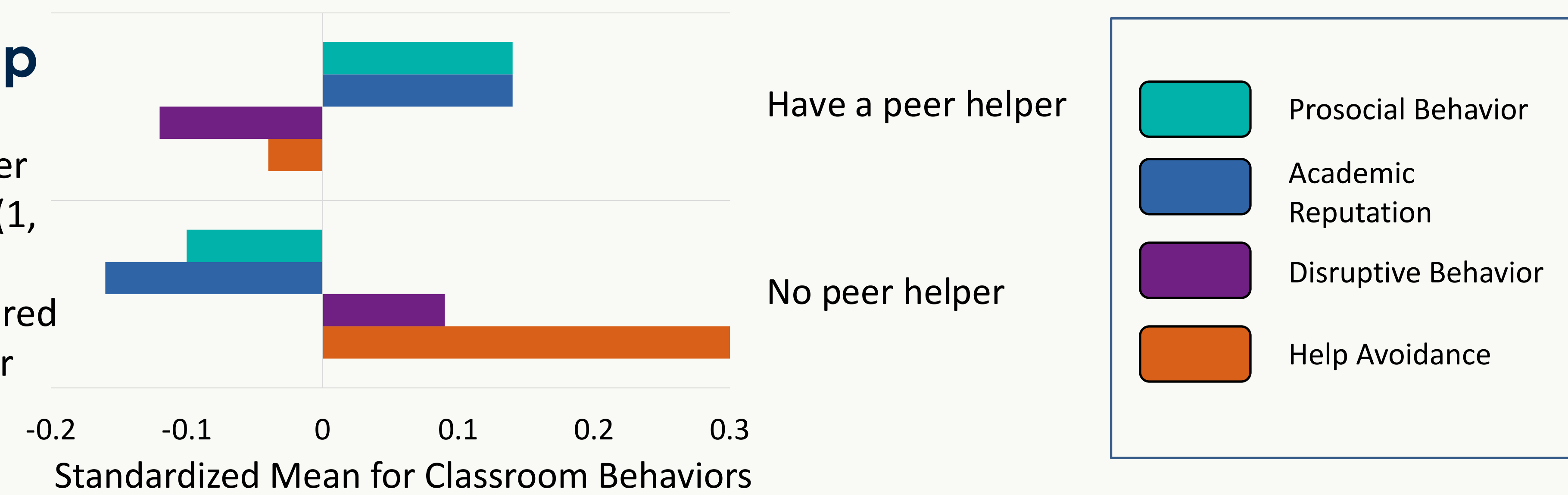

1b). Student Help-seekers

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.

3.) Changes in Help-seeking

	Spring Adaptive B (SE)	Spring Expedient B (SE)
Intercept	3.65*** (.10)	1.94*** (.10)
Fall Help-seeking	.39*** (.04)	.48*** (.04)
Teacher Helps	.13*** (.04)	-.14*** (.03)
Friend affiliation		-.06 (.09)
Best friend affiliation		-.10 (.09)
Peer helper's academic reputation (HPAR)		.22* (.09)
Friend x HPAR		-.21* (.10)
Best Friend x HPAR		-.28* (.11)
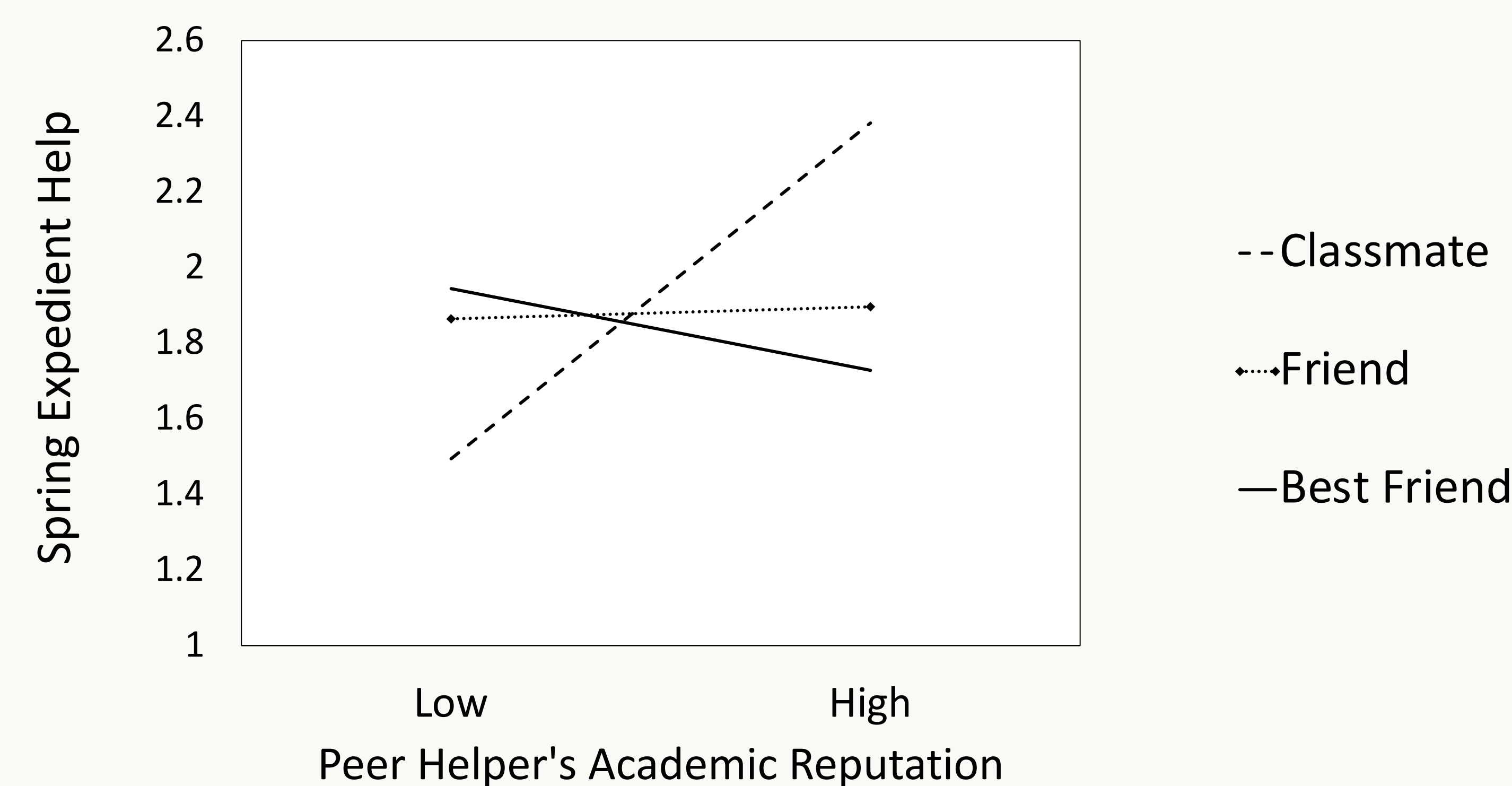
When adolescents' peer helpers were known for high achievement, this was related to increased expedient help-seeking across the school-year. However, this was attenuated when high achieving peers were friends and best friends.

Note. *p< .05, **p<.01, ***p<.001. Non-significant coefficients are not shown, except when they are lower order main effects. Models controlled for students' gender, race, grade-level, and students' own classroom behavior reputations. Models examining peer helper's prosocial and disruptive behavior were non-significant.

Measures

Peer Helper (Cillessen & Marks, 2017)	Students nominated one peer who they would ask for help their math/science work (select from a class list). Then were prompted, "what type of help would you ask this classmate for?"
Adaptive Help-seeking (Ryan & Shim, 2012)	4-items for adaptive help (e.g., "I would ask someone to explain it to me, not just give me the answer.")
Expedient Help-seeking (Ryan & Shim, 2012)	4-items for expedient help (e.g., "I would ask someone to tell me if I was right or wrong and not explain it to me.")
Help Avoidance (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997)	"When I don't understand my (math/science) work, I often guess the answer instead of asking for help." (4-items)
Teacher Helps (Skinner & Belmont, 1993)	"If I can't solve a problem, my teacher shows me a different way to try," (4-items)
Friendships (Cillessen & Marks, 2017)	Students selected from a class list, "Who are your friends in this class? Who do you talk to and hang around with the most?" and from this list they also selected a best friend.
Classroom Behavior Reputations (Cillessen & Marks, 2017)	Students selected from a class list to identify peers in the class who were prosocial (e.g., cooperative and willing to help), academic (e.g., gets good grades), and disruptive (e.g., gets in trouble)

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 mutuality) among academically diverse students may be important for the quality of help exchanged.