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Why Students Seek Help

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Why Students Seek Help

A Project Presented to the Graduate Faculty of Minnesota State University Moorhead by

Blake Rasmussen

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters in Curriculum and

Instruction

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Abstract

This project researched why students do and do not seek help in a high school class. Typically, when a student is more confident in their abilities, they are more likely to seek out help from a class teacher. Students who are less confident will conversely avoid looking for help, as they are afraid of what their peers and teachers will think of them for asking for help. This invites instructors to come up with ways to increase confidence and self-efficacy in these learners so they will then feel better about asking for help when needed.

Keywords: Self-efficacy, questions, help

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Why Students Seek Help

Chapter 1

General Problem

The problem has to do with an aspect of student engagement that does not necessarily occur in the classroom. It occurs when the lesson is done, and the students are working on their individual assignments. What happens when they come across a problem that they do not know how to solve? Some students will find someone, either a teacher or peer, to help them out, but others will not.

What causes students to ask questions and seek help, and what causes students to then avoid help? Usually the best students are the one that are asking help, but this is not always the case, as some students who struggle also frequently ask questions. Are there changes that a teacher can make to allow better questions or have students be more comfortable asking questions?

Subjects and Setting

Setting. The research will be done at a small rural school district in central Minnesota. The graduating classes are typically in the 60-70 range but have a bubble group of 80 to 90 in our middle school grades.

Each department is required to create pacing guides for all their classes, so a lot of teaching goes back to where we are on the pacing guide for the class we are teaching. They also have biweekly PLC meetings where we have time to develop these guides with other people in our department.

In the classroom, teachers have about 45 minutes to teach. In the specific classroom where the research will be done, there is a Smart Board, which is used almost daily, and students

have the option of using standard textbooks or eBooks. The curriculum uses the textbook's materials online to create some worksheets, quizzes, and tests, and also use assignments taking directly from the book as well. There is a classroom page on Google Classroom where students can view notes from the day's lesson and watch a video of the lesson as well.

Student also have access to office hours during the school day. There is an hour break for lunch where students have some time to eat, and also go and visit teachers in classes they have questions in.

Subjects. Research participants will be students of my classes during the 2020-2021 school year. Students will be volunteers in this research project. Different classes will be compared to each other, such as a high-level College Algebra course an elective Statistics course, and an elective Algebra Essentials course.

Research Ethics. Permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Minnesota State University Moorhead and from the school district to conduct this study. Protocol from the Review Board at the University and the school district have been strictly followed. Protection of human subjects is assured. Student participants and their parents were informed of the purpose of the study, time required, minimal risks, and benefits. Participants in this study were presented with no greater risk than that of a normal school day. This study took place within our high school classroom environment, under my supervision, as their classroom teacher and researcher. Confidentiality is maintained by using numbers rather than names to record data. Recorded data was then kept in a secure file on the research's computer which is password protected. The choice to participate or withdraw from the study at any time is outlined on a consent form that has been signed by the parents and/or guardians, giving written consent for their child to participate. Assent was sought from only children selected to participate in the

study. They were told they can say no and will be given complete passage if they so choose. They were also told that they can leave the research at any time if they feel the need with no consequences.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

In the United States, class sizes in many state have increased to the high twenties and low thirties (DeGeurin, 2019). This puts more pressure on teachers as being able to check for understanding for the entire class. What eases the pressure is having students ask questions and seek help from peers or the instructor. This allows the instructor to focus on students who are struggling and provide remediation when necessary. The problem that teachers encounter is that not all students will seek help, even if they are completely stuck on a concept, and the students that do seek help are not necessarily the ones who are struggling the most. What can teachers do to encourage students to ask questions and seek help and what kind of students seek help?

Students Self-Regulation and Seeking Help

When students are seeking help on a concept or assignment in class, they are using a “self-regulatory strategy that contributes to student learning” (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998), and it “reflects active learning and student engagement” (Freng, 2019). It is a natural and important part of learning. In a study of questions asked in a department’s Psychology class, the department determined that about 83% of all questions asked were unique and not answered by the textbook (Freng, 2019). In this case, students were gaining additional insight to the class that was not specific to the textbook and were having some agency on their own learning. However many students do not seek help on their academic work, even when that help would be beneficial and needed (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). There are several factors in which student will and will not seek help and ask questions.

Student Who Do Seek Help

As mentioned before, seeking help is a vital part of learning, and student who do so are getting better understanding than those who do not. When students do ask questions, there are traits that they share. They have high self-efficacy, a mutual affection with the teacher, a classroom that is supportive, and a history of seeking help previously.

High Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy is a student's perceived ability in completing schoolwork successfully (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). When they believe that they can do something, and do that thing successfully, students are then more likely to seek help when they are stuck. When they do encounter failure or difficulty, they do not attribute it to a lack of ability and instead will seek necessary help (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998).

Teacher Affection and a Supportive Classroom. When a student has a perceived mutual affection with a teacher, they are also more likely to ask for help in a classroom. This also is true for the classroom in general, as student who feel that they are in a classroom that is supportive, caring, and friendly, they are also more likely to ask for help (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998).

Seeking Help Previously. Once a student starts asking for help, they are then more likely to seek help again in the future. In a study of psychological patients, it was found that once a person does seek professional help, they are more likely to come back in the future (Nigoocki & Ægisdóttir, 2019).

Student Who Do Not Seek Help

There is an understanding on why some students will seeking out help, but what are the students who do not seek help like? In contrast to those who do seek, they have low self-efficacy, in a classroom that has a contrasting goal structure with asking for help, and feel a stigma toward asking for help in general.

Low Self-Efficacy. Student with low self-efficacy are less confident in their abilities to finish a task well. When they are less confident, they feel that asking questions is an admission to others that they lack ability. To save face in front of peers, they then are less likely to seek help (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998).

Classroom Goal Structure. In classrooms where the primary goal is demonstrating ability and being the best in the class, students were more likely to avoid asking for help. If a student has low self-efficacy and is in a class where the goal is on demonstrating ability, the problem is exacerbated, and they are even less likely to seek help (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998).

Stigma Towards Help. Going back to the study of psychological patients, it cites that fear of being stigmatized is the most cited reason that people avoid therapy (Nigoeki & Ægisdóttir, 2019). This leads many potential patients to find alternative means to solve their problems, including seeking help from nonprofessionals such as friends and family members. In the classroom, this can cause student to alternative means such as asking friends to help, or even cheat and copy assignment (Yu, Glanzer, Johnson, Sriram, & Moore, 2018).

Teacher Promoting Student to Seek Help

This leads to a problem of which students are asking for help and which are not. The students who are most confident in their abilities are the ones who are asking the most questions while the students who are not confident are the ones not asking questions. This is counter to what teachers would want and can cause struggling students to fall further behind their peers. What teachers can do is create a classroom environment that promotes the use of questioning for all students and encourages students with lower self-efficacy to seek help. There are strategies

that can increase student self-efficacy, promote a classroom environment that better encourages questions, and better meet a student's social-emotional needs.

Increasing Self-Efficacy

Increasing self-efficacy comes down increasing a student's confidence in the course they are in. Self-efficacy is malleable, but it is easier to change for a student in the early development of a skill (Tanit & Labone, 2011). An Australian program that prepares students from lower socioeconomically backgrounds has a few strategies that has increased self-efficacy.

Learning Groups. Peers can be a support for both motivational engagement and academic motivation (Tanit & Labone, 2011). By places students in groups, students can encourage each other on their work, and this type of encouragement increase their confidence (Tanit & Labone, 2011).

Alternate Assessments. Assignments that are scaffold are also helpful in increasing self-efficacy. Breaking up larger assignments into smaller pieces, and having students work on these tasks immediately following a presentation also helps. The students can then build off these small assignments into the larger, final part of an assessment. This type of structure also students to have smaller proximal goals and immediate feedback. These proximal goals then enhance a student's self-efficacy (Tanit & Labone, 2011).

Classroom Environments

As mentioned before, classrooms that are ability focused and have a competitive atmosphere generally lead to a higher level of help avoidance (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). Therefore, the classroom environment needs to be one where the focus is on effort and understanding. When students are not trying to be "the best" and are instead focused on learning

the material, they are more likely to ask questions, and a less likely to avoid help (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998).

Social-Emotional Needs

Even with students with low self-efficacy, if teachers are concerned with the students' social-emotional needs, the students are less likely to avoid help (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). One way to meet the social-emotional needs of students is through praise, either verbal or nonverbal. The most effective form of praise is through behavior-specific praise, rather than just general praise (Ingemarson, Rosendahl, & Birgegard, 2019). It promotes both learning and a positive student-teacher relationship.

Conclusion

The students who are asking the questions are not those ones who always need the most help. Usually it is the ones who have low confidence and are afraid of what their peers would think about them who are avoiding help. Instructors should realize this and come up with ways to increase student confidence to encourage more students seek help when needed.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Questions

Having taught in a high school and middle school for five years prior to the start of this research, there has always been students who are good at asking questions and seek help and other who will never do so even if asked directly from a teacher. This research will determine which ones of my students are seeking help in a class and determining what traits they have: previous success in the class, overall confidence, and the relationship with the teacher.

Methods

Since the research will be conducted in the first semester of the school year, many of the students will be new to the teacher. This data taken at the beginning of the year will be a baseline where many students do not yet have a relationship with the teacher. A second collection of data will then be done later in the semester where a relationship will then be developed.

Collecting Data. During the data collection process, my math classrooms will be observed. During the first phase, I will keep track of the number of students that come in during office time to seek help, which students are asking questions during class, and who is coming in for help either before or after school. The class the student is in and which grade will be recorded as well.

The second phase, each student will then answer some survey questions about the class. It will ask them about their previous accomplishments in the class, their overall confidence level,

and how they feel about the teacher so far. These two phases will then be repeated later in the semester.

Analyzing Data. From the first phase, this is what will be analyzed: does the student's grade, class they are in, class size, or letter grade affect if they seek help or not. In the second phase, it will analyze the students' relationship with their teachers and if that is affecting them from seeking help. These will then be compared to each other, one early in the semester, and the other later.

Ethical Issues

Protection of Human Subjects. Participants in this study are presented with no greater risk than that of a normal school day. Data used will be kept confidential and password protected on the school district's server. Students can also opt out of this study at any time.

Researcher's Bias. Since I will be the teacher in the study, I will want students to find me for help when they need to ask a question. I will also want to form positive relationships with students, and since I will be monitoring this, I may be pushing harder to do so than what I would do in a normal year.

Chapter 4

Result/Findings

Which Students Seek Help?

Data. Over the two weeks of the study, a total of 63 questions were asked by students from the 5 classes being studied. After the conclusion of the study, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire which measured a student's overall confidence in the class and what their usual grade is for a math course. The confidence score was based off two questions where students rated themselves on a 1 to 5 scale. These two scores were added together to form a confidence score from 2 to 10. For their course grade, students were asked what grade to usually expect in a math course, choosing from an A, B, C, or D/F. The information from the questionnaire is in table 1.0. Figure 1 below compares the number of questions a student asked and their confidence rating.

Table 1.0

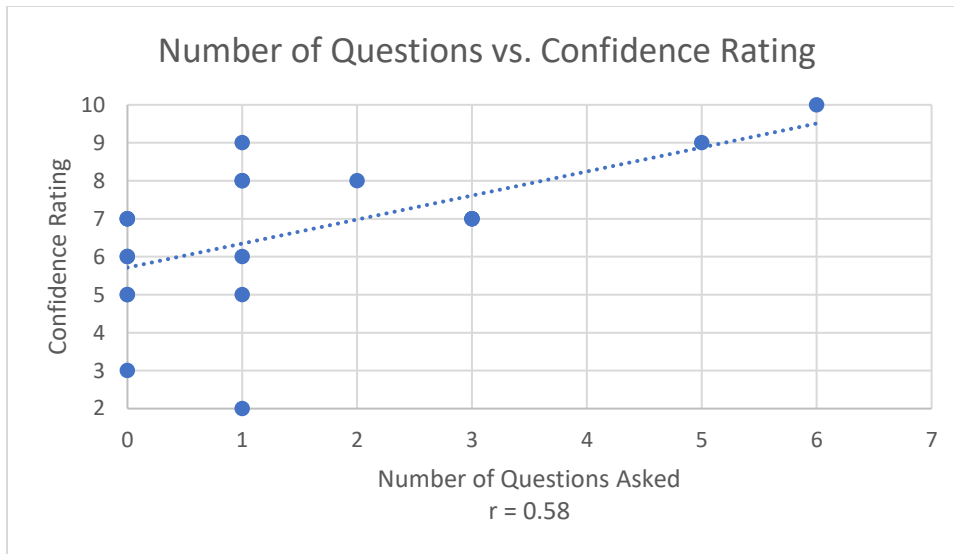
Questionnaire Results and Number of Questions Asked

Student Number	Confidence Score	Grade (GPA)	Questions Asked
1	7	4	3
2	6	3	1
3	Not Answered	Not Answered	1
4	7	3	3
5	7	4	3
6	10	2	7
7	9	4	5
8	NA	NA	2
9	8	4	1
10	9	4	1
11	8	4	1
12	8	3	2
13	2	3	1
14	5	4	0
15	7	4	0
16	5	3	0
17	7	4	0

18	6	3	0
19	7	4	0
20	6	3	0
21	3	3	0
22	NA	NA	0
23	NA	NA	0
24	NA	NA	0

Note: Table show results from the survey and the number of questions asked by individual students.

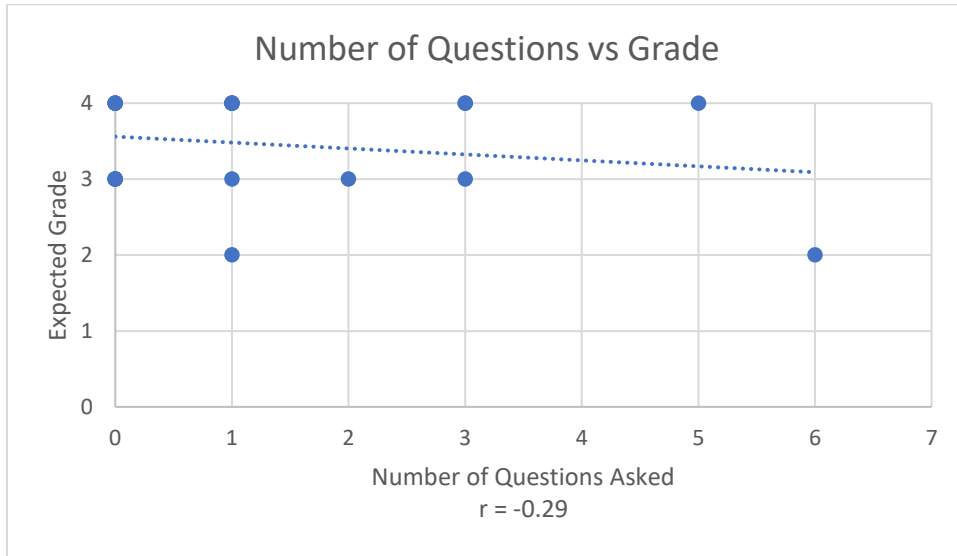
Figure 1



Note: Uses the data in Table 1.0. Notice the positive correlation of the number of questions and confidence.

Figure 2 compares the number of questions a student asked and their expected grade.

Figure 2



Note: Graph shows weak negative correlation between one’s grade and the number of questions asked.

The next set of data looks at each class as a whole. Table 1.1 displays the full data. Their average course grade through the first quarter and the number of questions asked per student, which is displayed in figure 3.

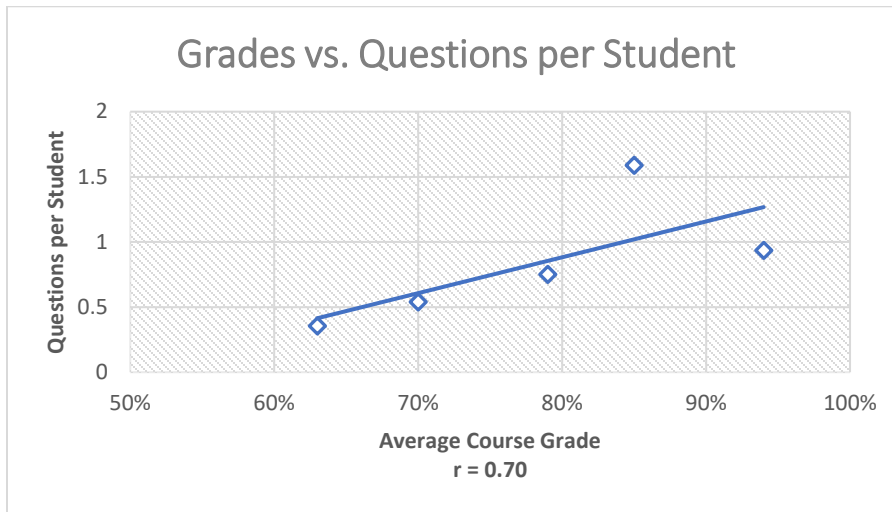
Table 1.1

Class-by-Class Results

Class	Average Confidence Score	Average Course Score	Questions Asked Per Student
College Algebra/Trig	7.23	85%	1.59
Statistics	6.22	70%	0.54
Algebra Essentials	6.00	63%	0.35
Precalculus	7.40	94%	0.93
College Algebra	4.43	79%	0.75

Note: Data is combined into the five math classes taught.

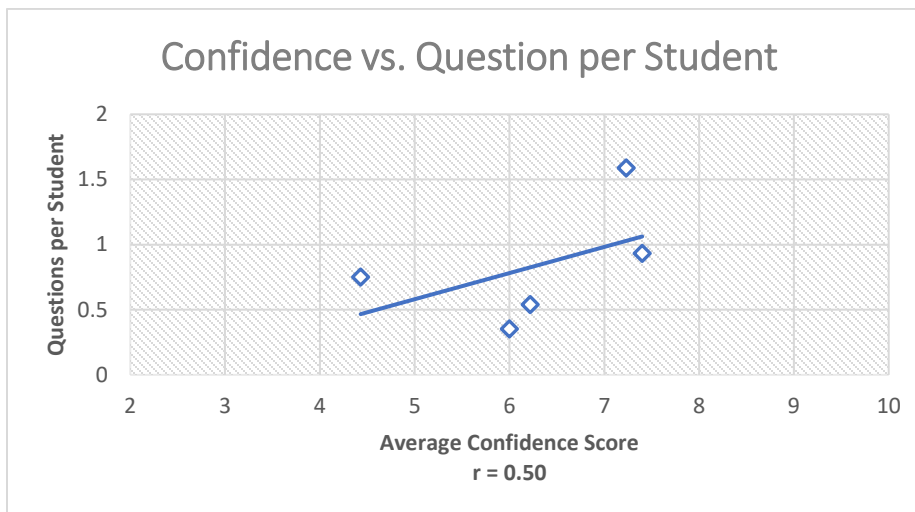
Figure 3



Note: Uses the data in Table 1.1. Notice the stronger positive correlation.

And finally, looking at a class's average confidence score and the number of questions asked per student in figure 4.

Figure 4



Note: Uses the data in Table 1.1. Again, positive correlation.

Interpretation. Based on the literature research, most of the findings were expected. In figures 1 and 4, it shows that the more confidence a student has, the more questions they will ask, with some positive correlation for each. What usually leads to higher confidence is also

higher grades, so it would be expected that higher grades would lead to higher questions asked. These results were mixed. In figure 2, there was very weak correlation that the higher the grade, the less questions are asked, but in figure 3, there was strong correlation of the opposite: more questions in classes with higher scores.

There were some challenges in the data collection in this study. The first was keep track of who was asking the questions while also teaching a lesson. This was made even more difficult since, at the time of research, the school district was using a hybrid teaching model due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, there were two questions asked by a hybrid student that did not get recorded to a specific student. There were used in the class data, however. The other challenge was the response rate of the students. Out of the 70 students that I teach daily, 24 of them received parental consent to participate in the research. Out the 24 students who participate in the study, 5 did not complete the survey at the end of the research. This was attempted to be mitigated by using the whole class data in figures 3 and 4 and table 1.1, but the research was much less specific. This could have also been the reason for the different conclusions coming from figure 2 and 3.

Chapter 5

Action Plan and Plan for Sharing

Action Plan

This research has changed how I think of students when they are or are not seeking help from instructors. In our math classrooms, we have always encouraged students to talk to us when they are struggling, and we can come off with a plan to help their understand and improve their attitude in the class. Very few students who were in struggling take us up on that offer, and we always believed it was due to apathy, stubbornness, or just plain old laziness. After doing this research, this is not really the case. Students are more likely to be embarrassed about asking questions, thinking that by asking questions, their peers and teachers will think that they are not intelligent. This has also brought up the question of where are students getting help when they are not asking it from their teacher and is that help reliable?

Plan for Sharing

I plan to share my findings with my department first. They have always been an advocate of trying to get students work help themselves whenever possible, so they would get a lot out of research like this. The project will also be available to those at the school district where I would be available to answers questions about my research.

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