

Indonesian Primary School Students' Perceptions on Academic Help-seeking Behaviour

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Abstract

When students face academic difficulties and seek help it is considered to be an adaptive behaviour. However, studies indicate that some students are reluctant to adapt and seek academic help when they need it. Education in Indonesia is slowly moving from a teacher centred to a student centred focus. Under a student centred focus, students should have a much more central role in the processes of their learning. This study aims to investigate Indonesian primary schools students' perceptions of academic support available to them and their own academic help-seeking behaviour (AHS). Fifty five students from five primary schools in Jakarta participated in focus group interviews. QSR NVIVO 10 software was used to identify the main themes that emerged from the data. Results indicate that students find it difficult to ask for academic help even though they believed that they should ask for help when they need it to improve their academic success. Student identified factors that support and inhibiting AHS are presented. The study also confirms that teacher's behaviours are a significant influence on students AHS. The impact of peers and students' own internal factors on AHS are also considered. Listening to the students' voices about their experience of asking for academic help provides a better understanding of the nature of AHS. Also this study provides guidance to facilitating a more conducive and effective environment for students' AHS in Indonesian schools; and this in turn may provide some directions for other contexts.

Keyword: academic help-seeking; primary school students; students' perceptions

Introduction

Many students encounter academic difficulty when they are trying to understand new materials, and undertaking tasks such as exercises in class, and doing assignments and homework. When students face such difficulties, it is useful for their learning if they are first aware that they need assistance (Newman, 2000) and then in recognising their need request help from their teachers or peers. This behaviour is considered to be adaptive behaviour (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988; Nelson-Le Gall & Glor-Sheib, 1985; 2000). Their behaviour is described as adaptive because the students have to adjust their behaviour from their normal approach of being reluctant to seek help to a proactive approach in seeking help.

Many studies have found that some students are reluctant to seek academic help when they need it (Butler, 1998; Newman & Goldin, 1990; Ryan, Gheen & Midgley, 1998; Ryan, Hicks & Midgley, 1997). Students who are reluctant to seek help also rarely take an active role in their own learning, in particular, when they face learning challenges and difficulties. When students do not seek help when they need it, they are at a significant disadvantage in their learning and academic performance compared with other students (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001).

Why is it important for students to seek help? In order to answer this question we need to remind ourselves of what learning is. Learning occurs within a learner; it is the learner that is the active person in the process of learning (Biggs, 2003). Clearly though learning also often involves teaching, which is a process of facilitating learning through the provision of guidance and information by the teacher. However, it is the learner that needs to make sense of and incorporates new information and skills. Impediments to learning can occur at a number of stages in the process, but critically, if the learner is not able to incorporate new things (learning), then clearly learning has not occurred. In learning, a student often identifies and uses resources; particularly human resources such as their teachers and their peers. One of the things that teachers often do is to provide scaffolding and encouragement for students so they can further access resources to facilitate their learning (Rasku-Puttonen, Eteläpelto, Arvaja, & Häkkinen (2003).

When students face learning difficulties they often use problem-solving approaches (Marais, van der Westhuizen, & Harm, 2013). Students are faced with problems of understanding, and need to make choices about what to do about the problem. Ignoring the problem is avoidance, and this rarely results in learning. In order to learn, when problems that prevent learning emerge, students need to be able to identify and solve such problems. They often do this on their own, but they are also often challenged to engage and collaborate socially with others sharing their own and drawing on others knowledge and opinions (McCaslin & Good, 1996).

Education in Indonesia is undertaking significant reformation. This is in part driven by the Indonesian Government implementing policy aimed at improving the quality of learning process and services, to achieve better learning outcomes (Depdiknas, 2007). These changes in education in Indonesia are bringing about a paradigm shift from a teacher centred approach into a student centred approach with a strong emphasized on learning inquiry (Harsono, 2006; Marsigit, 2006). Under a student centred approach the student has a much more central role in directing and controlling the processes of

their learning. It requires active learning (Biggs, 2003) and participatory learning (Warhurst, 2006) as opposed to traditional modes of “instruction” (McDermott, 1997). There is a change of focus and Teachers and students have different roles under this new paradigm. In bringing about a paradigms shift, it is not unusual for there to be resistance and difficulties (Bjork, 2004; Marsigit, 2006; Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001; Yeom, Acedo, & Utomo, 2002). Despite positive Government policy, traditional systems and processes of education in Indonesia are well entrenched historically and culturally. This entrenchment is across the whole of society including parents, employers and students, and teachers in particular have difficulty in undertaking the paradigm shift required.

We have observed in other Indonesian classrooms, when teachers asks students whether the students have any difficulties in understanding the materials or not they rarely get a reply or response. Students usually just sit passively and wait for the teacher’s instructions. Teachers too are well established in using teacher centred approaches in their teaching and rarely facilitate interactive sessions with students (Bjork, 2004; Kristiansen & Pratikno, 2006). However, under a student centred learning approach, students must be actively engaged in the learning process (Motschnig-Pitrik & Holzinger, 2002). Students need to be able to monitor their own learning and actively seek help as they need it, and in this process it is important for them to be able to ask questions. There is lack of research on the topic of academic help seeking behaviour in Asia and in particular in Indonesia and this study contributes to the literature on this topic and provides an opportunity to better understand the changing nature of education in Indonesia.

This study investigated student academic help-seeking behaviour in the classroom, and aims to understand student behaviour in their natural setting. It captured the different views of students about academic help-seeking. Specifically, it explored on 6-year primary school students’ perceptions of their own behaviour related to academic help seeking behaviour in Jakarta Indonesia.

Methodology

Data was collected from September 2012 through to January 2013 in East Jakarta, Indonesia. The study used a qualitative approach in exploration of students’ perceptions about their academic help-seeking behaviour; primarily through focus group interviews. These interviews captured the participants’ point of view about the importance of help-seeking behaviour for them.

Participants

Fifty five students (male = 26; female = 29) across five primary schools participated in eleven focus group interviews in this study. The participants of this research were from sixth grade primary schools. The average age of these students in this study was 11.14 years old.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured focus group interviews. Students were in groups of six to seven and under the guidance of the research discussed a series topic about students’ academic help-seeking behaviour. Both closed and open-ended

questions were used in this process and the discussions were recorded using an audio recorder. QSR NVIVO 10 software was used to organise and analyse the digital data. Some examples of interview questions that were used are: 1) "What did you do if you have problems with your learning process?", 2) "What is it about a teacher that makes it difficult to ask him/her for help? Tell me about it"

Data analysis involved a close examination of student responses at various levels from the broad topic level down to specific examples and nuances. Coding related to a response by a group of students and by individual student, often down to a word or phrase level. The coding of these data sets resulted in hundreds of code tags, which were then further refined in groups allowing the different main themes to emerge. That is, the themes emerged from the data (Saldana, 2009).

Results and discussion

Major themes regarding students' perceptions on academic help-seeking that emerged are: *the nature of academic help-seeking; the role of teachers; peers factors and students' personality*. Details of each theme are described as follows. Pseudo-names are used in this paper.

The nature of academic help-seeking

Students indicated that asking for academic help when they need it is important to them. As the participants in this study were students at sixth grade they were very concerned about the National Exam that they were due to undertake in a few months. Their answers to questions in the interviews reflected this situation. Generally they wanted to get a high score so that they could continue their schooling. Most of the students contended that they do need to approach their teachers or other people that might help them to help them solve academic problem. As quoted from one participant, "For us it is also [important] so that we can understand how to solve a problem...So that we can get the highest NEM score. (FGI-1: Aditya, 19/11/12).

Students also said that they recognise that seeking academic help and support is important to them because it can help them improve their understanding of subject materials. Some stated that by asking questions they would be in a better position to solve similar problem in the future; increase their own understanding and knowledge and to satisfy their curiosity. Some students also indicated that asking questions is important because it might help them to get a better mark that will lead them to better academic achievement. However, although they were aware of the importance of seeking help, many of these students were still reluctant to ask for academic help from their teachers even though their teachers gave them the opportunity to ask for help. One participant said: "I never ask for help to my teacher, ever" (FGI-5: Karimah, 10/12/12).

This study found that the reasons for not asking help varied from being "afraid of their teacher" to "I do not ask for help because I am lazy". Another student stated that "she does not know what to ask". Another said that he was being *lazy*. One participant confessed that she felt *shy* to ask for help in the classroom. From all the reasons that students gave in the focus group interviews, the researcher categorized them into three main themes which were: the role of the teachers, the role of peers and the students' own internal factors. Each of these themes will be described in the next section.

Student may have different attitudes towards academic help-seeking and reasons to or not to seek academic help when it is needed. Some students did not ask for help even though they could not solve the problems on their own. According to Nelson Le-Gall (1982), the decision whether or not students asked for help is based on the cost-benefit that might apply to the student. If the cost outweighs the benefit then they will be unlikely to ask for help. The characteristic from the sixth grade students is that they start to find out and realize of social comparison with their peers. Since seeking academic help involved an interaction with other people, therefore students would likely start to think about the risk before asking help from other (Butler, 1998).

The role of teachers in students' academic help-seeking

Previous studies have mentioned that teachers have significant roles in students' academic help-seeking (Butler, 2006; Le Mare & Sohbat, 2002; Oortwijn, Boekaerts, Vedder, & Strijbos, 2008). One of the important roles emerged in this current study was their support and responses to students' questions. Other studies have also found this to be the case (Karabenick & Sharma, 1994; Kozanitis, Desbiens, & Chouinard, 2007). Another essential factor that was found in this current study, related to students' academic help-seeking, was the teachers' characteristics, and this is also identified by Le Mare & Sohbat (2002) as an issue in their study.

Teachers' support and responses to students' questions

During the interviews the students noted when their teachers provided a good answer to their questions they will most likely ask more questions as stated by one student, *"Because the explanation is clear so that we can understand easily* (FGI-1: Evi, 19/11/12). Furthermore, student valued a teacher who is always willing to answer their questions seriously, *"Because he (always) answered students' questions without being angry, seriously and not just joking"* (FGI-2: Rio, 19/11/12). Students also noted that teachers who respond nicely and with respect were favourable, *If we ask something she respects our questions.* (FGI-1: Aditya, 19/11/12). Moreover, students like it when their teacher re-explains slowly things that they do not understand making sure that they comprehend the content and the principles (FGI-2: Rio, 19/11/12).

However, students also noted that some teachers gave them negative responses when they had difficulties, which made them reluctant to seek academic help at the time. When asked about how teachers answer their questions one student replied, *"Well, yes sometimes when I want to ask the teacher...she said to me, "You can find it in your book, you should be able to do it by yourself"* (FGI-2: Lisda, 19/11/12). Another participants explained that the teacher's explanations sometimes were unclear, *"Sometimes (the explanations) made us dizzy (frustrated)"* (FGI-1 and FGI-6: Ulfa, Fani, 19/11/12). One participant said that he was afraid of being laugh, *"...because if I were mistaken (I was afraid of being) laugh..."* (FGI-4: Gunawan, 10/12/12). Several students worried that their teacher will angry to them if they asked questions (FGI-1: Ulfa, 19/11/12). Another student complained that their teacher made fun of their questions such as, *"So that when I want to ask something he makes a joke and then I forgot what I want to ask.* (FGI-9/10: Arif, 14/12/12).

Some students also recognized "don't disturb me" message from their teachers. Students shared that sometime they wanted to ask for academic help, however they

saw that their teacher was busy at her/his desk and did not and did not want to be disturbed and the students were reluctant to ask for academic help from their teachers under such circumstances. A quote from one of the participants, "*Sometimes we have been asked to come forward. Sometimes we were ignored; she [just] concentrated on her works and her laptop...*" (FGI-2: Eni, 19/11/12). These kinds of messages were interpreted by the students as their teachers did not want to be interrupted by their questions. A study from Babad et al. (1991) explained that students were able to detect through teachers' nonverbal behaviour (teacher immediacy) and recognized whether or not their teacher truly care about their students. Richmond (2002) indicates that teacher immediacy behaviours actually can be of benefit to the teacher in gaining their students trust by showing to their students that they are competent and care. When teachers gain students' trust their students are more likely to feel comfortable to ask for academic help and engage more on the learning processes.

Teacher's characteristics

Another important factor emerged in this study was teachers' characteristics. Students identified what kinds of teachers' characteristics encouraged or did not encourage their academic help-seeking behaviour.

Characteristics such as "*tough and stern teacher*" or when teachers *made fun of their question* and *scary* can undermine students' academic help-seeking behaviour. Furthermore, some students also noted that some of their teachers demonstrated *ignorance; lack of communication* and *having [a] loud voice* which likely inhibit them asking for academic help. Often students feel that their teachers *did not appreciate their questions* as stated followed, "*My teacher ignore my questions, I feel that she did not appreciated me*" (FGI-1: Ahmad, 19/11/12). Another student seemed to have a sense that their teacher was always busy with themselves such as leaving the class or busy with their own tasks (FGI-1; Evi, 19/11/12), "...*Mrs Diana often leaving our class for a workshop, or busy with her own task in her desks*".

Teachers' characteristics that students' viewed as being easy to approach were: nice, clever; understanding, friendly and caring. Another student stated that having a close relationship with their students is important for their teacher; as is smiling; being humorous in class. They also perceived that a teacher who *was relaxed and not too formal* as being easy to be approach and a *patient* teacher helped them be comfortable. Other students pointed out that being *firm, thorough* and having a *broad knowledge* are important characteristics. One student stressed that having access to senior teachers with more capabilities and experience was important as stated below:

For example, if this teacher age is 21 years old than his/her experience is only a little. That will be different from the teacher that older with much more experience. (FGI-9/10: Ridwan, 14/12/12).

This study found that teachers' behaviour, both verbal and non-verbal, influence students' academic help-seeking. The way teachers responded to students' questions are important to enhance students' academic help-seeking behaviour. These findings are in line with a study from Karabenick and Sharma (1994) who found that teachers' support of college students' questions influenced the way in which students formulate questions. Furthermore, a study on undergraduate students from Kozanitis et al (2007) showed that teachers support and responses directly determined students instrumental

help-seeking approaches. Both of these studies from Karabenick and Kozanitis were conducted in quantitative approaches. The research described in this paper captures the students' voices and because of this provides rich exemplars and deeper understanding of students' perceptions of their teachers' responses to their academic help seeking needs.

This current study also reveals that students asking for academic help from their teachers also depend on the teachers' characteristics. Some of the results in this study were similar to the results from Le Mare and Sohbat's study (2002). According to Le Mare and Sohbat there are ten categories of teachers' characteristics that students identify, which are willingness, competence, reaction to self and others, expectation, global personality, relationship with children, predictability, the teacher's mood, familiarity and the teachers gender. In our study we identify seven categories which were willingness (*my teacher ignore my questions*), competence (*broad knowledge*), reaction to self and others (*make fun of my questions*), expectation (*you can find it on your book*), global personality (*nice, patient, tough, stern*), relationship with children (*lack of communication, close to students*) and teacher's mood (*bad mood*). However, our study also identifies that the age of the teacher is also an important factor for some students. Some students perceived that the more senior their teacher is the more capable they are of teaching and providing answers to questions that student asked.

Based on the findings above it is critical for the teachers to avoid behaviour that might be interpreted by their students as being in different or disrespectful towards them. Teachers should build good relationships with their students, and communications including body language is a critical component in this process. A student makes the decision to ask for academic help from their teachers based on their perception of how the teacher will respond to the request. In seeking academic help students undertake a form of cost-benefit analysis. If that perception is that their teacher will be indifferent to the request or not provide them with the caring support that they need, they will be unlikely to proactively engage in academic help seeking from their teacher.

The role of peers in students' academic help-seeking

The impact of peers plays an important role in students' decision of whether or not they seek academic help (Nelson-Le Gall, 2006; Newman, 2002; Oberman, 2000; Roussel, Elliot, & Feltman, 2011; Shim & Finch, 2013). Students in this current study were in their early adolescence and there is much literature that indicates the impact of peers on academic help seeking for adolescent children (Erickson, 1968 cited in Trucco, Wright, & Colder, 2013).

From the interviews it was found that students preferred to ask academic help from their friends rather than from their teachers. One student noted, "*I feel more comfortable and the answers are more complete*" (FGI-10: Barry, 14/12/12). Some students who are more capable can be a learning resource for other students. One student in an interview recounted how another more capable student took on the role of teacher in work groups:

Well yes, sometimes she becomes our teacher when we study together.
(FGI-1, Evi, 19/11/12)

Another benefit that students derived from their peers was they gained new

information from questions asked by other students. They recognised that they also can get help when other students ask their teachers for help. Moreover, students identified their classmates as a learning resource and characterized some other students as *smart, serious, calm, can explain how to solve problems, unselfish and humble*. Newman and Gauvain (1996, cited in Newman 2000) noted that peers can act as a learning resources and an alternative helper when students either cannot approach their teacher or the teacher is unavailable.

This current study found that peers are a significant influence on academic support and in the provisioning of academic support. This study shows the need to support students gaining benefit from students helping themselves to maximalise their opportunities of academic help from peers. Since students are more comfortable seeking help from their classmates, teacher should reconsider this fact. Teachers can help in facilitating peer-to-peer academic support, and where this results in improve student learning outcomes teacher teachers also benefit. Teachers can provide a learning environment that decreased this anxiety. Study from Ryan and Pintrich (1997) showed that students in low achievement still eager to ask for academic help when they perceived that the classroom stressing more on mastery than performance goal orientations. One approach to such facilitation can be by teachers choosing teaching methods that enhance student interactions. Peer-to-peer tutorial methods provide students the opportunities to learn from each other in order to completing a task. Group work provides flexible interaction between students where they can express and communicate their need of academic help a lot easier and more comfortably. According to Newman (2000) commenting on student in higher classes, this method also gives students a chance to share their thoughts, goals and strategies. Furthermore, Newman also notes that these opportunities were useful to develop questioning skills needed in asking academic help.

Students in our study were concerned about what their friends thought about them. Many of them stated that the reason that they do not ask for help to their teacher in the classroom was merely because they were afraid of the response that they might get from their classmates. Some of them were worried about being laugh at or ridiculed by their friends if they ask the wrong questions. *“I do not ask because I feel shy when my friends look at me, how come my other friend already know (that matter) and I am the one who do not know so I feel shy and I do not ask”* (FGI-10” Lara, 14/12/12).

This is in line with previous studies that mentioned students were masking their inability and not asking their teachers in the classroom because they were afraid that their classmates will see them as inadequate in the particular subject matters. Students perceived that the cost of asking academic help outweighed the benefit, therefore they did not ask for help (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991; Newman & Goldin, 1990; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997).

As students naturally compare their academic performance with their peers, they become concerned about their self-worth and their image (Middleton & Midgley, 1997). The feedback that they gained from their classmates was often perceived as a threat in the competitive classroom environment (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). Under such threat students were reluctant to openly admit their academic needs and there need for academic help in the classroom (Newman, 2002). Other research also points out the importance of peer acceptance (Ryan & Shin, 2011), social approval from classmate

(Ryan et al., 1997) and the desire to look 'cool and popular' (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008).

Academic help-seeking strategies involved not only cognitive ability but also the need to approach other (teacher or peer) people. Asking for academic help might be seen as embarrassment and the risk of receiving negative responses from their classmates hinder these students to performing one (Newman & Goldin, 1990).

In summary, peers played an important role in the development and support of students' academic help-seeking behaviour, and peers provided a valuable resource for student academic help. The students' interviews suggested that there were number of factors that determined from which classmates a student requested help. Students in this study preferred to ask academic help form their peers. Therefore, teachers should be able to provide learning activities that allowed students interact with their classmates in solving problems.

Students' personality

A student's personality was one of the factors identified in this study that impacted academic help-seeking. Students who actively engaged in asking for academic help, especially from their teachers reflected the following characteristics: They are 1) active; 2) brave and confident; 3) smart; 4) have a large vocabulary; 5) are curiosity; and 6) they are diligent.

A study from van der Meij (1990) stated that in order to ask for academic help students need to have adequate prior knowledge. This current study identified students who ask academic for help are generally characterised as smart and capable students. Several students he did not actively in gauging academic help seeking did so because they did not know what to ask because they lacked prior knowledge related to the content material.

This study also found some characteristics of students that might be barriers in students' academic help-seeking behaviour. The first characteristic that was identified through the interviews is that students considered themselves as *shy*. One of the reasons why most of the students do not ask for help was because they were too shy to raise their hand and ask for help. One student responded "...*I feel a little shy to ask to my teacher [for help] ...*" (FGI-4: Dedy, 10/12/12). Such shy students are reluctant to seek academic help even when they are aware that they need it.

A study from Coplan and Armer (2007) found that facing a new social situation made young shy students nervous and also worried about how others might evaluate them. Furthermore, even though these students would like to approach other people they were strained by social fear and anxiety (Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004). This might explained why some students felt shy in approaching other people for help especially their teachers.

A study from Exley (2005) in Indonesia mentioned that students in Indonesia were described as "typically passive, shy and/or quiet learners". Another study from Paulhus et al (2002) also found that the East Asian students reported higher rates of shyness compared to European heritage students. Students from East Asian seem to be the most shy and are *afraid of being wrong* and *afraid of being judged*.

Students' awareness and skills related to academic help-seeking

From the interviews this study also found that one of the factors that made students' reluctant to seek academic help was the lack of students' awareness that they had a problem and their lack of skills related to engaging in academic help-seeking behaviour.

Many students admitted that many times they do not know what to ask. One student said: *"I don't know what to ask to my teacher"* (FGI-5: Malik, 10/12/12). Another stated, *"Suddenly, I [am] blank (lost word) when I want to ask"* (FGI-10: Eca, 19/12/12). The other participant said, *"I am afraid that I ask the wrong questions"* (FGI-1: Andre, 19/11/12).

According to Nelson Le-Gall cited in (Stahl and Brome, 2009) there are a five step model of students' AHS included (1) the awareness of the need of assistance; (2) deciding to seek help; (3) identifying potential helpers; (4) eliciting help and (5) evaluating the behaviour. The first step for students to ask for help is the need to ask academic help from their teachers or their peers.

This study found that many students tend to not ask for academic help since they do not know how formulate a question properly or even know what to ask. This may be related to their understanding of the learning material.

van der Meij (1994) describes that the first step, being aware of the need for help, is often a stage of confusion. Students feel a gap between their prior knowledge and the new information that they are receiving. Having an awareness of a problem or a gap in understanding improves in students with increasing age (Newman, 1994). Students' growing awareness leads them to decisions as to whether or not to ask for academic help. However, even though they are aware of a gap some students still do not ask for help since they do not have enough skills engage in the process of asking for help. Teachers also may not help by providing guidance and structure that encourages and facilitates help seeking. Teacher-centred classroom structures (Harsono, 2006) provide little opportunity for students to take an active role in the learning process including them proactively asking for academic help. Encouraging teachers to reduce their dominance of classroom activities and getting them to encourage their students' engagement directed towards seeking help will further increase their students' awareness about the need for academic help-seeking.

Conclusion and implication

This research identifies that academic help seeking is a complex issue. Many reasons are identified why students may or may not engage in seeking academic help. Engaging in academic help seeking depends on many factors such as teachers' behaviour, peers and the students' personality. Students in this study perceived that asking academic help is an important behaviour. However, still many of them did not ask for help.

A dominant finding of this research is that teachers play a central role in facilitating or not facilitating academic help seeking. Academic help seeking requires students to take an active role in the process. In many cases in Indonesia the classroom environment needs to further undertake change from teachers centred to learner

centred so that children can more actively engage in activities in the class. Teachers need to give students more opportunity to ask for help in the classroom, and to achieve this teachers need to give students more guidance on what to ask, how to ask, and where and when to ask for academic help. In bringing about this process teachers too need to be helped in their understanding that when students receive help, even from their peers, and consequently achieve better learning outcomes that this benefits the teacher as well.

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