



**LEADING HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR AMONG CHINESE
PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: INSIGHTS FOR SCHOOL
COUNSELLING SERVICE IMPROVEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined help-seeking for school counselling among Chinese primary school students and explored the implications for improving school counselling services. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. The quantitative phase involved 261 students who were aged 10-12 years from selected Chinese primary schools in Petaling Utama, Selangor. Data were collected using the instruments Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale–Short Form (ATSPPH-SF), Peer Mental Health Stigmatization Scale (PMHSS), and Perceived Teacher Support Scale (PTSS). To provide further explanation of the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six school stakeholders, including principals, teachers, and school counsellors, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. Quantitative results showed a moderate level of attitudes towards seeking school counselling, with no significant differences by age or gender. Perceived peer stigma was negatively associated with students' attitudes ($r = -.13$, $p = .031$), whereas teacher support was positively associated ($r = .29$, $p < .001$). Teacher support remained the only significant predictor ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), and the regression model explained 9.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .099$). The qualitative findings revealed several factors that related to students' help-seeking behaviour. These included stigma, confidentiality concerns, the roles of teachers, peers, and parents, and organisational conditions related to access to and continuity of counselling services. Overall, the findings suggest that help-seeking is related to interpersonal and organisational factors within the broader school context in which counselling services are delivered. This highlights the importance of improving counselling awareness and normalisation, strengthening collaboration among school stakeholders, ensuring accessible, continuous service delivery, creating supportive counselling environments, and sustaining leadership and policy support.

Keywords: Explanatory sequential mixed-methods, school counselling, help-seeking behaviour, primary school students, peer stigma, teacher support.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health and psychological well-being among children and adolescents have become important public health concerns worldwide. Schools play an important role in providing early psychological support through counselling services that contribute to students' academic, emotional, and social development (Doan et al., 2020; Karunanayake et al., 2020; Warren et al., 2024). However, service availability does not necessarily ensure that students will seek professional help when experiencing emotional, behavioural, interpersonal, or academic difficulties (Auger et al., 2018; Patte et al., 2024). Understanding the factors that encourage or discourage help-seeking is important to ensure school counselling services are accessible, responsive, and effectively organised to meet students' needs.

Students' help-seeking attitudes may be understood concerning personal, interpersonal, and contextual influences. Peer stigma may discourage help-seeking through concerns about negative evaluation, labelling, and social rejection, whereas teacher support may foster trust, emotional safety, and access to formal support (Dabrowski et al., 2025; Martinez et al., 2020; Purwati et al., 2020; Villatoro et al., 2022). The broader school environment may also be relevant, as school climate has been associated with teacher-student relationships in primary school settings (Ansyah et al., 2024) and with a range of student developmental and well-being outcomes (Zynuddin & Sumintono, 2024). Help-seeking in school settings may therefore depend not only on students' willingness to seek support but also on social perceptions, referral pathways, and interactions with significant adults and peers.

Despite growing research on help-seeking, most studies have focused on adolescents, secondary school students, or university populations, with comparatively limited attention to primary school students (Kafka et al., 2024; Raynham & Jinks, 2021; Simões et al., 2021). Further research is needed to understand help-seeking among younger students within specific educational and cultural contexts, where school relationships, family expectations, and perceptions of counselling may shape both their willingness and opportunities to seek support.

In Malaysia, increasing attention has been given to student mental health and school-based counselling. Nevertheless, stigma, resource limitations, and variations in the implementation of counselling services remain relevant concerns (Ku Johari & Isa Amat, 2019; Rajaendram, 2023). Malaysian research has also highlighted the importance of school-level responses to student well-being concerns. Velarde and Vasodavan (2024) emphasised the role of school leaders in developing strategies, policies, programmes, and school-community involvement to address student concerns. Building on this recent MOJEM literature, the present study extends educational management research to help-seeking and school counselling service management among Chinese primary school students in Malaysia, with particular attention to referral pathways, service accessibility, stakeholder coordination, and leadership support. Research focusing on help-seeking among Malaysian primary school students, particularly in Chinese primary schools, remains limited.

Beyond these population and contextual gaps, quantitative relationships between individual and interpersonal factors may not fully explain how counselling is understood, accessed, and delivered within everyday school contexts. Therefore, greater attention should be given to the organisational conditions through which schools facilitate access to counselling, including referral arrangements, service accessibility, stakeholder coordination, and leadership support. In the context of this study, the term "leading" refers to the role of school leadership, management, and organisational practices in shaping and improving the conditions that support students' access to school counselling. It does not mean that school leadership was directly measured or quantitatively tested as a study variable. The term reflects the study's management perspective on how schools can create, coordinate, and maintain conditions that support students' help-seeking.

Thus, this study examined the associations between age, gender, perceived peer stigma, teacher support, and students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling. It further explored school stakeholders' perspectives on students' help-seeking patterns, barriers and facilitators, and school-level conditions related to counselling access and service improvement. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used to integrate the quantitative



findings among students with stakeholder perspectives.

Purpose of Study

This study aimed to examine and explain students' help-seeking for school counselling and provide insights for counselling service improvement within Chinese primary schools in Petaling Utama. The quantitative phase examined students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling in relation to age, gender, perceived peer stigma, and teacher support. The qualitative phase explored stakeholder perspectives to explain the quantitative findings and identify additional barriers, facilitators, and school-level conditions related to help-seeking and counselling service delivery.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the level of attitudes towards seeking school counselling among Chinese primary school students?
2. Are there significant differences in attitudes towards seeking school counselling based on age and gender?
3. Are perceived peer stigma and teacher support significantly associated with students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling?
4. Which of the examined factors significantly predict students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling?
5. How do school stakeholders explain students' help-seeking patterns and the barriers and facilitators related to access to school counselling?
6. What school-level leadership and organisational improvements may support students' help-seeking and improve school counselling services?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant Theories

This study is primarily guided by the Reasoned Action Approach (RAA), with Help-Seeking Theory and Social Support Theory as supporting frameworks for examining primary school students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling. The RAA highlights that attitudes and perceived social norms influence behavioural intentions (Fishbein, 2008), providing a basis for understanding students' help-seeking attitudes and the relevance of perceived peer stigma as a social normative influence. Help-Seeking Theory describes help-seeking as a process involving recognition of the need for help, decisions to seek support, and engagement with available sources of assistance (Rickwood et al., 2005), providing a framework for understanding how students navigate the help-seeking process. Social Support Theory further explains how support from significant others, including teachers, may facilitate students' access to counselling services (Finning et al., 2022; Pearson & Hyde, 2020), and is particularly relevant to understanding the role of perceived teacher support. Together, these perspectives provide a conceptual foundation for examining students' help-seeking attitudes, peer stigma, and teacher support, as well as interpreting the qualitative findings.

School Counselling and Students' Help-Seeking

School counselling supports students' academic, emotional, and social well-being and contributes to early intervention for psychosocial concerns (Johnson et al., 2023; McLain et al., 2025; Mullen et al., 2021). However, even when school counselling services are provided, students may not necessarily seek help. Students' attitudes may be shaped by their understanding of counselling, previous experiences, stigma, confidentiality concerns, and perceived social support (Auger et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2020; Ning et al., 2022). Although age and gender have been linked to help-seeking, previous studies have reported mixed findings across different developmental stages and cultural settings. In addition, relatively little is known about these patterns among primary school students (Kafka et al., 2024; Karunanayake et al., 2020; Simões et al., 2021).

Students' help-seeking attitudes may also be related to peer and teacher factors within the school environment. Negative peer norms, fear of judgement, labelling, and social rejection may discourage professional help-seeking, whereas supportive friendships and positive peer norms may promote it (Cogan et al., 2023; Ning et al., 2022; Simões et al., 2021). Teachers are similarly influential because of their regular contact with students and position within



school support systems. Supportive teacher-student relationships may strengthen willingness to seek help, while teachers may also recognise concerns, encourage help-seeking, and facilitate access to counselling (Halladay et al., 2020; Poulou, 2020; Saxer et al., 2023). Examining peer and teacher factors together is therefore important for understanding how students' immediate social environment relates to attitudes towards counselling.

Malaysian School Context and Research Gap

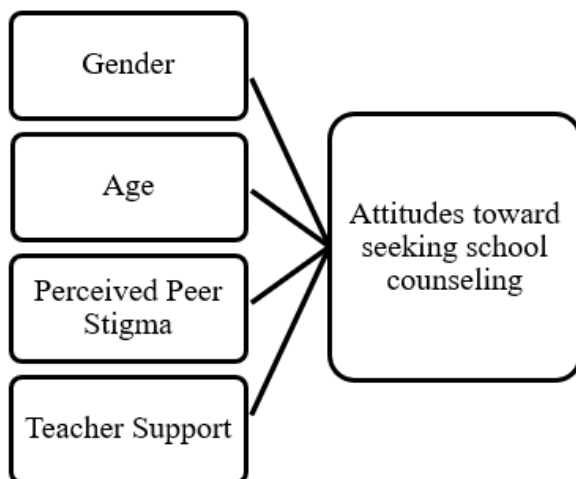
In Malaysia, school counselling operates within a broader educational system involving counsellors, teachers, school leaders, families, and peer-support structures. However, workload, role conflict, limited collaboration, and resource constraints may affect counselling accessibility and service delivery (Ku Johari & Isa Amat, 2019; Mullen et al., 2021). Help-seeking should therefore be understood not only as an individual decision but also in relation to interpersonal relationships and the organisational conditions through which counselling is accessed.

Despite growing research on help-seeking, most studies have focused on secondary school or university populations, with comparatively limited attention to primary school students, particularly within Asian contexts (Kafka et al., 2024; Raynham & Jinks, 2021; Simões et al., 2021). Furthermore, although demographic characteristics, peer attitudes, and teacher support have been associated with help-seeking, limited research has examined how these factors relate to help-seeking within students' everyday school contexts or how interpersonal and organisational conditions can inform counselling service improvement. This study addresses these gaps through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, integrating student survey findings with stakeholder perspectives to generate contextually grounded insights for improving counselling services in Malaysian Chinese primary schools.

Conceptual Framework

The quantitative phase was guided by the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1. The framework presents age, gender, perceived peer stigma, and teacher support as factors associated with students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling. The subsequent qualitative phase explored stakeholder perspectives to explain the quantitative findings and identify additional interpersonal and school-level factors related to students' help-seeking and counselling service delivery.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework of the Quantitative Phase



Note. The study examined the associations of age, gender, perceived peer stigma, and teacher support with students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling.



METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The quantitative phase first examined patterns and relationships among students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling, age, gender, perceived peer stigma, and teacher support. To better understand the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with school stakeholders to explore their perspectives, explain the quantitative findings, and identify additional contextual factors related to students' help-seeking and counselling service delivery.

Phase One: Quantitative Study

This study used a cross-sectional survey design involving 261 students aged 10 to 12 years from government Chinese primary schools in Petaling Utama, Selangor. Participants were selected using convenience sampling. An a priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 indicated a minimum sample size of 129 for multiple regression with four predictors ($f^2 = .15$, $\alpha = .05$, power = .95). The final sample exceeded this requirement.

Instruments

Students' attitudes toward seeking school counselling were measured using the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale-Short Form (ATSPPH-SF; Fischer & Farina, 1995). Perceived peer stigma was measured using the Peer Mental Health Stigmatization Scale (PMHSS; McKeague et al., 2015), while teacher support was measured using the Perceived Teacher Support Scale (PTSS; Wu et al., 2024). The instruments demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties in previous studies.

Data Collection and Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) (UM.TNC(P&I)/UMREC/3/5683). Research permission was subsequently obtained from the Ministry of Education Malaysia through the eRAS 3.0 (KPM.600-3/2/3-eras(28589), followed by approval from the relevant state and district education authorities and participating schools. Written parental or guardian consent was obtained, and student participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. A total of 370 questionnaires were returned. After screening for completeness and response quality, 109 incomplete or invalid responses were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 261 valid responses.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS Statistics Version 30. Descriptive statistics summarised participants' demographic characteristics and study variables. Independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses were performed to address the research questions. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, and appropriate effect sizes (Cohen's d , η^2 , r , and R^2) were reported where applicable.

Phase Two: Qualitative Study

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant ID	Position	Years of service	Area of Specialisation
P1	Principal	30	Educational Leadership (NPQEL)
P2	Principal	35	Educational Leadership (NPQEL)
C1	Counsellor	2	Guidance and Counselling



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C2	Counsellor	6	Guidance and Counselling
T1	Teacher	4	Chinese Language & Mathematics Education
T2	Teacher	25	Accounting & Finance; Chinese Language & Science Education

Note. P = Principal; C = Counsellor; T = Teacher; NPQEL = National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders.

Qualitative Data Collection Procedure

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was employed to recruit six participants comprising two principals, two school counsellors, and two teachers from Chinese primary schools. The qualitative phase was intended to explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings rather than to achieve statistical representation. Participants were purposively selected from three stakeholder roles to provide complementary perspectives on students' help-seeking and the delivery of school counselling services. Consistent with the principle of information power, the focused explanatory purpose and stakeholder sample's specificity supported the adequacy of a smaller qualitative sample (Malterud et al., 2016).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either online or face-to-face based on participants' availability. The semi-structured interview protocol was reviewed and refined based on feedback from the research supervisor and an experienced academic before data collection. As Mandarin was the participants' preferred language, all interviews were conducted in Mandarin, audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim in Chinese, and verified through member checking. Relevant quotations were subsequently translated into English for reporting purposes. The bilingual excerpts were returned to participants for verification to ensure that the reported data accurately reflected their intended meanings.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed manually using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis (Creswell, 2014). The researcher first read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data before generating the initial codes. Similar codes were grouped into categories to identify recurring patterns and differences in participants' perspectives. These categories were then organised into broader themes and subthemes through repeated review of the data. After the broader themes had been developed, the researcher revisited the original transcripts to identify any overlooked data and ensure that the themes accurately represented participants' perspectives. The themes were revised where necessary to improve their clarity, coherence, and distinction before the final themes were established. As this study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the final themes were interpreted alongside the quantitative findings to explain and expand on the quantitative results.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Quantitative Results

The final sample comprised 261 Chinese primary school students aged 10 to 12 years. Of these, 44.4% were male and 55.6% were female, while 76.6% reported having no previous counselling experience. Table 2 presents the participant characteristics.



Table 2

Summary of Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 261)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	116	44.4
	Female	145	55.6
Age	10 years old	82	31.4
	11 years old	90	34.5
	12 years old	89	34.1
Previous Counselling Experience	Yes	61	23.4
	No	200	76.6
Help-Seeking Consideration	Yes	36	13.8
	No	141	54.0
	Not Sure	84	32.2

Note. Percentages are based on valid responses (N = 261).

The PMHSS and PTSS demonstrated good to excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .859$ and $.941$, respectively), whereas the ATSPPH-SF showed relatively low internal consistency ($\alpha = .575$). Students demonstrated a moderate level of attitudes towards seeking school counselling ($M = 2.57$, $SD = .47$). No significant differences were found according to gender, $t(259) = 1.89$, $p = .060$, $d = .24$, or age, $F(2, 258) = 2.90$, $p = .057$, $\eta^2 = .022$. Perceived peer stigma was weakly and negatively associated with attitudes towards seeking counselling ($r = -.13$, $p = .031$), whereas teacher support showed a positive association ($r = .29$, $p < .001$). Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlations are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Means, SD, Reliability Coefficients and Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 261)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. ATSPPH-SF	2.57	0.47	(.575)			
2. PMHSS	2.58	0.57	-.13*	(.859)		
3. PTSS	4.37	0.91	.29**	-.23**	(.941)	
4. Age	2.03	0.81	-.04	-.01	-.18**	—

Note. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are presented in parentheses along the diagonal. Age was coded as 1 = 10 years, 2 = 11 years, and 3 = 12 years. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The regression model was significant, $F(4, 256) = 7.05$, $p < .001$, and explained 9.9% of the variance in attitudes



towards seeking school counselling ($R^2 = .099$). Teacher support was the only significant predictor ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), while age, gender, and peer stigma were not significant predictors (Table 4). Additional exploratory analysis showed a significant association between previous counselling experience and consideration of seeking help, $\chi^2(2, N = 261) = 32.41$, $p < .001$. Students with previous counselling experience were more likely to report considering seeking help (34.4%) than those without previous experience (7.5%).

Table 4
Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	VIF
Age	.000	.035	.000	.008	.994	1.037
Gender	-.101	.057	-.106	-1.782	.076	1.004
PMHSS	-.058	.051	-.069	-1.134	.258	1.058
PTSS	.140	.032	.269	4.339	< .001	1.093

Note. $R^2 = .099$; Adjusted $R^2 = .085$; $F(4, 256) = 7.05$, $p < .001$

Qualitative Findings

Theme 1: Current Situation and Perceptions of Help-Seeking

Common Reasons for Seeking Counselling. The qualitative findings provided further insight into the moderate level of attitudes towards seeking school counselling. Participants reported that students sought counselling for diverse concerns, including bullying, emotional and behavioural difficulties, family problems, peer conflicts, school transition, and social media-related concerns. As one participant explained, students commonly sought support for “family problems, emotional or behavioural difficulties, peer-related concerns, or worries about moving to secondary school” (P2). These findings demonstrate the relevance of school counselling services to a wide range of student needs and provide context for understanding students’ attitudes towards seeking counselling.

Referral and Voluntary Help-Seeking. Students accessed counselling through both teacher referral and voluntary help-seeking. As one principal explained, “Students in my school usually do not seek help from the school counsellor on their own...” (P1). Similarly, one counsellor noted that “When students come to me on their own, it is usually for relatively minor issues” (C1). These findings suggest that teacher referral remained important, especially when students did not independently recognise their need for support or were unfamiliar with counselling services. However, participants also observed an increase in voluntary help-seeking. One teacher described this shift: “Previously, about 60% of cases were referred by teachers, but now approximately 70% come voluntarily” (T2). Voluntary cases were generally perceived as less severe and associated with greater self-awareness, whereas referred cases often reached counsellors after teachers had difficulty managing them.

Participants also reported an inconsistent understanding of the purpose of school counselling. While many students sought counselling for genuine concerns, some visited the counselling room to socialise, avoid lessons, or use the available resources. As one teacher explained, “...5 or 6 students attend together as a group, but they mainly chat or play with their friends rather than seek counselling” (T1). Another participant similarly observed that “Some students do not like attending class... they seek counselling as a way to avoid being in the classroom” (T2). At the same time, participants observed that greater familiarity with counselling and positive experiences shared through word of mouth could encourage voluntary help-seeking. These findings suggest that students differed in how they understood and used counselling services. These differences may also help to explain the quantitative finding that students with previous counselling experience were more likely to consider seeking help.



Perceptions of Age and Gender Differences. Perceptions of age and gender differences were mixed. Some participants perceived upper primary students as more emotionally sensitive and self-aware, whereas others observed little difference according to age or gender. For example, one participant noted that "...students who are more mature tend to think more about their own inner needs, especially those aged 11 or 12" (T1). At the same time, another stated, "I don't think the age or gender really makes much difference" (C1). These perspectives were consistent with the quantitative findings, which indicated no significant differences in attitudes based on age or gender.

Theme 2: Barriers to Seeking School Counselling

Stigma, Misconceptions, and Confidentiality Concerns. Participants identified interconnected barriers to students' help-seeking, including stigma, misconceptions, confidentiality concerns, peer influence, and limited support from teachers and parents. Students appeared worried that information shared during counselling might be disclosed to teachers, parents, or classmates. As one counsellor explained, "Some students worry that if they tell the counsellor something, other teachers will know..." (C1). Counselling was also sometimes associated with wrongdoing or serious problems. One counsellor observed that "Some students think that being referred to the counsellor means they have done something wrong" (C2). Participants described concerns about embarrassment, social judgement, and possible negative reactions from teachers in relation to these perceptions.

Peer Influence. Peer influence is a double-edged social force. Negative rumours, questioning, and fear of being labelled could discourage students from seeking counselling, particularly when they had limited personal knowledge of the service. However, trusted friendships and positive counselling experiences could encourage help-seeking through word of mouth. As one counsellor explained, peer influence "can either become a barrier or a catalyst" (C2). This finding contextualises the weak negative correlation between peer stigma and attitudes towards seeking counselling.

Teacher and Parental Influence. Teacher support was also described as relevant to students' decisions to seek and continue counselling services. Some participants reported that teachers discouraged counselling when they considered students' concerns minor, were concerned about missed lessons, or misunderstood counselling as an opportunity to avoid class. On the other hand, supportive teachers also facilitated referrals and encouraged students to access help. As one teacher explained, "If a teacher is unwilling or makes it difficult for a student to see the school counsellor, the student may lose the motivation to seek counselling..." (T2). These findings provide explanatory context for teacher support, which was the only significant predictor in the regression model.

Parental attitudes represented an additional factor identified in the qualitative phase but not measured in the quantitative phase. Participants reported that some parents associated counselling with serious problems, questioned its necessity, or feared that private family matters might be disclosed. One participant explained, "Some parents do not agree to their children receiving counselling because they are afraid that their family matters will be shared with others" (T2). Limited parental understanding or cooperation could therefore complicate students' access to and continued engagement with counselling services.

Theme 3: School Support and Improvement

Participants identified several school-level conditions related to students' access to counselling and service delivery. These included teacher support, referral and collaboration procedures, counsellor workload and time constraints, counselling awareness, and the physical counselling environment.

Teacher Support, School Procedures (SOP), and Collaboration. Participants viewed teacher support as central to students' access to counselling through recognising concerns, encouraging help-seeking, and facilitating referrals. As one participant explained, "Class teachers are very important...they have a strong influence on whether students



are willing to see the school counsellor" (T2).

Building on this role, participants also emphasised the need for clearer referral procedures, stronger teacher-counsellor collaboration, and greater understanding of counsellors' professional roles. Experiences of existing procedures varied across schools, with some participants describing systematic referral arrangements and others reporting less established practices. However, participants mentioned that procedures alone were insufficient without stakeholder cooperation. As one teacher explained, "The procedures are already very clear... I think the most important thing is for teachers' cooperation" (T1). Limited understanding of the counsellor's professional role could further reduce cooperation and affect referral and support processes.

Workload and Time Constraints. Workload and time constraints were identified as organisational barriers to accessible and continuous counselling. As one principal observed, counsellors "need to provide counselling, organise programmes, relief classes, conduct psychometric assessments, and complete a lot of paperwork..." (P1). Administrative and documentation responsibilities, external case coordination, school timetables, and academic demands further reduced counselling time and sometimes resulted in postponed or shortened sessions. Participants therefore emphasised the need for sufficient counselling capacity and greater scheduling flexibility to support timely access and continuity.

Awareness and Promotion. Counselling awareness was also identified as an important area for improvement. As one principal observed, "I don't think my school students really understand the role of the school counsellor yet" (P1). Participants reported that misconceptions among students, teachers, and parents could affect help-seeking, referral, collaboration, and support systems. Therefore, participants suggested that counselling awareness initiatives should involve not only students but also teachers, parents, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), the school board, and the wider school community. These initiatives could be delivered through school programmes, professional development, community events, and appropriate digital communication.

Counselling Facilities and Environment. Finally, participants emphasised the importance of a private, comfortable, and adequately equipped counselling environment. Highly visible counselling rooms, particularly those with transparent doors or windows, were perceived to reduce students' sense of privacy and willingness to seek help. As one participant explained, "Students need an environment where they do not have to worry about being seen or interrupted by someone else" (T2). Participants also highlighted the importance of suitable facilities and materials for individual and group counselling.

Table 5 presents the integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings, showing how stakeholder perspectives helped explain the quantitative results and inform the management implications.

Table 5

Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings and Management Implications

Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Explanations	Integrated Interpretation	Management Implications
Moderate attitudes towards seeking school counselling	Students accessed counselling through referral and voluntary pathways but understanding varied.	Students were receptive, but familiarity, understanding, and access varied.	Strengthen counselling awareness and maintain referral and voluntary access pathways.
No significant age	Stakeholder views on	Demographic	Provide inclusive,



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or gender differences	age and gender differences were mixed.	characteristics alone may not explain help-seeking attitudes.	developmentally appropriate counselling awareness and access.
Peer stigma was negatively associated with help-seeking attitudes ($r = -.13$, $p = .031$)	Negative peer responses discouraged help-seeking, while positive peer experiences could encourage it.	Peer influence may function as both a barrier and facilitator.	Promote counselling normalisation and structured peer-support mechanisms.
Teacher support was positively associated with attitudes ($r = .29$, $p < .001$) and was the only significant predictor ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$)	Teachers facilitated referral and access, while academic demands could constrain attendance.	Teacher support has both relational and structural relevance to counselling access.	Strengthen referral procedures, teacher-counsellor coordination, and access arrangements.
Not examined in the quantitative phase	Parental attitudes, confidentiality concerns, counselling visibility, service capacity, and organisational arrangements emerged as additional factors.	Qualitative findings identified additional family-level and organisational conditions related to help-seeking.	Strengthen parent engagement, privacy, service capacity, resource planning, and organisational support.

Note. Integrated interpretations and management implications were derived from the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings. r = Pearson correlation coefficient; β = standardised regression coefficient.

Overall, the integrated findings indicate that improving help-seeking requires attention not only to students' attitudes but also to the organisational conditions through which counselling is delivered. Several factors were related to counselling access, including stakeholder collaboration, service capacity, flexible scheduling, awareness of counselling services, and privacy within the counselling environment. Together, these findings suggest that students' help-seeking occurs within a broader school context that may facilitate or constrain access to counselling services.



DISCUSSION

Understanding the Current Situation of Students' Help-Seeking Behaviour

The quantitative findings indicated that Chinese primary school students demonstrated a moderate level of attitudes towards seeking school counselling. The moderate level suggests that students were generally open to counselling rather than resistant. However, differences may exist in their perceived need, awareness of available services, and readiness to seek formal support. This interpretation is broadly consistent with previous studies showing that students' counselling needs, willingness, awareness, and service utilisation may differ (Habib et al., 2022; Wangid et al., 2025). This pattern is consistent with existing studies suggesting that young people's help-seeking may be related to problem recognition, mental health literacy, perceived support, and concerns about social evaluation (Radez et al., 2020; Rickwood et al., 2005; Velasco et al., 2020).

The qualitative findings help explain the quantitative findings that students demonstrated a moderate level of attitudes towards seeking school counselling. Participants reported that students sought counselling for diverse concerns, including bullying, emotional and behavioural difficulties, peer conflict, family problems, school transition, and social media-related concerns. While this diversity demonstrates the relevance of counselling to different student needs, students may recognise counselling as useful without necessarily perceiving it as personally relevant until difficulties arise. Their developmental stage may also contribute to tentative attitudes. Students aged 10 to 12 are becoming increasingly self-aware and sensitive to social evaluation, while their decisions remain influenced by interpersonal relationships and perceived social norms (Branje et al., 2021; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021).

The integrated findings also revealed a developing help-seeking pattern characterised by both teacher referral and increasing voluntary engagement. Teacher referral remained important for students who were unfamiliar with counselling or unlikely to approach counsellors independently, while even some voluntary help-seekers informed or sought permission from teachers before attending counselling. At the same time, students demonstrated varying levels of understanding about counselling. Although many sought support for personal concerns, others visited the counselling room to socialise, avoid lessons, or use its recreational resources. Together, these findings help explain the moderate level of help-seeking attitudes. Students appeared increasingly familiar with counselling, but their understanding and use of the service remained inconsistent. Help-seeking therefore appears to be related to school relationships, referral pathways, and access arrangements rather than being solely an individual decision (McPhail et al., 2024; Pfiffner et al., 2023).

Familiarity may be particularly relevant to this process. Previous counselling experience was significantly associated with consideration of speaking with the school counsellor, $\chi^2(2, N = 261) = 32.41, p < .001$. Although causality cannot be inferred, the qualitative findings provide contextual explanation. Participants observed that familiarity and positive word of mouth could encourage voluntary help-seeking, whereas unfamiliarity and misconceptions created uncertainty. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that prior counselling experience may be associated with greater openness to future help-seeking (Bañada et al., 2024; Rastogi et al., 2024; Vincenzes et al., 2023). However, the mechanisms underlying this association require further investigation.

No significant differences in attitudes were found according to age or gender. The absence of gender differences contrasts with findings among older populations, in which females often report more positive help-seeking attitudes (De Luca et al., 2019; Doan et al., 2020; Nam et al., 2010). Gendered expectations concerning emotional expression and help-seeking may be less firmly established among upper primary students (Davison et al., 2022), while the absence of age differences may partly reflect the narrow developmental range of the sample. Qualitative perspectives were similarly mixed. Some participants perceived older students as more emotionally mature and self-aware, whereas others observed little difference according to age or gender. These findings suggest that demographic characteristics alone may not reliably indicate willingness to seek help (Cavelti et al., 2024; Radez et al., 2020), as students of similar age and gender may differ in their needs, awareness, experiences, relationships, and available support.



From a school management perspective, these findings highlight the role of school-level conditions in students' opportunities to encounter, understand, and access counselling. School leaders should promote familiarity with counselling through inclusive preventive, developmental, and awareness activities, rather than relying on students to seek support only after serious difficulties arise (Jansson et al., 2024; Wangid et al., 2025). As students seek help through both referrals and voluntary approaches, schools need to maintain accessible self-referral pathways and coordinated referral arrangements involving teachers and counsellors. Since no significant differences were found across age or gender, access and awareness initiatives should be available to all students. However, the content should be adapted to students' developmental levels through appropriate language, activities, and examples.

Overall, the integrated findings suggest that students were moderately receptive to counselling but were neither uniformly resistant nor consistently proactive in seeking help. Help-seeking appears to be a developing process that is related to perceived need, familiarity, understanding, previous experience, and relationships within the school context.

Barriers and Facilitators to Students' Help-Seeking Behaviour

The quantitative findings identified contrasting associations between interpersonal factors and students' attitudes towards school counselling. Perceived teacher support was positively associated with attitudes towards seeking counselling ($r = .29, p < .001$) and emerged as the only significant predictor in the regression model ($\beta = .27, p < .001$). In contrast, peer stigma showed a small negative correlation with help-seeking attitudes ($r = -.13, p = .031$) but did not remain significant in the regression model. The qualitative findings provided further context for this contrast. Participants described a wider network of relationships involving teachers, peers, counsellors, and parents that could facilitate or constrain students' access to support.

Stigma, Misconceptions, and Confidentiality Concerns. The qualitative findings identified stigma, misconceptions, and confidentiality concerns as interconnected barriers to help-seeking. Participants reported that students worried that personal information shared during counselling might be disclosed to teachers, parents, or peers. Others feared being viewed as problematic, assumed to have done something wrong, losing friendships, or receiving negative reactions from teachers for leaving lessons to attend counselling.

These concerns are consistent with previous research identifying stigma, fear of judgement, and confidentiality concerns as barriers to professional help-seeking among young people (Gulliver et al., 2010; Radez et al., 2020; Velasco et al., 2020). However, the qualitative findings suggest that confidentiality concerns may extend beyond trust in individual counsellors. Students' perceptions of privacy may also reflect how counselling access, information sharing, and communication are managed within the wider school system (Gunu et al., 2025; Low et al., 2015).

School counsellors work within a broader system that requires collaboration with teachers, administrators, parents, and other relevant professionals (Chin & Low, 2025; Sadana & Kumar, 2021). However, privacy concerns may extend beyond formal information sharing, as students may be noticed entering the counselling room, questioned about their attendance, or worry that others are aware of their difficulties. Thus, professional confidentiality may be maintained while the help-seeking process remains socially visible.

From a school management perspective, confidentiality should therefore be understood as both a professional and organisational concern. Counsellors' professional practice alone may not be sufficient if the broader arrangements surrounding counselling access and communication continue to make students feel visible to others. This extends the understanding of confidentiality beyond information protection to include how privacy is experienced within the organisational context of counselling access.

Teachers as Gatekeepers and Facilitators of Help-Seeking. Teacher support demonstrated the strongest relationship with students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling services and emerged as the only significant predictor in the regression model. This finding is consistent with Social Support Theory and previous research



indicating that supportive relationships with significant adults can facilitate coping and help-seeking (Halladay et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2022; Forsberg et al., 2023). In primary schools, teachers may be particularly influential because of their daily contact with students and close connection to formal support systems (Maclean & Law, 2022).

The qualitative findings extend this understanding by showing that teachers functioned not only as relational sources of support but also as practical gatekeepers to counselling access. Teacher referral remained an important pathway, while students seeking counselling voluntarily often informed or sought permission from teachers because sessions occurred during school hours. Supportive teachers could recognise students' needs, validate their concerns, encourage counselling, and facilitate access. Conversely, students could experience indirect pressure when teachers were dismissive, unsupportive, or concerned about missed lessons, potentially discouraging continued attendance. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting teachers' roles in recognising students' concerns, providing initial support, and facilitating referrals to appropriate services (Nalipay et al., 2025; O'Farrell et al., 2022).

These challenges should not be interpreted simply as teachers being unwilling to support students' well-being. Teachers are also responsible for curriculum delivery, assessment, and students' academic progress (Hadisaputra et al., 2024; Uwaleke et al., 2026). Concerns about missed lessons may reflect the challenge of balancing academic responsibilities with students' psychosocial needs, rather than simply indicating whether teachers are supportive or unsupportive. This dual role provides further context for understanding the stronger association observed between teacher support and help-seeking attitudes. Teachers are relevant to students' perceptions of whether seeking help is acceptable, as well as to the practical conditions under which counselling can occur. Their role is therefore both relational and structural.

From a management perspective, these findings extend the interpretation of teacher support beyond interpersonal encouragement by highlighting its relevance to the organisational arrangements through which students access counselling. Teachers' academic responsibilities and practical constraints suggest that differences between academic and psychosocial priorities may require coordination at the school level rather than being negotiated solely between individual teachers and counsellors. This interpretation is consistent with previous research highlighting role and collaboration challenges within school mental health systems (Rojas-Andrade et al., 2024).

Peer Influence as a Double-Edged Social Force. Peer stigma showed a small but significant negative relationship with students' attitudes towards seeking school counselling, consistent with previous research indicating that fear of judgement, labelling, and rejection may discourage young people from seeking professional support (Ferrie et al., 2020; Velasco et al., 2020). However, its small effect size and non-significance in the regression model suggest that peer stigma was not a dominant independent predictor. The qualitative findings provide further explanation by showing that peer influence was not uniformly negative. While teasing, questioning, rumours, and fear of being perceived as different could discourage help-seeking, positive counselling experiences shared through friendships and word of mouth could encourage other students to seek support. Peer influence may therefore be understood as a double-edged social force. When counselling is unfamiliar or negatively perceived, peer networks may discourage help-seeking. However, as counselling becomes more familiar and positively discussed, the same networks may contribute to greater acceptance and normalisation.

From a school management perspective, peer influence should therefore not be treated solely as a barrier but also as an informal social system relevant to counselling norms. This interpretation extends attention beyond individual peer stigma to the wider role of student networks in how counselling is perceived and discussed within the school.

Parental Support and Resistance to Counselling. Although the quantitative phase did not examine parental influence, participants described parental attitudes and cooperation as relevant to whether students accessed counselling and continued attending sessions. Some parents associated counselling with serious behavioural or psychological problems, questioned its necessity, or were concerned about social judgement and the disclosure of private family matters. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that family socialisation



influences children's health beliefs and help-seeking norms (Harrison et al., 2023). The qualitative findings extend the quantitative model by identifying an additional family-level factor beyond the interpersonal relationships examined within school. Parental responses may reinforce school efforts to encourage help-seeking or create tension between school-promoted supports and beliefs communicated at home (Harpaz & Grinshtain, 2020). Limited parental understanding or cooperation may make it more difficult for students to begin or continue counselling. Even when students recognise a need for help and receive support from school personnel, parental resistance may still discourage them from seeking or continuing counselling.

From a school management perspective, parental resistance should not simply be interpreted as unwillingness to support children's well-being. Misconceptions about counselling, concerns about privacy and social judgement, and uncertainty about confidentiality may contribute to parental reluctance (Harrison et al., 2023; Khatib et al., 2023). Parental engagement should therefore be incorporated into the wider management of counselling services rather than left to individual counsellors to address only when difficulties arise. This highlights the relevance of school-family relationships to the organisational context in which counselling access and continuity are managed.

Practical Implications for Improving School Counselling Services

The integrated findings indicate that improving students' help-seeking requires more than changing individual attitudes. These findings are consistent with an ecological perspective, which views child development and behaviour as shaped by interactions across multiple levels of the social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Students' willingness to seek counselling is therefore considered in relation to how counselling is understood, promoted, accessed, coordinated, and supported within the wider school system. Hence, the findings suggest five areas for improving school counselling services, including counselling awareness and normalisation, stakeholder collaboration, accessibility and continuity, supportive counselling environments, and leadership and policy support. These areas require coordinated leadership and management than isolated actions by individual counsellors. School leaders therefore have an important role in aligning referral procedures, counsellor workload, service capacity, scheduling arrangements, privacy, stakeholder coordination, resource allocation, and policy support to ensure that counselling remains accessible and sustainable.

Strengthening Counselling Awareness and Normalisation. The findings indicate that counselling awareness should extend beyond informing students that services are available. Limited understanding among students and misconceptions among peers, teachers, and parents suggest the need for a continuous, school-wide approach to normalising help-seeking. The association between previous counselling experience and greater consideration of seeking help further suggests that familiarity may increase openness towards counselling. Schools should integrate counselling awareness into preventive and developmental activities across year levels through classroom guidance, mental health literacy programmes, and school-wide initiatives (Hayes et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2023). As no significant age or gender differences were found, these initiatives should be inclusive while remaining developmentally appropriate, with themes such as counsellors' roles, emotional regulation, bullying prevention, and appropriate help-seeking adapted through age-appropriate language and activities.

The double-edged nature of peer influence supports school-wide normalisation and structured peer-support mechanisms that may improve understanding, encourage help-seeking, and connect students with appropriate support (Curtin et al., 2022; Doan et al., 2020; Vitus, 2025). Existing mechanisms such as Pembimbing Rakan Sebaya (PRS) may provide a practical structure for involving students in these efforts (Cooper et al., 2024; Topping, 2022). Peer supporters may facilitate help-seeking within clear boundaries, ensuring students with complex concerns receive appropriate support from trained professionals (Wogrin et al., 2021). Schools should provide structured training and ongoing supervision to clarify peer supporters' roles and guide appropriate referral to professional support. Peer-led awareness activities may also be integrated into broader school-wide normalisation efforts. These efforts may help positive help-seeking messages circulate through student networks rather than relying exclusively on adult-led promotion.



Teacher professional development, including existing in-service structures such as Latihan Dalam Perkhidmatan (LADAP), may clarify counsellors' roles and boundaries, appropriate initial responses, and referral processes (Rahmawati et al., 2020; Yildirimer et al., 2025). Parental awareness may similarly be incorporated into student orientation, parent-teacher meetings, and school community events to explain counselling services, confidentiality boundaries, and common misconceptions. Official digital channels may further provide accessible information about counselling services, introduce school counsellors, and promote appropriate help-seeking. Overall, effective normalisation requires consistent messages across students, teachers, parents, and official school communication channels. The findings suggest that awareness promotion should be aligned with service capacity to ensure that increased willingness to seek help can be met with timely access to support.

Strengthening Stakeholder Collaboration and Referral Coordination. The findings indicated that interactions among teachers, counsellors, school leaders, students, and families are relevant to counselling access. Effective service delivery requires coordinated relationships rather than reliance on individual counsellors. Teacher-counsellor collaboration is particularly important because teachers are often among the first adults to recognise students' difficulties and facilitate access to formal support (Halladay et al., 2020; O'Farrell et al., 2022). Clear referral procedures and appropriate professional development may strengthen teachers' ability to identify concerns, provide appropriate initial support, and make informed referrals when additional support is needed (Albright et al., 2022; Baxter et al., 2022). Well-defined role expectations may also help maintain appropriate professional boundaries between teachers and counsellors.

Referral systems should provide clarity without becoming excessively rigid. Teachers may need structured guidance on referral indicators, appropriate initial responses, and the respective roles of teachers and counsellors (Nalipay et al., 2025; O'Farrell et al., 2022). At the same time, students should have opportunities to seek counselling voluntarily. Referrals help students who may not seek help on their own, while voluntary access allows students to seek help when needed. School leaders can support both pathways by establishing shared expectations and workable procedures for referral, communication, and coordination.

Teachers, school counsellors, and school administrators may need relevant information to coordinate appropriate support. However, information sharing should be limited to what is necessary for supporting the student (Marraccini et al., 2024; Sanchez-Maddela & Dela Cruz-Cada, 2024). Parents should similarly be engaged as part of the wider support network. School leaders, counsellors, and teachers may work with the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) to strengthen communication, improve understanding of counselling, and facilitate dialogue between schools and families. The PTA may support outreach and coordination, while professional explanations of counselling roles, confidentiality, and service procedures should remain the responsibility of appropriately qualified school personnel. The school board may also support these efforts through school activities and awareness programmes. Overall, effective collaboration requires clarity regarding who identifies concerns, facilitates access, provides professional intervention, communicates with families, and supports organisational conditions. Such coordinated interdependence may reduce duplication, misunderstanding, and gaps in students' pathways to appropriate support.

Improving Counselling Accessibility and Continuity. The findings suggest that willingness to seek help does not necessarily guarantee timely or continuous access to counselling. Previous research has similarly identified competing academic priorities and timetable constraints as barriers to school-based support (Jayawardena & Gamage, 2022; Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). In the present study, participants also identified counselling capacity and students' tuition, daycare, and transport arrangements as relevant to counselling accessibility. Because counselling often occurs during school hours, repeated absence from lessons may raise concerns about academic progress, while overly restrictive access may delay support or disrupt continuity. Flexible arrangements are needed to balance psychosocial support with academic responsibilities while responding to students' different counselling needs.

No single scheduling arrangement is likely to meet all students' needs. Before-school, recess-time, and after-school



appointments may improve access for some students, but these options should be considered alongside counsellors' workload, school resources, and students' external arrangements. Schools can increase flexibility by offering different appointment options for urgent cases, ongoing counselling, brief consultations, and less time-sensitive concerns. In larger schools, a simple internal appointment system may improve coordination, reduce repeated individual communication, and support more systematic scheduling of counselling appointments.

From a management perspective, school leaders can improve counselling access by establishing clear and consistent procedures. These should include urgent cases, follow-up arrangements, communication about lesson absences, and scheduling flexibility. This would reduce dependence on case-by-case negotiation between individual counsellors and teachers and promote greater consistency across classrooms. Thus, improving accessibility requires attention not only to the availability of counselling services but also to the processes through which students access, attend, and remain engaged with these services over time.

Creating Private and Supportive Counselling Environments. The findings highlight the relationship between the counselling environment and students' perceptions of privacy, safety, and trust. Highly visible counselling rooms, transparent doors or windows may increase concerns about being noticed, questioned, or becoming the subject of speculation. The counselling environment may be relevant not only to physical access but also to students' perceptions of privacy, comfort, and willingness to seek support (Gunu et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2023).

Complete anonymity may be unrealistic within a shared school environment. Nevertheless, schools can take reasonable steps to minimise unnecessary visibility. Where relocation is impractical, measures such as visual screening, appropriate window coverings, improved sound privacy, and suitable waiting arrangements may be considered. Where greater separation from the school setting is needed, appropriate external services may provide an alternative source of support.

Privacy also depends on the organisational arrangements surrounding the counselling space. Visible attendance at counselling may lead others to ask why students are visiting the counsellor or request information about their cases. At the same time, counsellors' commitment to confidentiality may be misunderstood as an unwillingness to cooperate. Thus, school leaders should build up shared expectations regarding consultation, information sharing, and professional boundaries. Teachers, school counsellors, and school administrators may need to share relevant information to coordinate student support. However, information sharing should be limited to what is necessary to support the student while respecting confidentiality (Marraccini et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2024). Students should also receive developmentally appropriate explanations of confidentiality and its limitations to strengthen understanding and trust (Kafka et al., 2024).

Beyond privacy, counselling environments should provide appropriate furniture and comfortable, child-friendly spaces for primary school students (Huang et al., 2023; Sinclair et al., 2021). The provision and sustainability of these resources should be supported through workable processes for funding, procurement, and maintenance rather than depending primarily on individual counsellors' efforts. Creating supportive counselling environments requires attention to both physical conditions and the organisational practices surrounding service delivery.

Strengthening Leadership, Resources, and Policy Support. Sustainable improvement in school counselling requires organisational and policy support beyond interventions directed at individual students, teachers, or counsellors (Hewitt et al., 2024; Spencer et al., 2022). Awareness efforts should be supported by sufficient service capacity, effective coordination, appropriate resources, and workable procedures (Herlitz et al., 2020). School leadership plays a central role in creating the conditions that enable students to seek help and receive timely and continuous support (Gee et al., 2020).

A key management consideration is aligning counselling demand, professional responsibilities, and service capacity. Increasing awareness may generate greater demand, but insufficient capacity may result in delayed or discontinuous



support. Resource and workload planning should therefore consider not only student enrolment but also actual service demand, case complexity, counselling and follow-up, documentation, programme responsibilities, consultation, crisis response, and stakeholder coordination. Counselling workload should not be assessed primarily by teaching periods, as core professional responsibilities extend well beyond classroom time (Blake, 2020; Leslie et al., 2025).

Competing responsibilities, including relief teaching, should be managed within this capacity balance. Classroom involvement is not necessarily incompatible with counselling work and may increase counsellor visibility, familiarity, rapport, and opportunities to understand student interactions (Yablon, 2020). However, excessive or unpredictable relief teaching may reduce time for counselling, follow-up, documentation, programme planning, and consultation (Muhammed et al., 2020). The management issue is therefore not whether counsellors should ever enter classrooms, but whether competing responsibilities preserve sufficient capacity for core counselling functions. Effective services require both counsellor visibility and availability.

Effective coordination and communication are important for maintaining coherent school mental health service delivery (Chin & Low, 2025; Nygaard et al., 2024). In schools with multiple counsellors, this may involve transparent yet flexible arrangements for case allocation, programme responsibilities, year-level coverage, follow-up, and communication. School leadership can support this coordination by establishing shared principles for workload allocation and role distribution while allowing sufficient flexibility to respond to changing student and service needs.

Evaluating counselling services also requires broader indicators. Unlike examination results or curriculum completion, counselling outcomes may be gradual, individualised, and less immediately visible. Evaluation should therefore extend beyond counts of sessions and programmes to consider accessibility, continuity, appropriate referral and follow-up, student awareness, voluntary help-seeking patterns, perceived psychological safety, and stakeholder collaboration. These indicators may provide a more meaningful understanding of service quality and functioning.

At the broader system level, identifying students requiring support should extend beyond their willingness and ability to access available services. Although screening alone does not ensure help-seeking or service engagement, screening initiatives such as “Saringan Minda Sihat” may support early identification (Connors et al., 2022; Lustig et al., 2023). Therefore, identification mechanisms should be linked to clear referral pathways, sufficient counselling capacity, stigma reduction efforts, accessible services, and appropriate follow-up (Stefanidou et al., 2020; Wong-See et al., 2023).

School-level flexibility remains necessary because schools differ in enrolment, staffing, facilities, schedules, and student needs. However, flexibility should operate within clear professional and policy boundaries. Decisions regarding additional duties and workload distribution should be based on transparent criteria that account for professional roles, existing responsibilities, and documented service demands (Cox et al., 2024; Park et al., 2022). Fairness does not require identical duties for every staff member, but differences should not depend primarily on informal influence, personal relationships, work visibility, or an individual’s willingness to resist additional responsibilities (Misra et al., 2021; O’Meara et al., 2019). These findings suggest the need for clearer guidance regarding counselling capacity, accessibility, professional responsibilities, role coordination, and the balance between academic and psychosocial support. Schools should retain flexibility to adapt these arrangements according to the school enrolment, staffing, available resources, and student needs (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2024; Margaretha et al., 2023; Patel et al., 2023).

Overall, this study extends understanding of students’ help-seeking by showing that access to school counselling involves both interpersonal and organisational factors. Although teacher support was the only significant predictor in the regression model, the qualitative findings highlighted the importance of referral arrangements, service capacity, stakeholder collaboration, privacy, scheduling, parental involvement, and leadership support. These



findings extend attention beyond students' attitudes towards the school conditions that facilitate and sustain access to counselling. Efforts to encourage student help-seeking should therefore be supported by sufficient organisational capacity to ensure that counselling services remain accessible and effective. Accessible services, coordinated responsibilities, appropriate resources, meaningful evaluation, equitable workload practices, and sustained leadership support should accompany awareness and normalisation. Promoting help-seeking without strengthening the system through which support is delivered risks creating a gap between students' willingness to seek assistance and their ability to receive timely and continuous support.

Limitations and Future Direction

This study has several limitations. First, the quantitative phase was cross-sectional and relied on self-report measures. Thus, the findings indicate associations rather than causal relationships and may be subject to response bias. The relatively low internal consistency of the ATSPPH-SF ($\alpha = .575$) also warrants caution. Previous psychometric evaluation of the ATSPPH-SF has largely involved adult populations (Elhai et al., 2008), indicating the need to consider its developmental suitability for students aged 10 to 12 years. Research has also shown that negatively or reverse-worded items may affect response consistency and psychometric performance, particularly in relation to reading ability and linguistic processing (Bulut & Bulut, 2022; Suárez-Álvarez et al., 2018). In addition, cultural differences in understandings of mental health and professional help-seeking may shape responses to help-seeking measures (Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2023). Findings involving help-seeking attitudes should therefore be interpreted cautiously. Future research should further examine the age-appropriate and cultural suitability of the ATSPPH-SF for primary school students.

Second, help-seeking and counselling practices are context-dependent. Schools differ in leadership, organisational culture, staff relationships, parental attitudes, resources, and counselling arrangements. The small purposively selected qualitative sample provided explanatory depth but reflected participants' specific professional roles and school contexts and should not be assumed to represent all Chinese primary schools. Similarly, the quantitative phase used convenience sampling from selected government Chinese primary schools in one district and excluded students with special educational needs, limiting broader generalisability.

Third, qualitative coding, translation, theme development, and mixed-method integration involved the researcher's interpretation. Although transcript checking, member checking, repeated review, and translation verification were used to strengthen credibility, some degree of researcher subjectivity is inevitable. Future studies may consider incorporating peer debriefing or independent coding to further enhance analytical rigour.

In addition, future research may adopt longitudinal and multi-school designs to examine how help-seeking attitudes and actual service use change over time and across different school contexts. Future studies could also examine parental influence, which emerged in the qualitative findings but was not measured quantitatively, and investigate how teacher support, peer influence, counselling familiarity, parental attitudes, and organisational accessibility jointly relate to students' help-seeking.

CONCLUSION

This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study examined help-seeking behaviour towards school counselling among Chinese primary school students in Petaling Utama. Students demonstrated moderate attitudes towards seeking counselling, with no significant age or gender differences. Perceived peer stigma was negatively associated with help-seeking attitudes, while teacher support emerged as the only significant predictor. Qualitative findings further identified stigma, confidentiality concerns, the roles of peers and parents, teacher facilitation, and organisational conditions surrounding counselling accessibility and continuity. Overall, students' help-seeking should not be understood solely as an individual decision but as an interpersonal and organisational process embedded within the school context. Strengthening counselling services requires coordinated awareness, stakeholder collaboration, accessible and continuous support, appropriate privacy, and sustained leadership and policy support.



As schools differ in staffing, resources, facilities, schedules, and student needs, service improvements should be responsive to local conditions while maintaining clear professional and organisational support for counselling. Rather than eliminating every practical constraint, the priority should be to ensure that counselling services remain accessible, trusted, and responsive to students' needs.

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