

Multilevel Barriers to Student Help-Seeking in China's Exam-Oriented Education: A School Psychology and School Counselling Perspective

Chuxuan Chen*

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

**Corresponding author: Chuxuan Chen.*

Abstract

The barriers to help-seeking faced by Chinese students are not individual problems but are rooted in multilevel processes occur in the evaluation of student performance within classrooms and peer groups, as well as through school systems of assistance. This paper discusses how students move from the shame of questioning to silence when they seek help from teachers, and how such a trajectory hinders school mental health initiatives in supporting student well-being. Applying ecological systems theory, this paper provides a multidisciplinary analysis of help-seeking issues at four different levels. First, at the individual level, question-asking and help-seeking are risk-related activities associated with the exposure of incompetence, leading to fear of negative evaluation, reduced self-efficacy, and unmet psychological needs. Second, at the peer level, help-seeking behaviors are socially visible and involve peer exclusion, conditional belonging, and classroom cultures that make speaking out risky. Third, at the level of teachers and classrooms, controlling communication patterns, lack of psychological safety, and classroom pacing hinder help-seeking behaviors and lead to misinterpretations of student silence. Finally, this paper argues that school mental health practice should not passively wait for help-seeking behavior to emerge. Instead, student silence should be recognized as an early indicator of potential problems and addressed through low-threshold interventions, shame-sensitive approaches, teacher training, and proactive referral procedures. In conclusion, this paper acknowledges the limitations of theoretical analysis and suggests the combined use of classroom observation, longitudinal studies, and intervention work within school and family systems to understand how such systems can promote safer help-seeking.

Keywords

help-seeking barriers, help-seeking silence, examination-oriented education, school psychology, school mental health

1. Introduction

In China's examination-oriented education system, students' learning problems do not only reflect cognitive difficulties or a lack of skills in performing academic tasks. These problems are also closely associated with pressures related to academic progression, classroom evaluation, and school adjustment.

According to Chen et al. [1], within examination-oriented educational systems, learning maladjustment is prevalent among Chinese high school students preparing for the Gaokao under substantial pressure. They further highlight that academic help-seeking cannot be regarded as an automatic response; rather, students must first recognize their need for help and subsequently decide to seek assistance. Consequently, asking questions, expressing confusion, and seeking help cannot be considered routine learning behaviors, as they can easily become socially conspicuous and risky within classrooms that emphasize evaluation, comparison, and competition. Chen et al. [1] also note that shy individuals who are concerned about others' perceptions may experience embarrassment or shame during help-seeking, which increases their tendency to engage in maladaptive help-seeking or to avoid help-seeking altogether. In such settings, psychological suffering often becomes visible in how young people engage with classroom learning activities and peer interactions. Ideally, seeking help could function as an adaptive response to managing pressure and addressing learning difficulties. However, in reality, the matter is considerably more complex. In particular, Ryan et al. [2] conceptualize help-seeking as an important self-regulation strategy. In contrast, avoidant help-seeking refers to situations in which individuals recognize the need for help but do not take action. Thus, the issue is not only whether schools provide adequate support resources, but also whether students who urgently require help are able to translate the internal recognition of "I need help" into observable action. Yu et al. [3] also highlight that despite high academic achievement in Chinese education, there remain low levels of learning engagement, innovation, and socio-emotional development. Consequently, student silence cannot simply be interpreted as timidity or lack of motivation; it must be understood within an educational environment shaped by intense evaluation, constant comparison, and high-stakes examination pressure. Current studies in school psychology and counselling have already described downstream processes of support systems within schools. As reported by Chui et al. [4], in systems such as Hong Kong's, teachers are often regarded as gatekeepers of students' mental health support. Teachers' referral decisions depend on multiple factors, including severity of the problem, student readiness, stigma, parental beliefs, available resources, and teachers' self-efficacy. Despite this knowledge, existing research provides insufficient theoretical grounding for understanding student silence as an antecedent condition in the help-seeking process. Taking these factors into account, this paper addresses the transitional stage through which Chinese students move from questioning shame to help-seeking silence. Drawing on ecological systems theory [5], it examines how individual processes, peer pressures, and teacher-classroom practices collectively contribute to the weakening of early-stage support pathways in school contexts.

2. Individual Psychological Mechanisms

From a psychological perspective, this tendency not to seek assistance or to avoid asking questions can be conceptualized as help-seeking inhibition. According to Ryan et al. [2], this phenomenon occurs when students recognize their need for help but still choose not to ask. In environments dominated by evaluation and comparison, asking for assistance is often interpreted as a signal of low competence and may elicit disapproving reactions from teachers and peers. In Chinese high schools, this factor is particularly salient, as students are highly sensitive to the potential negative consequences of help-seeking. According to Chen et al. [1], under intense Gaokao pressure, shy students experience shame when seeking assistance and fear being negatively evaluated. Thus, the issue is not that students are unable to formulate questions, but rather that doing so exposes them to evaluation and perceived humiliation. Li et al. [6] provide further evidence for how this form of silence becomes internalized. Their study involving Chinese high school students found that shyness negatively affects academic adjustment, with rumination serving as a mediator, while reflection shows no significant effect [6]. This indicates that students facing difficulties related to shyness do not merely experience transient anxiety; instead, they tend to focus persistently on personal weaknesses, past failures, and anticipated social evaluation. Consequently, this form of silence reflects not only behavioral inhibition but also internal beliefs such as I may not ask appropriately or my question may not be useful, which leads to avoidance of vulnerability. The findings of Bong [7] further contribute to understanding how this cycle is associated with self-efficacy and performance-avoidance goals. Bong shows that students' self-efficacy moderates situational effects on academic behavior. Students with stronger performance-avoidance goals are more concerned about their relative incompetence compared to peers and therefore avoid help-seeking [7]. This suggests that silence is not merely fear-based behavior; rather, it can be understood as maladaptive self-protection aimed at minimizing embarrassment and failure, while simultaneously reducing access to learning opportunities and support. From the perspective of self-determination theory, such silence reflects the continued frustration of basic psychological needs. Gao et al. [8] show that autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are

differentially associated with engagement, with competence being most strongly related to behavioral engagement. Although their study focuses on engagement, it helps explain why help-seeking silence emerges. When students experience restricted autonomy, threatened competence, and insufficient relatedness, verbal help-seeking becomes less likely. Therefore, help-seeking silence should not be equated with passivity or low motivation, but rather understood as a psychologically coherent response to constrained educational environments.

3. Peer Norms and Social Risks

During adolescence, help-seeking behavior involves not only individual recognition of difficulty but also social participation. Asking questions in class, expressing lack of understanding, and seeking assistance from teachers or peers are socially visible behaviors that may be observed and evaluated by others. As Ryan et al. [2] argue, help-seeking should be understood not only as self-regulation but also as a form of social communication. Students may recognize their difficulties yet remain silent due to fear of negative judgment from teachers or peers. In highly competitive examination-oriented environments, peer evaluation based on grades, speed, and performance becomes a mechanism of social positioning. In such contexts, asking questions may be interpreted not as engagement but as evidence of lack of competence. According to Ryan et al. [9], help-seeking tendencies are associated with broader motivational, affective, relational, and achievement-related profiles. Compared with adaptive help-seekers, avoidant help-seekers display maladaptive tendencies. Thus, silence may reflect not a momentary hesitation but a stable behavioral profile shaped by multiple personal and relational factors, including anxiety and self-efficacy. Hu and Liu [10] further show that peer exclusion mediates the relationship between shyness and academic alienation. Although their study does not directly examine help-seeking silence, it helps explain why students may perceive public questioning or help-seeking as carrying relational risks. Students are therefore not only asking, What if I ask the wrong question? but also If I reveal my difficulty, will I still be accepted by this group? Help-seeking thus becomes linked to conditional belonging, where students maintain secure peer positions by appearing competent, avoiding disruption, and not drawing attention to difficulty. Zhao et al. [11] further demonstrate that classroom cultural norms shape the outcomes of social withdrawal. In classrooms characterized by low individualism norms or strong collectivist norms, unsociability is associated with poorer academic performance and increased psychological difficulties [11]. This suggests that classrooms are not neutral interaction spaces; rather, they shape which behaviors are socially acceptable. Help-seeking silence can therefore be understood as a peer-regulated adaptation within specific classroom cultural contexts.

4. Teacher Responses, Classroom Psychological Safety, and Structural Constraints

Whereas peer dynamics may normalize silence, teacher responses and classroom structures may further reinforce it. Ryan et al. [2] note that help-seeking avoidance is not determined solely by individual motivation; rather, it is shaped by classroom rules, achievement goals, and broader social contexts. In other words, students' willingness to speak depends heavily on classroom conditions. Kaur et al. [12] show that autonomy-supportive teacher behaviors, such as acknowledging student perspectives and reducing pressure, enhance perceived need support. In contrast, controlling communication styles increase need frustration [12]. In school psychology terms, psychological safety refers to students' belief that they can express uncertainty without immediate shame or dismissal. However, Yu et al. [3] argue that teacher behavior is embedded within systemic exam-oriented constraints. High-pressure pacing, time limitations, and performance monitoring often require directive instruction. Even well-intentioned teachers may reduce dialogue to maintain instructional flow. Thus, structural constraints rather than individual intentions often shape classroom communication patterns. Chui et al. [4] conceptualize teachers as gatekeepers in mental health referral systems, yet referral decisions are influenced by student willingness, stigma, parental beliefs, resource availability, and teacher self-efficacy. Chui et al. [14] further show that teachers' own help-seeking stigma shapes referral attitudes through social projection. As a result, student silence may be misinterpreted as compliance, maturity, or temporary disengagement, particularly when difficulties are internalizing rather than externalizing.

5. Implications for School Counselling and School Mental Health

If silence can be internalized by students and also misread or overlooked by teachers, school counselling systems should not rely solely on explicit help-seeking signals. Instead, persistent silence, withdrawal, low participation, and reluctance to ask questions should be considered potential early indicators of unmet support needs. However, silence should not be treated as diagnostic evidence, as it may also reflect personality traits, classroom norms, or temporary states. Khan et al. [13] suggest that psychological distress can be addressed through psychological capital and social support resources, while stigma and limited mental health literacy remain barriers. Therefore, schools should reduce perceived exposure associated with help-seeking by improving mental health literacy, providing emotional education, implementing non-stigmatizing assessment practices, and establishing accessible and anonymous counselling channels. At the classroom level, brief emotional check-ins, non-blaming responses, and supportive environments can reduce shame associated with expressing difficulty. Chui et al. [4] and Chui et al. [14] further emphasize that effective referral depends on teacher awareness, stigma sensitivity, and willingness to act. Shi and Cheung [15] highlight that teachers' social-emotional competencies are essential for effective school-based mental health interventions. Accordingly, teacher training should strengthen emotional awareness, supportive communication, and relational responsiveness.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, help-seeking silence among students in China's examination-oriented education system should not be interpreted as individual passivity or lack of motivation. Rather, it reflects a multilevel process that occurs prior to visible help-seeking within school mental health systems. This paper has demonstrated that silence emerges through the interaction of individual psychological mechanisms, peer evaluative pressures, classroom structures, teacher responses, and broader institutional constraints. From a school psychology and counselling perspective, waiting for students to explicitly state I need help may result in missed opportunities for early intervention. Effective support systems should incorporate early identification, proactive engagement, sensitive communication, teacher training, and structured referral pathways. This study is limited by its theoretical nature and lack of empirical validation. Future research should examine how school and family systems jointly facilitate non-shame-based help-seeking behaviors.

References

- [1] Chen, Y., Li, L., Wang, X., Li, Y., & Gao, F. (2018). Shyness and learning adjustment in senior high school students: Mediating roles of goal orientation and academic help seeking. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, Article 1757. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01757>
- [2] Ryan, A. M., Pintrich, P. R., & Midgley, C. (2001). Avoiding seeking help in the classroom: Who and why? *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(2), 93–114. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1009013420053>
- [3] Yu, S., Chen, B., Levesque-Bristol, C., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2018). Chinese education examined via the lens of self-determination. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30(1), 177–214. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9395-x>
- [4] Chui, H., Luk, S., Fung, K. K., & Huang, Y. (2023). Referring students for professional psychological help: A qualitative study of teachers' experience in Hong Kong. *Journal of School Psychology*, 99, Article 101219. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2023.05.002>
- [5] Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- [6] Li, L., Wang, X., Gao, F., & Chen, Y. (2020). Shyness and academic adjustment in Chinese high school students: The mediating role of self-focused attention model. *Current Psychology*, 39, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00457-w>
- [7] Bong, M. (2008). Effects of parent-child relationships and classroom goal structures on motivation, help-seeking avoidance, and cheating. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 76(2), 191–217. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JEXE.76.2.191-217>

- [8] Gao, Q., Bao, C., Du, H., & Yan, R. (2023). The mediating role of basic psychological needs satisfaction in the relationship between teacher-student relationships and academic engagement in China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 43(2), 514–525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1933380>
- [9] Ryan, A. M., Patrick, H., & Shim, S.-O. (2005). Differential profiles of students identified by their teacher as having avoidant, appropriate, or dependent help-seeking tendencies in the classroom. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 97(2), 275–285. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.97.2.275>
- [10] Hu, Z., & Liu, Q. (2025). Peer exclusion as a mediator between shyness and academic alienation in early adolescents: A three-wave longitudinal study. *Social Psychology of Education*, 28, Article 201. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10150-5>
- [11] Zhao, S., Liu, M., Li, D., Liu, J., Liu, S., Zhou, T., & Chen, X. (2026). Unsociability and school and psychological adjustment in Chinese adolescents: The moderating effects of classroom cultural norms. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 55, 1097–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-025-02312-7>
- [12] Kaur, A., Lin, Y., Lu, K., Zhou, Q., Zhou, Y., & Noman, M. (2025). Chinese students' conception of psychological need support and need frustration: A qualitative analysis from self-determination theory perspective. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 34, 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-024-00844-3>
- [13] Khan, A., Zeb, I., & Fang, S. (2026). Navigating stigma and support: A qualitative study of help-seeking for mental health challenges among Chinese university students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 21(1), Article 2646251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2026.2646251>
- [14] Chui, H., Luk, S., Chong, E. S. K., Chen, H., & Fung, K. K. (2026). Teachers' help-seeking stigma and attitudes toward referring students for help. *Social Psychology of Education*, 29, Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10166-x>
- [15] Shi, J., & Cheung, A. C. K. (2024). Effective components of social emotional learning programs: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 53, 755–771. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-024-01942-7>

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author (s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).