

When do pupils talk about their problems? Explaining pupils' intentions to seek help from school social work services

Roger Pfiffner^a, Regula Windlinger^{b,*}, Ueli Hostettler^b

^a Institute for Organisation and Social Service Management, Bern University of Applied Sciences, Hallerstrasse 10, 3012 Bern, Switzerland

^b Research Programme "Governance in Education", Bern University of Teacher Education, Fabrikstrasse 8, 3012 Bern, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

School social work aims to be a low threshold point of contact and advice for pupils. In practice, however, pupils often avoid seeking help when needed. Although the factors that influence help-seeking are well established in the literature, there has been very little research on this for school social work. Adapting the behavioral model of health services use, the present study addresses this gap by examining individual and contextual factors promoting or inhibiting pupils' intentions to seek help from social work services directly integrated into their schools. A total of 4,420 pupils (grades 5 to 9) from 32 schools in Switzerland completed a questionnaire in which they were asked how likely they would be to seek help when they face a family problem, peer problem, or difficulties in everyday school life they cannot solve on their own. Results from the multi-level analysis reveal that, overall, pupils' intentions to seek help are rather low. Predisposing factors and enabling factors influence willingness to seek help, with trust emerging as the most important facilitator. It is therefore important that all pupils can establish a trusting relationship with their school social worker and gain positive experiences with him or her.

1. Introduction

During their years of schooling, young people may experience significant psychosocial and emotional distress that impedes their development and everyday functioning (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014). This risk is salient for pupils who accumulate multiple social disadvantages, such as exposure to poor socio-economic conditions, adverse life events, a lack of parental support, as well as detrimental school environments (Flouri, Mavroveli, & Tzavidis, 2010; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004; Schoon, Sacker, & Bartley, 2003). Studies indicate that up to one fifth of school-age children experience psychosocial stress and excessive demands in tackling the challenges of growing up, which can seriously impair their ability to learn and adjust in school, and this, in turn, can have negative consequences that persist into adulthood (Hurrelmann, 2012; van der Ende, Verhulst, & Tiemeier, 2012). It is thus important to identify vulnerable pupils early and prevent problems from compounding over time (Fanti & Henrich, 2010).

Given that pupils may face psychosocial problems that schools cannot address alone (Franklin, Gerlach, & Chanmugam, 2008; Rothi & Leavey, 2006), school social work has become a widespread form of support in many western countries and plays a crucial role for early

intervention in schools. Acting as a compensatory resource for vulnerable children and youths, school social work assists teachers, pupils, and parents by providing a range of services such as individual, group, and family counseling; teacher support and classroom interventions; assistance with conflict resolution; or advocacy for pupils and families (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013; Franklin et al., 2008). School social work aims to be a low threshold point of contact for various topics and acts as gatekeeper to mental health and child protection services. As such, it emphasizes the principles of voluntariness and confidentiality (Kooperationsverbund Schulsozialarbeit, 2009) which are seen as prerequisites for gaining pupils' trust in counseling.

In practice, however, most school social workers experience that distressed pupils do not necessarily seek help on their own – an experience that is shared by many professionals. Numerous studies on help-seeking behavior have demonstrated that many people (e.g., those suffering from mental disorders, suicidal ideation, bullying, violence or sexual abuse) show a strong reluctance to seek professional help (e.g., Corry & Leavey, 2017; Gilchrist & Sullivan, 2006; Meinck et al., 2017; Pereira et al., 2020; Radez et al., 2021; Rickwood, Mazzer, & Telford, 2015). While these studies have well documented the barriers and facilitators to the use of out-of-school psychosocial services, none have

* Corresponding author at: Bern University of Teacher Education, Fabrikstrasse 8, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland.

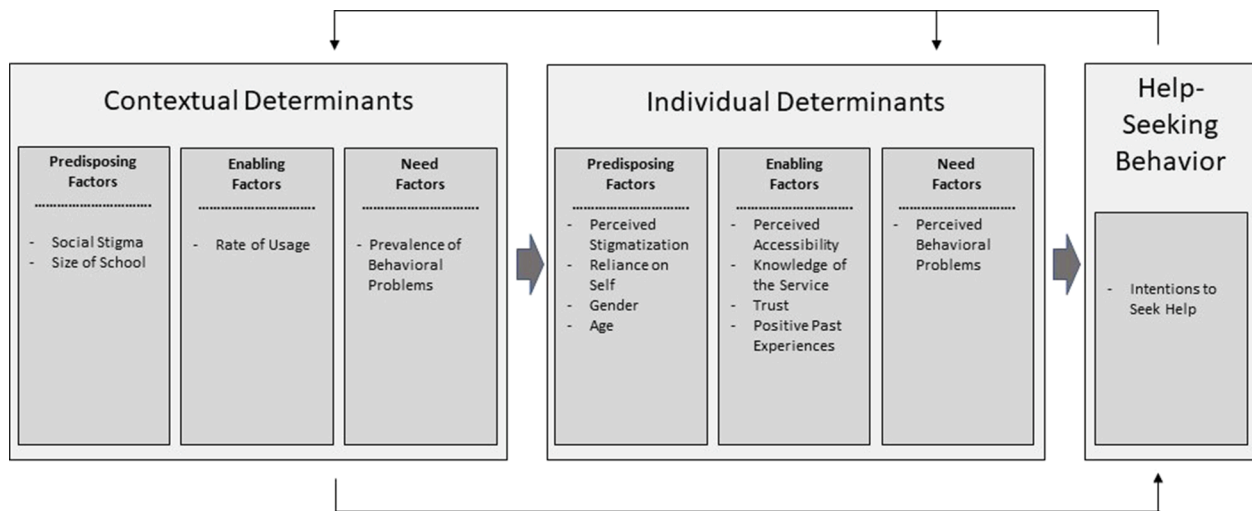
E-mail addresses: roger.pfiffner@bluewin.ch (R. Pfiffner), regula.windlinger@phbern.ch (R. Windlinger), ueli.hostettler@phbern.ch (U. Hostettler).

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Source: Based on Andersen's (2008) Behavioral Model of Health Services Use, adapted for help-seeking behavior in school social work.

Fig. 1. Factors determining pupils' intentions to seek help.

explicitly referred to the field of school social work. This gap is addressed here.

2. Explaining pupils help-seeking behavior

Various conceptual frameworks have been used to explain variations in help-seeking behavior in adults and young people. The behavioral model of health services use is one of the most popular models. It is aimed at understanding why people use health services and how access to care can be improved (Andersen, 2008; Babitsch et al., 2012). The model suggests that people's service use is dependent on their predisposition to use services, factors which enable or impede the use of services, and individual need for care. The model also emphasizes that the best way to understand service use is to consider both individual and contextual determinants. Individual determinants include predisposing factors such as mental factors (e.g., beliefs related to help-seeking) and demographic characteristics. Moreover, the model accounts for enabling factors such as the financial means to pay for the services and perceived organizational factors. The nature or severity of a problem is assigned to the need factors that affect individuals' help-seeking behavior. Contextual factors are measured at the aggregate level (e.g., schools), but, like the individual characteristics, they can be differentiated into predisposing, enabling, and need factors (Andersen, 2008). Fig. 1 depicts how we applied the model and which factors are at the heart of the present study.

While the basic model structure is identical to Andersen's original model, the single factors had to be adapted to the field of school social work. Contextual characteristics such as the age structure of the population, health insurance benefits or financial resources of families to pay for support were omitted as they are not relevant for the use of school social work. Instead of using general health indices (e.g., infant mortality) to determine the needs of a population, we use a broad measure of the prevalence of behavioral problems in children and adolescents that is of greater relevance to school social work. This factor captures how pupils view their own functional state and need for help. Professional judgements about the pupils' psychosocial condition (evaluated need) were not obtainable for privacy reasons.

2.1. Predisposing factors

Extant studies have shown that predisposing factors have a strong influence on young people's help-seeking behavior. Regarding the mental determinants, perceived stigma and embarrassment are reported

as key barriers in most studies, particularly in connection with mental health problems, suicidal thoughts, and sexual violence (Del Mauro & Jackson Williams, 2013; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010). For young people, what colleagues and others think of them is very important, provoking discomfort when disclosing their intimate concerns or when others might find out their use of professional service. Pupils are especially afraid that others will view seeking professional help as a sign of weakness or personal failure and react inappropriately (Pereira et al., 2020, p. 6; Ungar et al., 2009, p. 344). There is empirical evidence that such self-stigmatizing attitudes among young people reduce willingness to see a mental health professional, general practitioner, or counsellors (Clement et al., 2015; Doyle, Treacy, & Sheridan, 2017; Jorm, Wright, & Morgan, 2007). To examine whether this barrier applies for school social work as well, we hypothesize:

H₁: The perceived stigmatization of using school social work services is negatively associated with pupils' help-seeking intentions.

Rickwood et al. (2007) state that, as young people progress through adolescence, they develop a growing need for autonomy and increasingly consider it important to solve problems themselves. Several studies have consistently shown that a high level of self-reliance in solving problems is another predisposing factor negatively associated with help-seeking (Del Mauro & Jackson Williams, 2013; Radez et al., 2021; Sheffield et al., 2004). Thus, we hypothesize:

H₂: Reliance on self is negatively associated with pupils' intentions to seek help from school social work services.

Sociodemographic factors such as gender and age are further predisposing factors described in the literature. Their relationships with help-seeking are rather complex, and the empirical evidence is fairly contradictory (Rothi & Leavey, 2006). Notwithstanding, most studies have reported that girls and young women are more inclined to seek help than boys and young men (Ando et al., 2018; Leavey, Rothi, & Paul, 2011; Meinck et al., 2017). This can be explained by internalized gender norms that assume men are more self-reliant, so they are more likely to deny needs or hide problems (Barker, Olukoya, & Aggleton, 2005). We therefore hypothesize:

H₃: Females show stronger intentions to seek help from school social work services than males.

While some scholars have observed that older adolescents are more likely to consult professional services due to increased (mental) health literacy and capacity for self-referral (Mauerhofer, Berchtold, Michaud,

& Suris, 2009), Booth et al. (2004) found that younger adolescents are more likely to seek help from school counselors. Maybe adolescents, as they grow older, rely more on their peers and less on parents and other adults. Based on this, we hypothesize the following:

H4: Age is negatively associated with pupils' intentions to seek help from school social work services.

2.2. Enabling factors

The likelihood that pupils will (not) seek professional help may also depend on the perceived organizational characteristics of service and the associated access routes. According to the theory of planned behavior, such features may promote or inhibit a person's intention to seek help, because they affect his or her control beliefs – that is, “a person's subjective probability that a given facilitating or inhibiting factor will be present in the situation of interest” (Ajzen, 2020, p. 315). The more positively a person views his or her resources, capabilities, and opportunities for a certain behavior, the more likely he or she will intend to perform it and actually do so. In the help-seeking literature, the most common reported barrier related to organizational factors is limited accessibility due to a lack of time and long waiting lists, inflexible hours, long distance to services, and high costs associated with service use (Gulliver et al., 2010; Radez et al., 2021; Rothi & Leavey, 2006). High costs or long journeys to services obviously play no role for school social work services directly integrated into schools and free of charge; however, other factors such as time constraints, inflexible hours, or complicated registration procedures can make it more difficult to schedule an appointment with a school social worker and reduce pupils' willingness to seek help. A more complicated pathway to help and long delays can easily frustrate them and reduce their efforts to claim help at a later date (Stunden et al., 2020). Thus, we hypothesize:

H5: The perceived accessibility of school social work services is positively associated with pupils' help-seeking intentions.

Young people's knowledge of a professional service has been identified as another enabling factor that promotes help-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2010; Radez et al., 2021). In order to be able to attribute a concrete meaning to seeking help from a professional, pupils need to know the providers' area of responsibility and the type of support provided, as well as when it is appropriate to seek it (Booth et al., 2004). In addition, children and young people usually want to talk to someone they know and trust (Rickwood et al., 2007). Therefore, they first and foremost seek help from friends, family, or other relatives. Similarly, when professional help is sought, young people primarily claim help from familiar bodies, such as school counsellors or GPs (Booth et al., 2004; Rothi & Leavey, 2006). Our next hypothesis is therefore:

H6: Knowledge of school social work is positively associated with pupils' help-seeking intentions.

Young people can have multiple concerns about using professional services, such as being judged or not being understood or taken seriously (Booth et al., 2004). Trust in professionals reduces such concerns and gives young people the confidence to receive appropriate help. Trust is associated with positive emotions and the conviction that others show reliability and honesty, which are essential for young people to maintain contacts with other people (Rotenberg, Boulton, & Fox, 2005). It is also crucial for pupils to find the school social worker likeable and pleasant: this is related to the trust they place in him or her (Baier & Heeg, 2011). Related to this, research shows that trust in a person or provider is an important prerequisite for children seeking help (Corry & Leavey, 2017; Radez et al., 2021). Thus, we hypothesize:

H7: Trust in school social work services is positively associated with pupils' intentions to seek help.

For children and young people, seeking help from a professional is

often a big step. They take it only when unpleasant consequences do not prevail. They assess the extent to which this is the case based on their experiences. Therefore, people who have had positive past experiences with a service provider are more inclined to seek help from professional sources (Gulliver et al., 2010; Radez et al., 2021). Conversely, negative past experiences were found to decrease motivation to pursue help and make it difficult for young people to talk about problems, particularly due to fear of similar negative experiences in the future (Stunden et al., 2020). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H8: Positive past experiences with school social work services are positively associated with pupils' help-seeking intentions.

2.3. Need factors

It is an intuitively well-understood assumption that a high intensity of problems is positively associated with the intention to seek help, especially because seeking help is seen as a useful coping strategy (Barker et al., 2005). In the event of great difficulties, young people may lack the ability to cope with a problem on their own and therefore rely on additional help. In this context, Sourander et al. (2001) have shown that higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems in children and adolescents are positively related to mental health service use. There is also empirical evidence that young peoples' willingness to seek help rises with their experience of psychological distress and functional impairment (Kaiser, Kyrrestad, & Fossum, 2020; Sheffield et al., 2004), although this link is not entirely unambiguous. For instance, Kaiser et al. (2020) found that emotional symptoms are positive predictors of help-seeking behavior, while conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems are not. Furthermore, there are even studies revealing that adolescents with more pronounced suicidal ideation (Deane et al., 2001) and psychotic-like symptoms (Ando et al., 2018) show the greatest reluctance to seek professional assistance. Against this background, it seems that the influence of problem intensity on help-seeking is highly dependent on the type of problem, the type of measurement, and the covariates considered. In relation to school social work, this raises the important question of whether particularly vulnerable pupils show a greater willingness to entrust themselves to school social workers. After all, school social work sees itself as a resource for disadvantaged pupils and intends to support pupils with psychosocial and behavioral problems. Therefore, our hypothesis is:

H9: Higher levels of behavioral problems are positively associated with pupils' intentions to seek help from school social work services.

2.4. Contextual factors

Apart from individual attitudes and social influences, intention to seek help may further depend on environmental factors beyond an individual's control. The behavioral model of health services use takes this into account by considering contextual factors, such as the characteristics of a society or support system. Similarly, the theory of planned behavior accounts for the interaction among individual, social, and environmental factors. It suggests that contextual factors enhance positive attitudes towards a behavior and intentions to perform it when they increase the individual's perceived control in the process (Ajzen, 2020). Thus, the more a person is confident that he or she has the necessary resources, abilities, and opportunities to obtain appropriate help, the more likely he or she is to seek help or intend to do so.

Based on the above considerations, we assume that if school social work is firmly anchored in the school day and is thus used by a large proportion of pupils, it will reinforce young people's control beliefs that they have the abilities and opportunities to seek help. On the other hand, we assume that the more stigma that is attached to school social work, the more negative the students' attitude is towards seeking help. This is because the social stigma signals to pupils that using school social work

services contradicts the social norms of a school. Finally, a high prevalence of behavioral problems in the school environment could strengthen the pressure for cooperation and increase the psychosocial counseling provided by school social workers, with positive effects on the help-seeking intentions of pupils. This leads us to the final three hypotheses:

H₁₀: A higher utilization rate of school social work services is positively associated with pupils' intentions to seek help.

H₁₁: The social stigma attached to school social work is negatively associated with pupils' help-seeking intentions.

H₁₂: A higher prevalence of behavioral problems in the school environment is positively associated with pupils' intentions to seek help.

3. The present study

The main objective of this study is to explain the help-seeking intentions of school children aged 11 to 16. Building on the behavioral model of health services use (Andersen, 2008), the study investigates the relationships between individual and contextual characteristics and young peoples' willingness to seek help from school social work services. The main question addressed is which individual and contextual factors promote or inhibit pupils' intentions to request help from school social work services and divulge family problems, peer problems, or other difficulties. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the factors in a school setting that determine whether young people seek and receive the help they need.

The study was conducted in Switzerland, where school social work has spread rapidly since the late 1990s (Baier, 2011). In urban areas, school social work has been introduced throughout all schools, while in rural areas there are still restrictions on access. Due to the federal structures and the high autonomy of the municipalities in Switzerland, different forms of organization have emerged (Hostettler, Pfiffner, Ambord, & Brunner, 2020). In the present study, only services provided by qualified social work professionals were considered. All school social work services are directly integrated into the schools and the social workers regularly introduce themselves to all classes. They offer counseling and class interventions or carry out projects. For this reason, all the pupils in our study have had some form of experience with school social work.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants and procedure

Data were collected as part of the research project "School Social Work in Switzerland - Forms of Cooperation and Structures of Utilisation" funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF; grant #156642). The main objective of this project was to collect information about the organization of school social work in Switzerland and to investigate forms of collaboration with schools. The research project was designed as a full survey and achieved a response rate of 91.6%. The resulting data enabled us to determine the number of public schools with school social work in German-speaking Switzerland ($n = 858$). We were also able to identify almost all schools suitable for this study on help-seeking because they offer free access to school social work for pupils in 5th grade and above ($n = 360$). From this subset, we drew a random sample of 32 schools for which we surveyed all students in grades 5 through 9. A total of 72 schools in the subset had to be contacted in random order to obtain confirmation of participation from 32 school principals. The final sample for the present study consisted of 4,420 pupils.

Before conducting the survey, the principals of the schools informed the parents and children about the study (i.e., that participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time, and that

confidentiality was guaranteed). The pupils completed the anonymous questionnaires under the supervision of teachers who were provided with a standard guideline for the study procedure that ensured pupils were informed about the voluntariness of participation. The pupils placed their completed questionnaires in unmarked envelopes and sealed them before collection by the teachers.

An average of 138.1 pupils per school participated (Min = 24, Max = 369). The pupils were between 11 and 16 years old. 48.5% were male, 49.4% female, and 2.1% did not indicate their gender.

4.2. Measures

The questionnaire was in German. It was pretested in separate interviews with six fourth graders to ensure clarity and appropriateness. Since no volunteers from educationally disadvantaged families could be found, the students in this first pretest were intentionally one year younger than those interviewed in our study. This was followed by another pretest in a school with 20 classes from grades 5 to 7.

Unless stated otherwise, items and scales were developed specifically for this study, and the answer scale ranged from *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (4). All items used for scale construction can be found in Appendix 1. The scales included in the study are outlined briefly below.

4.2.1. Dependent variable

Help-seeking intentions were assessed with five items, four items asking about seeking help when different problems arise (at home, at school, with friends, being sad or angry), for example, "Would you seek help from the school social worker if you had major problems at home or with your family in the near future?" and one item asking about willingness to disclose problems ("I could talk to the school social worker openly and frankly about all my worries"). The answer scale ranged from *very unlikely* (1) to *very likely* (4). Internal consistency of the scale was $\alpha = 0.80$.

4.2.2. Predisposing factors

- Perceived stigmatization was assessed with three items ($\alpha = 0.72$), for example, "Others think poorly of me if I go to the school social worker."
- Reliance on self was assessed with two items ($\alpha = 0.66$), for example, "I try to solve all my problems on my own."
- Age was measured in years from 9 to 16.
- Gender was assessed with the item: I am a *boy/a man* (0), a *girl/a woman* (1).

4.2.3. Enabling factors

- Perceived accessibility of school social work services was assessed with three items ($\alpha = 0.53$), for example, "I think the school social worker rarely has time." (recoded)
- Knowledge of school social work was measured with four items ($\alpha = 0.65$), for example, "I know for which questions I can turn to school social work."
- Trust in school social work was assessed with four items ($\alpha = 0.83$), for example, "I think that I can rely on school social work."
- Positive past experiences with school social work services were assessed with three items ($\alpha = 0.67$), for example, "Has school social work ever helped you or given you useful advice?", the answer scale was *not true* (1), *somewhat true* (2), or *certainly true* (3).

4.2.4. Needs factors

Behavioral problems were assessed with 20 items from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1997); for example, "I am constantly fidgeting or squirming"; the answer scale was *not true* (1), *somewhat true* (2), or *certainly true* (3). Internal consistency of the scale was $\alpha = 0.81$. To represent the total difficulties, the scores were summed

Table 1
Results for Multilevel Models 0 – 2 Explaining Pupils' Help-Seeking Intentions.

		Model 0		Model 1		Model 2	
		-		-		-	
				β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Individual level							
Perceived stigmatization	H1			0.03*	0.01	0.03*	0.01
Reliance on self	H2			-0.07**	0.01	-0.07**	0.01
Gender (Male = 0)	H3			0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
Age	H4			-0.12**	0.02	-0.13**	0.02
Perceived accessibility	H5			0.13**	0.02	0.13**	0.02
Knowledge of school social work	H6			0.06**	0.01	0.06**	0.01
Trust	H7			0.35**	0.01	0.34**	0.01
Positive past experiences	H8			0.23**	0.02	0.23**	0.02
Perceived behavioral problems	H9			0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01
School level							
Social stigma	H10					-0.44	0.27
Rate of use	H11					-0.33	0.25
Prevalence of behavioural problems	H12					0.03	0.25
School size						0.09	0.29
Within-school variance		0.470**	0.018	0.309**	0.011	0.309**	0.011
Between-school variance		0.033**	0.009	0.004**	0.002	0.004*	0.001

Note. Standardized coefficients are reported. H = hypothesis, in bold the hypotheses that have been confirmed by our data.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

up.

4.2.5. Contextual factors

- Social stigma was assessed by aggregating the stigmatization perceived by individual pupils into a school-level mean score.
- Rate of use of school social work services: Pupils indicated whether they had ever been to the school social worker for a personal consultation in the past. This information was aggregated to the school level.
- Prevalence of behavioral problems was calculated by aggregating the pupils' individual assessments of their behavioral problems to form a school-level mean score.

4.2.6. Control variable

School size was measured by the number of pupils in the school. This information was provided by the principal.

4.3. Analytic strategy

Our analysis consists of two main components. First, we created the composite scales from their respective questionnaire items based on factor analysis. Factor analysis groups variables according to their shared variance into new common factors. This enabled us to examine whether the items load on the expected construct and whether the scales are conceptually distinct. An explanatory approach was used because our items and scales were developed specifically for this study.

As we assume that distinct factors can be identified, principal component analysis with orthogonal rotation was used. We started the analysis with all items from the questionnaire. Some items had to be dropped because of cross-loadings. The final analysis was done with 45 items. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis ($KMO = 0.871$). Analysis of scree suggested that eleven common factors (with eigenvalues > 1) were appropriate, which in combination explained 53.4% of the variance. The results with the factor loadings can be found in [Appendix 1](#). The calculations were made with the software SPSS.

Second, to consider the hierarchical structure (pupils nested in schools), data were analyzed with multilevel regression analysis in Mplus 8.3 ([Muthén and Muthén, 1998-2021](#)), using full information maximum likelihood (MLR) estimation to deal with missing values and non-normality of data. The analyses were done in three steps ([Hox, 2010](#)): first, we calculated a null model (variance component model) to

determine whether there was variability in pupils help-seeking intentions across schools; second, we entered the predictors on the individual level (within level); and third, predictors at the school level (between) were also included.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the variables are reported in [Appendix 2](#). Overall, pupils' help-seeking intentions are relatively low ($M = 2.3$ on a 4-point scale where 2 stands for *unlikely* and 3 for *likely*); 60.6% of pupils have a value below the theoretical midpoint of the scale (< 2.5), which indicates that they are not inclined to seek help from school social work services when problems arise. Overall, most correlations between the variables were in the expected direction, except for the variable behavioral problems, which was correlated negatively with the dependent variable help-seeking intentions.

5.2. Multilevel regression models

[Table 1](#) shows the results for the multilevel regression models. From the null model (Model 0), we can infer that 6.6% of the variance of pupils' help-seeking intentions is at the school level and therefore multilevel models are required. The first model (Model 1) included all the predictors at the within level; together they explained 34% of the within-schools and 88% of the between-schools variance in pupils' help-seeking intentions. The second model (Model 2) further included the three predictors and the control variable at the school level. In this final model, the proportion of explained variance in the outcome at both levels remained the same as in model 1.

5.2.1. Predisposing factors

Regarding the predisposing factors, the results show a mixed pattern. Reliance on self ($\beta = -0.07$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .01$), and age ($\beta = -0.13$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .01$) were negatively related to pupils' help-seeking intentions, confirming hypotheses 2 and 4. No support was found for hypothesis 1, as perceived stigmatization ($\beta = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .05$) was positively related to pupils' help-seeking intentions, nor for hypothesis 3, as gender ($\beta = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .29$) was not significantly related to pupils' help-seeking intentions.

5.2.2. Enabling factors

All the enabling factors were positively and significantly related to pupils' help-seeking intentions, namely perceived accessibility ($\beta = 0.13$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .01$), knowledge of school social work ($\beta = 0.06$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .01$), trust ($\beta = 0.34$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .01$), and positive past experiences ($\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .01$). Therefore, hypothesis hypotheses 5, 6, 7, and 8 were supported by our data.

5.2.3. Need factors

Perceived behavioral problems was not significantly related to pupils' help-seeking intentions ($\beta = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .12$), so hypothesis 9 was not supported.

5.2.4. Contextual factors

Of the contextual factors, none were related to the outcome. Contrary to our expectations, social stigma ($\beta = -0.44$, $SE = 0.27$, $p = .10$), rate of use ($\beta = -0.33$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = .19$), and prevalence of behavioral problems ($\beta = 0.03$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = .91$) were not connected to pupils' help-seeking intentions at the school level. Hypotheses 10 to 12 were thus not confirmed. The control variable also showed no significant influence.

6. Discussion

A key question that arises with the expansion of school social work is whether and under what conditions pupils are willing to seek help from school social work services and voluntarily entrust themselves to it. The present study addressed this understudied issue by examining the individual and contextual factors that promote or inhibit pupils' willingness to request help in the case of a family, school, or peer problem. Our results show, first, that the average intention of young people to ask the social worker in their school for help is rather low. Pupils with more severe behavior problems do not have a stronger intention to seek help. Thus, our results suggest that it is by no means given that pupils turn to school social workers when they are confronted with problems that they cannot solve on their own. Only 39.4% of pupils tend to seek help in such a situation. This result is in line with other studies showing that many young people who need help are reluctant to seek professional help (e.g., Doyle et al., 2017; Kaiser et al., 2020; Radez et al., 2021). Complementing this research, our findings reveal that low willingness to seek help is also observed for low-threshold and free support services in schools. Interestingly, this is true even for services that generally receive high ratings from pupils in terms of familiarity, accessibility, and trustworthiness.

Our results further demonstrate that the differences between schools regarding pupils' intentions to seek help from school social work services are small. None of the three contextual factors examined showed a significant influence on help-seeking. Therefore, we can infer that the differences in help-seeking intentions are not substantially attributable to the organization of school social work in individual schools. Within the schools, the pupils vary significantly in their help-seeking intentions due to a wide range of individual factors. Personal and, in particular, enabling factors influence the willingness to seek help. Enabling factors that increase pupils' intention to seek help include knowledge about the counseling service, perceived ease of access, and, especially, positive experiences with the service. These factors are directly and positively related to help-seeking intentions, because they reinforce a person's control belief in tapping appropriate help (Ajzen, 2020).

Our results confirm the findings of Corry and Leavey (2017) that trust is the most important determinant of help-seeking among young people, which they attribute to adolescents' increased vulnerability and low self-esteem. They emphasize how important it is for adolescents' identity development and self-esteem to be seen positively by others (see also Booth et al., 2004). Trusting the school social worker gives them confidence that they will be understood in counseling, that they will be treated honestly and respectfully, and not be judged. According to the

framework of interpersonal trust (Rotenberg et al., 2005), this sense is an important prerequisite for young people to maintain interpersonal contacts and seek help from others. Young people's experience and familiarity with the counterpart form the basis for this (Rotenberg, 2010; also Corry & Leavy, 2017). Corresponding to this theory, our bivariate and multivariate analyses show that there is a clear relationship between accessibility, positive prior experiences with school social work, degree of knowledge about the service, trust, and help-seeking. Taken together, this suggests that pupils trust and willingness to seek help is highly dependent on established relationships with the person providing help. For younger children and adolescents in particular, such relationship aspects are probably more important than qualifications and professional competencies, which they find difficult to assess.

Regarding predisposing factors, consistent with our hypotheses, intentions to seek help decrease with age and greater reliance on self. As scholars have previously noted, the increasing need for autonomy and self-determination during adolescence reduces the willingness to seek professional advice (Radez et al., 2021; Rickwood, 2007), which makes early detection and early intervention more challenging at secondary schools.

In contrast to other studies focusing on help-seeking from out-of-school mental health services (e.g., Gulliver et al., 2010), perceived stigma is of secondary importance in our study. We observe in our descriptive results (see Appendix 2) that students generally do not perceive that classmates who use school social work are particularly stigmatized by others. This is particularly true in schools where school social work is used by a large proportion of pupils. And contrary to our expectations, perceived stigma is positively related to intention to seek help in the multilevel regression analysis, although the effect is very weak. This surprising result could be a statistical artifact that is probably due to substantially related predictor variables (Maassen & Bakker, 2001). It could indicate that a stigmatization of school social work is perceived especially by pupils with anxiety symptoms (emotional problems) or poor relationships with classmates (peer problems). This assumption is supported by the correlation between behavioral problems and perceived stigmatization, as shown in Appendix 2. This interaction could explain our finding that pupils with behavioral problems do not show a higher willingness to seek help and that the factor stigma has this unexpected effect. This interpretation implies that the stigma attached to the use of school social work is perceived differently by students, depending on their personal characteristics. While most pupils can today regard the use of school social work as a largely normal part of everyday school life, it can still cause feelings of embarrassment and shame for vulnerable children.

6.1. Strength and limitations

The main strengths of this study are the consideration of a wide range of factors that can influence help-seeking intentions, the multilevel approach to analysis, and the large sample size. However, there are also some limitations to be considered. First, our study focused on intentions to seek help. According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the intention to seek help is an important trigger for actual claiming or use of a service. This approach also allowed us to capture the willingness to seek help in the total sample of pupils. Based on this approach, however, we cannot make a direct statement about whether and which pupils actually used school social work counseling and how effective the help was. These important aspects need to be clarified in future studies. Second, we used an overall index as the dependent variable that measured intentions to seek help in three situations typical of school social work. We did not evaluate the extent to which the willingness to seek help and the influencing factors varied by different types of concerns or problems. More in-depth analyses could provide important clues as to the problems for which school social work is considered particularly competent or suitable by the pupils and is therefore more likely to be consulted. Finally, several items and scales were developed

Table A1

Results from a factor analysis of the study questionnaire.

Item	Factor loading										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Factor 1: Help-seeking intentions											
Would you ask the school social worker for help if you had serious problems or conflicts with friends or classmates in the near future?	0.742										
If you were very depressed, sad, or angry in the near future, would you talk to school social work about it?	0.730										
Would you seek help from the school social worker if you had major problems at home or with your family in the near future?	0.721										
Would you seek help from the school social worker if you had severe problems in school or with a teacher in the near future?	0.707										
I could talk to the school social worker openly and frankly about all my worries	0.586										
Factor 2: Trust											
The school social worker is very nice.		0.781									
The school social worker in our school has a pleasant aura.		0.758									
I think that the school social workers take the pupils seriously.		0.698									
I think that you can rely on school social work.		0.636									
Factor 3: Behavioral problems (emotional problems)											
I worry a lot.			0.718								
I have many fears, I am easily scared.			0.697								
I am nervous in new situations. I easily lose confidence.			0.645								
I am often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful.			0.628								
I get a lot of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness.			0.541								
Factor 4: Behavioral problems (peer problems)											
I have one good friend or more. (r)				0.728							
Other people my age generally like me. (r)				0.639							
Other children or young people pick on me or bully me.				0.576							
I am usually on my own. I generally play alone or keep to myself.				0.538							
I get on better with adults than with people my age. (r)				0.501							
Factor 5: Behavioral problems (hyperactivity problems)											
I finish the work I'm doing. My attention is good. (r)					0.670						
I think before I do things. (r)					0.613						
I am easily distracted, I find it difficult to concentrate.					0.590						
I am restless, I cannot stay still for long.					0.542						
I usually do as I am told. (r)					0.455						
I am constantly fidgeting or squirming.					0.396	0.363					
Factor 6: Behavioral problems (conduct problems)											
I get very angry and often lose my temper.						0.433					
I fight a lot. I can make other people do what I want.						0.680					
I am often accused of lying or cheating.				0.357		0.481					
I take things that are not mine from home, school or elsewhere.						0.608					
Factor 7: Self-reliance											
If I ever have difficulty seeing, I will try to arrange my life so no one will notice.							0.680				
I try to solve all my problems on my own.							0.651				
Factor 8: Perceived stigmatization											
I am afraid that my classmates will find out about my visit to the school social worker.								0.838			
Others think poorly of me if I go to school social worker.								0.826			
I am afraid of unpleasant consequences if I tell secrets to school social worker.								0.618			
Factor 9: Positive past experiences											
Has school social work ever helped you or given you useful advice?									0.754		
Have you ever learned anything useful for you during activities/ lessons with school social work?									0.738		
Has school social work ever helped your class to solve a problem?										0.645	
Factor 10: Knowledge of school social work											
I know how to contact the school social work (in person, by email or by phone).										0.736	
I know for which questions I can turn to school social work.										0.662	
I know the school social worker in our school.										0.621	
The school social worker is often present at break time and talks to the pupils.										0.447	
Factor 11: Perceived accessibility											
I think the school social worker rarely has time. (r)											0.726
I think arranging a meeting with the school social work would be too complicated for me. (r)											0.657
I don't have time to go to the school social work. (r)											0.532

Note. The extraction method was principal axis factoring with an orthogonal (Varimax with Kaiser Normalization) rotation. Factor loadings below 0.35 are not shown. Reverse-scored items are denoted with an (r).

Table A2

Means, standards deviations, and intercorrelations.

Individual level	Scale	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Help-seeking intentions	1–4	2.30	0.71									
2. Perceived stigmatization	1–4	1.86	0.76	-0.08**								
3. Reliance on self	1–4	3.14	0.73	-0.12**	0.02							
4. Gender (proportion females, male = 0)	0 / 1	0.49	NA	0.08**	0.08**	-0.02						
5. Age	9–16	13.30	1.59	-0.25**	-0.03	0.18**	-0.06**					
6. Perceived accessibility	1–4	2.99	0.64	0.35**	-0.25**	-0.05**	0.03	-0.08**				
7. Knowledge of school social work	1–4	3.13	0.57	0.32**	-0.14**	0.04**	0.08**	-0.04**	0.32**			
8. Trust	1–4	3.40	0.57	0.52**	-0.20**	-0.03*	0.07**	-0.16**	0.40**	0.41**		
9. Positive past experiences	1–3	1.81	0.62	0.45**	-0.05**	-0.04*	0.06**	-0.22**	0.26**	0.39**	0.38**	
10. Perceived Behavioural problems	0–40	9.83	5.14	-0.04*	0.28**	-0.05**	0.04**	0.02	-0.18**	-0.11**	-0.18**	0.08**
School level	Scale	M	SD	1	2	3						
1. Social stigma	1–4	1.87	0.12									
2. Rate of use	1–100	40.93	12.69	-0.41*								
3. Prevalence of behavioural problems	0–40	9.89	0.78	0.23	-0.02							
4. School size	1–369	149.70	101.43	-0.16	-0.46**	-0.09						

Notes. $N = 4,171$ – $4,420$, School level $n = 32$; M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

specifically for this study to make them applicable for surveying pupils about school social work. Overall, the factor analysis conducted shows an appropriate factor structure. However, Cronbach's alpha tests indicated that four scales had low internal consistency ($\alpha < 0.70$). In contrast, the key concepts in our study, such as help-seeking and trust, demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha \geq 0.80$). Nevertheless, we hope that further studies will address the issue of help-seeking in school social work and develop more sophisticated measures of the influencing factors.

6.2. Implications

Because many pupils avoid seeking professional help for their problems and concerns, offering school social work on a low-threshold and voluntary basis is not sufficient for effective early detection and intervention. Special attention needs to be paid to the fact that pupils need to have a trusting relationship with school social work before they are willing to seek help. Building such a relationship requires time and different approaches (Booth et al., 2004).

According to our findings, school social workers can create trust by being easily accessible in everyday school life. Further, it is important that the pupils know the school social workers and their support services well. Therefore, it is advisable that school social workers be visible in everyday school life, introduce themselves repeatedly to all classes, and clearly communicate their working methods. Regular activities in the area of primary prevention can help to increase awareness of and trust in school social work. Above all, it is central to facilitate positive experiences for as many pupils as possible, which can be accomplished through professionally designed and effective classroom interventions. Our results suggest that such experiences should take place as early as possible in elementary school. Finally, it should be mentioned here that teachers also play a central role in early detection and early intervention at schools (Franklin, Kim, Ryan, Kelly, & Montgomery, 2012) – for example, by recognizing psychosocial problems and consistently referring pupils to school social work. Our findings suggest that this is particularly important for children with behavioral problems, as they do not necessarily make use of school social work on their own.

6.3. Conclusion

Seeking help is a complex process involving a variety of influencing factors. Our research contributes to a better understanding of the multiple reasons why pupils in need of support (do not) seek help from school social work services, particularly emphasizing the importance of relational aspects such as trust. We hope that our findings will help to improve the delivery of school social work services so that young people

receive the help they need.

Ethical Approval

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), which supported this work (grant #156642), monitors compliance with legal requirements, namely the Human Research Act (HRA), and requests, if necessary, approval from an official ethics committee. Since the aforementioned project was classified as ethically unobjectionable by the SNSF, no additional approval from an ethics committee was required.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A

See the [Tables A1 and A2](#).

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