

Enhancing the Effectiveness of School-Based Psychological Counseling for Lower Secondary Students in Long Xuyen Ward, Vietnam: A Qualitative Study of Systemic Challenges and Strategic Solutions

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ABSTRACT

In the context of rapid socio-economic transformation and increasing psychosocial risks among adolescents, school-based psychological counseling has become an urgent educational priority in Vietnam. This qualitative study explores the current status, challenges, and strategic measures for enhancing psychological counseling activities in lower secondary schools in Long Xuyen Ward, An Giang Province. Data were collected from over 400 lower secondary students and 35 teachers concurrently assigned to school counseling roles through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Findings reveal a high demand for counseling support related to academic pressure, peer relationships, parent-child conflict, emotional regulation, and career orientation. However, counseling services remain fragmented, under-resourced, and largely delivered by non-specialized staff lacking systematic training. Cultural barriers, limited funding, and institutional ambiguity further constrain effectiveness. Based on thematic analysis, the study proposes a multi-tiered intervention framework emphasizing professional capacity building, structural institutionalization, parental engagement, culturally responsive practices, and policy-level investment. The findings contribute to the development of sustainable school counseling models in lower secondary education within emerging educational systems.

Keywords: school-based counseling, lower secondary education, qualitative research, adolescent mental health, educational psychology

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterized by rapid biological maturation, identity exploration, and heightened emotional reactivity. Within Erik Erikson's (1968) psychosocial framework, this stage is defined by the tension between identity formation and role confusion, as individuals seek coherence in their self-concept amid expanding social expectations. Contemporary research further indicates that adolescents are particularly sensitive to peer influence, social evaluation, and emotional dysregulation due to ongoing neurodevelopmental processes (Laurence Steinberg, 2014; B. J. Casey et al., 2008). These characteristics render lower secondary students (ages 11–15) especially vulnerable to academic stress and instability in interpersonal relationships.

At the global level, adolescent mental health has emerged as a major public health priority. The World Health Organization (2021) estimates that one in seven adolescents experiences a mental disorder, with a substantial proportion of conditions developing before the age of 14. In response, schools are increasingly recognized as critical sites for early identification, prevention, and intervention (Katherine Weare & Melanie Nind, 2011), given their sustained access to students during a formative stage of development.

In Vietnam, these global concerns are intensified by rapid socio-economic transformation, examination-oriented educational systems, expanding digital environments, and performance-driven parenting practices. Empirical studies have documented increasing levels of academic anxiety, peer conflict, cyberbullying, and family-related stress among adolescents. In particular, high academic expectations and authoritarian parenting styles have been shown to significantly predict psychological distress (Raymond Ang & Vivian Huan, 2006; Nguyen Thi Thu, 2017). At the same time, international evidence consistently demonstrates that well-structured school counseling programs are associated with improved academic engagement and socio-emotional outcomes (John Carey & Carey Dimmitt, 2012).

Despite policy-level recognition of the importance of school counseling in Vietnam, implementation remains uneven and largely dependent on teachers who lack formal training in psychological support. The absence of professional standards, systematic supervision, and dedicated resources constrains the effectiveness and sustainability of counseling services. Furthermore, cultural factors—including hierarchical teacher–student relationships and stigma surrounding mental health—continue to limit students’ willingness to seek help, thereby reducing the accessibility and impact of existing support mechanisms.

Lower secondary education constitutes a critical window for preventive intervention, as it is during this period that key competencies related to identity, emotional regulation, and resilience are formed. However, in contexts such as Long Xuyen Ward, An Giang Province, the increasing complexity of students’ psychosocial needs contrasts sharply with the limited development of institutional counseling structures. This discrepancy highlights the need for systematic empirical investigation and contextually grounded reform.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine: (1) the predominant psychosocial concerns experienced by students; (2) teachers’ perceived competence in counseling roles; (3) structural and institutional barriers to effective service delivery; and (4) evidence-informed strategies for strengthening school-based psychological counseling. Addressing these dimensions is essential for advancing the professionalization of counseling services and enhancing both student well-being and educational quality in contemporary Vietnam.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is informed by an integrated theoretical framework that brings together developmental psychology, ecological systems theory, and contemporary approaches to school counseling. Within developmental psychology, adolescence is understood as a formative period characterized by identity construction, heightened emotional sensitivity, and increased responsiveness to social contexts. As articulated by Erik Erikson (1968), this stage involves the central task of negotiating identity versus role confusion, during which individuals actively work toward a coherent sense of self. Subsequent research has further demonstrated that this developmental phase is marked by an imbalance between rapidly developing socio-emotional systems and still-maturing cognitive control mechanisms, which contributes to increased emotional reactivity and vulnerability to stress (B. J. Casey et al., 2008; Laurence Steinberg, 2014).

Building on this foundation, Self-Determination Theory (Richard Ryan & Edward Deci, 2020) provides a useful lens for understanding the conditions that support or hinder adolescent development. The theory emphasizes the importance of satisfying three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—as prerequisites for well-being and adaptive functioning. When educational environments fail to support these needs, particularly in contexts characterized by high academic pressure and hierarchical relationships, students are more likely to experience disengagement, anxiety, and maladaptive coping patterns.

At a systemic level, Ecological Systems Theory (Urie Bronfenbrenner, 1979) situates adolescent development within a network of interacting environmental systems, including family, school, and broader socio-cultural contexts. From this perspective, schools are not merely sites of academic instruction but critical developmental settings in which psychosocial risks may either be mitigated or intensified. The quality of interactions within these systems—particularly those involving teachers, peers, and institutional norms—plays a decisive role in shaping students’ psychological outcomes.

In parallel, contemporary models of school counseling emphasize the need for structured, professionalized systems of support. The American School Counselor Association (2019) framework conceptualizes school counseling as a comprehensive, data-informed program that integrates academic, career, and socio-emotional development. Empirical studies have shown that such programs are associated with improved student engagement and learning outcomes (John Carey & Carey Dimmitt, 2012). At the same time, the effectiveness of counseling practice is closely tied to the presence of formal training and ongoing supervision—core elements highlighted in counseling psychology literature (Janine Bernard & Rodney Goodyear, 2014).

From a public health standpoint, adolescent mental health has become an increasingly urgent global concern. The World Health Organization (2021) identifies early adolescence as a critical window for prevention, noting that a substantial proportion of mental health conditions emerge before the age of 14. In this context, schools are widely recognized as strategic platforms for early intervention and mental health promotion (Katherine Weare & Melanie Nind, 2011). However, adolescents' willingness to seek help remains limited, often constrained by stigma, perceived risks, and concerns about confidentiality (Amelia Gulliver et al., 2010).

Taken together, these perspectives converge on a consistent implication: effective school-based psychological counseling must be developmentally grounded, systemically embedded, and professionally supported. In contexts such as Vietnam, where counseling services are still evolving (Anh Tran & Betsy Weiss, 2018) and help-seeking behaviors are shaped by cultural norms (Nguyen Thi Thu, 2017), strengthening counseling systems requires not only technical capacity building but also careful alignment with local socio-cultural conditions.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how psychological counseling is understood and practiced in lower secondary schools. The choice of design reflects the need to access participants' perspectives within their everyday school environment, where counseling is often informal, situational, and shaped by institutional routines. Rather than isolating variables, the study focuses on how students' psychosocial experiences and school responses are intertwined in practice. This approach allows for a grounded account of counseling as it actually occurs, rather than as it is formally prescribed.

Participants and sampling

The study was conducted in four public lower secondary schools. Participants were selected purposively to reflect the different roles involved in counseling processes, including 412 students (Grades 6–9), 35 teachers, and 5 administrators.

For the student component, particular attention was given to the composition of focus groups. A total of 12 groups were conducted, with three groups at each grade level. Each group included 8 to 10 students and was assembled to ensure variation in academic standing, classroom behavior, and gender. In consultation with teachers, students who had encountered academic pressure, peer conflict, or disciplinary situations were included alongside those with more typical school experiences. This mix helped generate discussion that was both grounded and reflective of a broader student population.

Teachers and administrators were selected based on their direct involvement in student support, whether formally assigned or informally enacted. In many cases, teachers undertook counseling responsibilities without specialized training, making their perspectives particularly relevant to understanding how counseling is operationalized in practice.

All participants were informed of the study's purpose and their rights. Consent procedures were completed in accordance with ethical requirements, including parental consent for students.

Data Collection

Data collection took place over six months, allowing sufficient time to observe patterns and build trust with participants. Student focus groups were used to explore shared experiences of stress, relationships, and help-seeking. The group setting encouraged participants to respond to one another, often revealing common pressures that might not surface in individual accounts.

In parallel, 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators. These conversations focused on how participants understood their roles in counseling, the kinds of situations they encountered, and the constraints they faced in responding to students' needs.

Observations were carried out in natural school settings, including classrooms, staff interactions, and situations where counseling occurred informally. These observations helped situate participants' accounts within actual practice.

Document analysis provided an additional layer of insight. School records related to counseling and student discipline showed that most documented cases were linked to behavioral incidents, suggesting that counseling tends to be activated after problems arise. At the same time, existing school guidelines outlined general responsibilities but offered limited direction for implementation, leaving much of the practice dependent on individual teachers' judgment.

Data Analysis and Rigor

The data were analyzed thematically, beginning with close reading and inductive coding of transcripts and field notes. Codes were developed from the data rather than imposed in advance, and were gradually grouped into broader themes. Comparisons were made across student, teacher, and administrator accounts to identify both shared patterns and points of divergence.

To strengthen the study's credibility, multiple sources of data were used and findings were checked against participants' accounts where possible. Records of coding and theme development were maintained to ensure transparency. Throughout the process, interpretations were kept close to the data, with attention to preserving the meaning of participants' perspectives rather than overextending theoretical claims.

Limitations

First, the study was conducted within a single ward (Long Xuyen Ward, An Giang Province), which may constrain the transferability of findings to other educational contexts with different socio-cultural or institutional conditions.

Second, counseling activities were primarily undertaken by teachers assigned to this role without formal professional training or certification in psychological counseling. This may have influenced both the reported practices and the perceived effectiveness of services.

Third, the study relied largely on self-reported data from students, teachers, and administrators. Although multiple qualitative methods were employed to enhance credibility, the data remain subject to potential biases, including social desirability and subjective interpretation. Taken together, these limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted with caution, and future research should consider broader sampling, inclusion of professionally trained counselors, and the integration of additional objective or longitudinal data sources to strengthen robustness.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis yielded four interrelated domains reflecting both psychosocial demand and systemic limitations in school-based counseling.

High and multifaceted psychosocial counseling demand

Students across all grade levels reported pervasive academic stress, particularly related to examination pressure and performance expectations. Academic anxiety was universally mentioned across focus groups. Parent–child conflict (approximately 88%) and peer relational tension (approximately 82%) were also frequently cited, often linked to communication breakdown, comparison pressure, and social exclusion.

Students further described anxiety related to pubertal changes, gender identity concerns, and fear of online bullying. A recurring narrative emphasized the desire for “a neutral and confidential adult” who could listen without judgment. These findings indicate not only high demand but also unmet expectations for psychologically safe support structures.

Role ambiguity and limited professional competence

Teachers assigned to counseling roles acknowledged significant professional limitations. Most reported lacking systematic training in counseling theory, assessment, or therapeutic communication. Counseling interactions were often described as advice-oriented or disciplinary rather than facilitative and student-centered.

Participants noted limited competence in active listening, emotional reflection, and crisis management. Several teachers expressed uncertainty regarding ethical boundaries and confidentiality protocols. This role ambiguity reduced counseling credibility and constrained student trust.

Structural and resource constraints

Institutional barriers were consistently reported across schools. None of the participating institutions employed full-time professional counselors. Counseling responsibilities were integrated into existing teaching loads, resulting in time constraints and inconsistent availability.

Physical infrastructure was also limited: dedicated counseling rooms were either absent or shared with other administrative functions, undermining confidentiality. Budget allocation for counseling activities was minimal, restricting training opportunities and resource development. These structural deficits collectively weakened the sustainability and professionalization of counseling services.

Cultural barriers to help-seeking

Cultural norms significantly influenced students’ help-seeking behaviors. Many students preferred discussing problems with peers rather than teachers, citing fear of judgment or potential breaches of confidentiality. Counseling was commonly perceived as necessary only for “serious” or disciplinary cases, reinforcing stigma around psychological support.

Hierarchical teacher–student relationships and concerns about family reputation further discouraged emotional disclosure. As a result, preventive counseling engagement remained limited, with services often accessed only after problems escalated.

Overall, the findings reveal a pronounced discrepancy between escalating psychosocial needs and the current institutional capacity of school-based counseling services. High student demand exists within a context of professional ambiguity, structural inadequacy, and cultural hesitation—highlighting the necessity for systemic reform and professionalization.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a clear structural misalignment between the psychosocial needs of lower secondary students and the current capacity of school-based counseling systems. Students described persistent academic pressure, relational instability, and emotional strain, yet the available support remains informal, fragmented, and weakly institutionalized. This gap reflects not simply a lack of services, but a deeper inconsistency between adolescent developmental demands and the organization of educational support structures.

From a developmental perspective, early adolescence is a period marked by heightened needs for autonomy, belonging, and identity formation. However, counseling practices observed in this study tend to rely on directive or moral-instructional approaches rather than dialogical, student-centered engagement. Within hierarchical school cultures, such patterns may discourage emotional expression and limit the effectiveness of counseling as a space for psychological support. When students perceive counseling as an extension of authority rather than a confidential and empathetic process, help-seeking becomes constrained.

At the professional level, the reliance on teachers to perform counseling roles without formal training significantly restricts service quality. Effective counseling requires competencies that extend beyond pedagogical expertise, including emotional attunement, ethical sensitivity, and structured intervention skills. In the absence of systematic training and supervision, counseling practices are often shaped by personal experience rather than evidence-based frameworks, thereby limiting both preventive and developmental impact.

These limitations are reinforced by structural conditions. The absence of dedicated personnel, funding, private counseling spaces, and standardized procedures indicates that psychological services remain marginal within the school system. As a result, counseling is typically reactive—activated in response to behavioral incidents—rather than preventive or developmental in orientation. This structural marginality also undermines students' trust, particularly regarding confidentiality and accessibility.

Cultural factors further complicate this landscape. In contexts where academic performance is strongly emphasized and mental health remains stigmatized, students may hesitate to seek support. The lack of clear differentiation between counseling and disciplinary functions intensifies this hesitation, as engagement may be perceived as socially or academically risky. These dynamics suggest that improving counseling effectiveness requires not only institutional reform but also cultural repositioning of psychological support within schools.

By addressing these challenges calls for a coordinated, multi-level reform approach.

First, professionalization is essential. Establishing clear competency standards, certification pathways, and ongoing supervision would strengthen both the credibility and effectiveness of counseling services. Partnerships between schools and universities may offer a feasible pathway for building such capacity in resource-constrained settings.

Second, counseling must be structurally embedded within school systems. This includes the allocation of dedicated personnel, the creation of confidential counseling spaces, and the development of clear operational protocols. When counseling is institutionally recognized rather than informally assigned, it becomes more visible, accessible, and sustainable.

Third, a tiered model of support offers a practical framework for addressing diverse student needs. Preventive interventions at the universal level—such as social-emotional learning and resilience education—can strengthen protective factors across the student population. Targeted group interventions provide early support for emerging difficulties, while individualized counseling and referral pathways are necessary for more complex cases. Such a model allows schools to balance scale with depth, particularly in contexts with limited resources.

Finally, reform efforts must attend to the broader social ecology of student well-being. Strengthening family–school collaboration is critical, especially in addressing academic pressure rooted in parental expectations. At the same time, culturally responsive approaches are needed to reduce stigma and normalize help-seeking. Framing counseling as part of holistic development, alongside the use of confidential or peer-supported models, may help shift student perceptions and increase engagement.

In sum, the findings suggest that school-based psychological counseling cannot be improved through isolated interventions alone. Its effectiveness depends on the alignment of professional capacity, institutional structures, and cultural understanding. Advancing counseling within lower secondary education therefore requires not only technical enhancement, but a broader reconfiguration of how student well-being is positioned within the educational system.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a clear structural misalignment between the increasingly complex psychosocial needs of lower secondary students and the limited capacity of current school-based counseling systems in Long Xuyen Ward, An Giang Province. Despite growing awareness of student mental health, counseling practices remain fragmented, informal, and insufficiently professionalized, constraining their ability to provide effective and developmentally appropriate support.

The findings highlight four interrelated challenges: the rising complexity of students' emotional and relational difficulties; the lack of specialized competence among those delivering counseling; persistent institutional constraints, including limited resources and the absence of standardized frameworks; and cultural factors that inhibit help-seeking behaviors. Taken together, these issues reflect systemic rather than isolated shortcomings.

Addressing this gap requires a coordinated and sustained reform approach. Priority should be given to professionalizing counseling through certification and supervision, embedding counseling services within formal school structures, implementing multi-tiered intervention models, and strengthening alignment between schools and families. Equally important is the integration of culturally responsive practices that enhance trust and normalize psychological support.

From both developmental and public health perspectives, lower secondary education represents a pivotal stage for fostering identity, emotional competence, and resilience. Strengthening school-based counseling at this level is therefore not a supplementary initiative but a strategic imperative. Advancing toward a standardized, professional, and contextually grounded counseling system is essential for improving student well-being and ensuring the long-term quality and equity of education.

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