



Stress-coping skills of lower secondary school students - a practical study at lower secondary schools in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

This study focuses on analyzing the current situation of stress and coping skills among lower secondary school students in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province. The survey results of 600 students, 180 teachers, and 22 administrators reveal that school-related stress is a common phenomenon, mainly stemming from academic pressure, family expectations, and changes in the learning environment. Students self-assessed their stress levels as relatively high ($M = 2.96/4$), while their stress-coping skills remained limited ($M = 1.68/4$). Most students are only capable of recognizing stressors and symptoms but lack the ability to identify and implement effective coping strategies. The study highlights the crucial role of schools and families in providing psychological support and life skills education for students. Based on the findings, the authors propose several solutions to enhance students' stress-coping skills, contributing to the development of a healthy, friendly, and sustainable learning environment.

Keywords: Skills, Coping, Stress, Lower Secondary School Students

1. Introduction

The age group of lower secondary school students includes those aged 11 to 14 or 15, who are studying from grades 6 to 9 in lower secondary schools. This age group, considered adolescence, occupies a special position in a child's developmental stages. Compared with other age groups, lower secondary students experience rapid yet unbalanced development across all aspects—physical, intellectual, and social. During this period, new elements of maturity begin to emerge, with the development of self-awareness marking a fundamental turning point and serving as the central aspect of their psychological growth. At this stage, students often have many concerns, confusions, and anxieties due to the sensitivity of puberty. Learning activities also differ significantly from those in primary school, requiring more effort, which can lead to a sense of academic pressure. In the current context of educational reform—characterized by changes in content and implementation methods—students are expected to develop specific competencies and qualities, which presents new challenges. If students cannot manage their academic difficulties, they may experience stress that affects their physical and mental health.

Stress is a common phenomenon among lower secondary school students, resulting from academic pressure, family and social expectations, as well as psychological and physiological changes during adolescence (Stallard *et al.*, 2011). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 20% of students worldwide face mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and high levels of stress (WHO, 2020). In

Vietnam, a recent survey by the Ministry of Education and Training (2021) of 6,000 lower secondary students across three regions found that 68% reported stress symptoms caused by high academic pressure—such as insomnia, fatigue, poor concentration, and irritability—affecting their lives and academic performance. Prolonged stress can lead to serious mental and physical health consequences, including depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress, cardiovascular diseases, and immune system problems (Yaribeygi *et al.*, 2017) [8]. Among students, long-term stress can result in cognitive decline, learning difficulties, a higher risk of dropping out, and long-term mental health problems (Newman *et al.*, 2024) [6].

The causes of student stress can be divided into the following main categories:

Academic workload and performance expectations

Lower secondary students face increasing volumes of homework and exams, leading to pressure to perform well in all academic tasks. Competition over grades, high achievement goals, and meeting expectations from teachers and parents are major stressors (Nguyễn Văn Thanh, 2021) [5]. Excessive family expectations for academic excellence may cause anxiety, fear of failure, and chronic stress.

Lack of time management and study skills

Many students lack effective time management and organizational skills. This often leads to last-minute studying, fatigue, and tension (Phạm Thị Lan Anh, 2020). Without

suitable study strategies, students may feel confused about where to start, especially during exam periods.

Social and environmental pressures

During adolescence, students face psychological and physiological changes while navigating relationships with peers, teachers, and family. Conflicts with friends, feelings of isolation, or lack of support can cause social stress (Lê Thị Hương, 2019) ^[9]. Additionally, factors such as school violence and cyberbullying contribute to increased stress levels.

Self-imposed expectations

Many students set unrealistic goals or compare themselves excessively with peers. When they fail to meet these expectations, they may experience stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Trần Hoàng Anh, 2022).

Changes in learning environment

The transition from primary to lower secondary school can be stressful due to new learning environments and teaching styles. Stricter schedules, more subjects, and the need to adapt to new teachers and classmates can cause tension (Cao Phương Trâm, 2023) ^[11].

Family expectations and dynamics

Alongside school pressures, family environments play a crucial role in causing student stress. Lack of understanding or communication between parents and children, or family conflicts, can make students feel isolated and tense. Trần Thị Mai (2020) ^[12] found that families with excessive academic expectations tend to create a stressful environment that negatively affects students' mental health.

Manifestations of Coping Skills for Stress among Lower Secondary Students

Coping skills can be divided into the following groups:

- **Skills to identify stressors and stress symptoms**
Recognizing sources and signs of stress helps students understand the root causes and manifestations of stress, enabling them to manage it more effectively. Stressors may include academic pressure, family expectations, or a competitive school environment.
Symptoms manifest in behavioral, emotional, and physical forms.
- **Skills to identify coping strategies**
Once students identify stressors and symptoms, they must learn to select appropriate coping methods. These include: time management; problem-solving; communication; relaxation and self-care; seeking support;

Skills to implement coping strategies

This involves applying coping techniques to reduce stress and solve problems effectively. Such skills include: effective time management, problem-solving; communication and seeking help; relaxation and self-care; self-motivation and cognitive adjustment.

In the current Vietnamese context of industrialization, modernization, international integration, educational reform, and digital transformation, society places increasing demands on students. Many have limited adaptability and coping skills, along with insufficient life experience, which raises their risk of stress. Therefore, it is essential to accurately assess the causes of stress and the current state of students' coping skills in order to develop effective measures for improvement. The objectives of this study are to: Explore the causes of stress among lower secondary school students; Assess the current state of their stress-coping skills; and Propose recommendations to develop these coping skills effectively for lower secondary students.

2. Research methodology

To collect data assessing the causes of stress and the current situation of stress-coping skills among lower secondary school students in Que Vo District, Bac Ninh Province (now Dao Vien Ward, Bac Ninh Province), we conducted a survey involving 600 students, 180 teachers, and 22 administrators from six lower secondary schools, including Pho Moi, Bang An, Bong Lai, Chi Lang, Dao Vien, and Ngoc Xa.

Two types of questionnaires were designed: Form 1 for administrators and teachers; Form 2 for students.

We applied social science statistical methods to calculate percentages and mean values for data analysis. A 4-point Likert scale was used, following a consistent coding scheme:

1 = Weak / Rarely / No influence

2 = Average / Sometimes / Slight influence

3 = Fair / Often / Influential

4 = Good / Very often / Highly influential

Following Narli's (2010) recommendation, we calculated the interval width of the 4-point Likert scale to determine boundary values for interpreting results: $(4-1)/4 = 0.75$. Based on this, the interpretation of mean scores was as follows:

1.00 – 1.75 → Weak / Not implemented / Not important

1.76 – 2.50 → Average / Sometimes / Slight influence

2.60 – 3.50 → Fair / Often / Influential

3.33 – 4.00 → Good / Very often / Highly influential

We used Microsoft Excel to analyze the quantitative data and draw conclusions based on both quantitative and qualitative results. In addition, we conducted interviews with several educational administrators and lower secondary school teachers to collect supplementary opinions and enrich the survey findings.

3. Research findings

3.1. Causes of stress among lower secondary school students in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province

Table 1: Teachers' evaluation of the causes of stress among lower secondary school students in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province

Factors	Level of Influence								M	Rank
	Highly influential		Influential		Slightly influential		Not influential			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Academic workload and performance expectations	150	74.3%	25	12.4%	16	7.9%	11	5.4%	3.56	1
Lack of time management and study skills	145	71.8%	30	14.9%	17	8.4%	10	5%	3.54	2
Self-imposed expectations	125	61.9%	20	9.9%	27	13.4%	30	14.9%	3.19	6
Family expectations pressure	136	67.3%	25	12.4%	32	15.8%	9	4.5%	3.43	3
Social relationships and living environment	130	64.4%	18	8.9%	22	10.9%	32	15.8%	3.22	4
Changes in learning environment	125	61.9%	20	9.9%	27	13.4%	30	14.9%	3.19	6
Overall Mean (M)									3.36	

The survey results show that teachers rated the causes of stress among lower secondary school students at a relatively high level, with an overall mean score (M) of 3.36 out of 4. This indicates that school-related stress is a significant issue, as students face various pressures both in academic learning and in their living environments.

Firstly, academic workload and performance expectations were identified by teachers as the most influential cause of student stress, with a mean score of 3.56, and 74.3% of teachers reporting it as “highly influential.” This suggests that most students are under considerable pressure from demanding curricula and high expectations for achievement.

Secondly, lack of time management and effective study skills was also rated as a major contributor to stress (M = 3.54). Lower secondary students often lack self-study skills and the ability to manage their time efficiently, making them more vulnerable to overload when academic demands increase.

Thirdly, self-imposed expectations (M = 3.43) and family expectations (M = 3.22) were also identified as significant stress factors. Students are not only affected by external pressures but also by the high standards they set for themselves,

combined with their parents' desire for strong academic performance.

Lastly, social relationships, living environment, and changes in the learning environment had a mean score of 3.19, ranking lowest among the causes but still within the “influential” level. This shows that socio-psychological factors—such as peer relationships, classroom changes, and school transitions—also contribute to students' stress levels.

In summary, school stress among lower secondary students in Que Vo Town primarily stems from academic pressure and insufficient study skills, alongside personal and family expectations. These factors reflect the distinctive characteristics of this developmental stage—a critical transition in students' psychological, cognitive, and social growth. Therefore, solutions should focus on reducing academic pressure, teaching effective time management and study methods, and enhancing psychological counseling and life skills education for students.

To gain deeper insights into this issue, we conducted a follow-up study involving 600 students, and the survey results are presented below.

Table 2: Students' self-assessment of the causes of stress at lower secondary schools in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province

Content	Level of influence								M	Rank
	Highly influential		Influential		Slightly influential		Not influential			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Academic workload and performance expectations	240	40.0	262	43.7	85	14.2	13	2.2	3.21	
Lack of time management and study skills	189	31.5	156	26.0	188	31.3	67	11.2	2.78	
3. Self-imposed expectations	173	28.8	131	21.8	210	35.0	86	14.3	2.65	
4. Family expectations pressure	180	30.0	230	38.3	173	28.8	17	2.8	2.96	
Social relationships and living environment	285	47.5	198	33.0	105	17.5	12	2.0	3.26	
Changes in learning environment	185	30.8	196	32.7	206	34.3	13	2.2	2.92	
Overall Mean (M)									2.96	

The survey of 600 lower secondary school students in Que Vo Town revealed that their school-related stress is influenced by various factors, with an overall mean score of 2.96 out of 4, indicating a relatively high level of impact.

Among the causes, pressure from family expectations was rated as the strongest source of stress (M = 3.26; 47.5% of students selected “highly influential”). This result highlights

that parents' high expectations for academic achievement are the main source of pressure faced by students.

The second most significant factor was academic workload and performance expectations (M = 3.21; 40% “highly influential”), suggesting that heavy curricula and exam demands remain a constant burden. Changes in the learning environment also exerted considerable influence (M = 2.92),

especially for students transitioning between school levels or adapting to new study conditions.

Self-imposed expectations ($M = 2.96$) reflect internal pressure students place on themselves to achieve good results, while lack of time management and effective study methods ($M = 2.78$) makes it difficult for them to study efficiently, leading to stress. Social relationships and living environment were rated the lowest ($M = 2.65$), though they still contribute to stress, particularly during adolescence—a stage marked by intense psychological and social development.

Overall, students reported that their stress mainly stems from academic pressure and expectations from both themselves and their families, rather than from social or environmental factors. This finding suggests the need for psychological support, study skills training, and stronger cooperation between schools and families to help students manage stress and maintain emotional balance in learning.

A comparative analysis between teachers and students shows that both groups agreed school stress primarily arises from academic pressure and performance expectations, but they differed in the degree of influence assigned to each factor. Teachers rated academic workload and performance expectations as the most influential cause ($M = 3.56$), while students ranked it second ($M = 3.21$).

Conversely, students considered family expectations the leading cause of stress ($M = 3.26$), whereas teachers placed it fourth ($M = 3.22$). This difference suggests that students are more sensitive to parental expectations, while teachers tend to emphasize academic and instructional pressures.

Both groups agreed that lack of time management and study skills is a common source of stress (teachers: 3.54; students: 2.78), though students rated it lower—possibly because they are not fully aware of their own learning deficiencies. Factors such as social relationships, living environment, and changes in the learning environment were ranked lowest by both groups (average scores ranging from 3.19 to 2.65), showing that while social factors do contribute, they are not the primary causes.

In conclusion, both teachers and students recognize that school stress is a real and multifactorial problem. Students are most affected by self- and family-related expectations, while teachers focus more on academic and instructional pressures. This finding underscores the need for collaboration among schools, families, and students to reduce academic pressure, provide psychological support, and develop effective study skills to alleviate school-related stress.

3.2. The current situation of students' stress-coping skills at lower secondary schools in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province

To explore this issue, we conducted a survey among administrators, teachers, and students to examine their perspectives on the current state of students' stress-coping skills in daily life and learning at lower secondary schools in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province. The aim was to capture both the evaluations of administrators and teachers and the students' self-assessment regarding their ability to cope with stress. The results obtained are as follows:

Table 3: Evaluation by administrators and teachers at lower secondary schools in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province on students' stress-coping skills

Content	Level of Proficiency								M	Rank
	Good		Fair		Average		Weak			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Skills in recognizing stressors and stress symptoms (<i>stress from academic pressure, exams; expectations from family and teachers; competitive learning environment; behavioral, emotional, and physical symptoms</i>)	10	5%	58	29%	102	51%	30	15%	2.24	1
Skills in identifying coping strategies (<i>time management, problem-solving, communication, relaxation and self-care, seeking help</i>)	10	5%	52	26%	102	51%	36	18%	2,18	2
Skills in implementing coping strategies to reduce stress (<i>effective time management, problem-solving, communication and seeking support, relaxation and self-care, self-motivation and cognitive adjustment</i>)	6	3%	52	26%	102	51%	40	20%	2.12	3
Overall Mean (M)									2.18	

The results indicate that administrators and teachers rated students' stress-coping skills at only a moderate level, with an overall mean score of 2.18.

Among the three groups of skills, administrators and teachers assessed that students performed best in recognizing stressors and stress symptoms. Drawing from their experience and daily interactions with students, teachers observed that many students are aware of the causes of their stress, anxiety, and pressure. However, they do not know how to handle these emotions appropriately or how to relieve their own tension and worries, which explains why the group of skills related to implementing coping strategies was rated lower.

In an interview with Ms. L.M.N, a homeroom teacher of Grade 9 at Dao Vien Lower Secondary School, she shared:

“After many years working as a homeroom teacher and interacting with students from different cohorts, I find that today's students face much greater pressure than before. The 2018 General Education Curriculum has been challenging not only for us teachers but also for students, as it involves many changes and difficult content. To achieve good results, students must make tremendous effort.

Moreover, Grade 9 students—being in their final year—face immense pressure from the high school entrance exam. Entering a high-quality high school in Bac Ninh requires

significant effort. Many students are under great stress due to their parents' expectations to pass exams and achieve high scores. As a result, they often live in a constant state of tension. Each time an exam approaches, we teachers also feel anxious for our students, so we always try to help them relieve stress through various supportive activities."

This reality highlights the urgent need to equip lower secondary students with stress-coping knowledge and skills,

enabling them to manage pressure effectively, study better, and maintain a joyful, healthy, and happy life.

To propose appropriate and effective educational measures for developing stress-coping skills among lower secondary students, we also sought to understand students' self-assessment of their own abilities. Therefore, we conducted a follow-up survey among students on this issue. The results are presented as follows:

Table 4: Students' self-assessment of their stress-coping skills at lower secondary schools in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province

Content	Level of Proficiency								M	Rank
	Good		Fair		Average		Weak			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Skills in recognizing stressors and stress symptoms (<i>stress from academic pressure, exams; expectations from family and teachers; competitive learning environment; behavioral, emotional, and physical symptoms</i>)	24	4.0	81	13.5	206	34.3	289	48.2	1.73	1
Skills in identifying coping strategies (<i>time management, problem-solving, communication, relaxation and self-care, seeking help</i>)	15	2.5	58	9.7	220	36.7	307	51.1	1.64	3
Skills in implementing coping strategies to reduce stress (<i>effective time management, problem-solving, communication and seeking support, relaxation and self-care, self-motivation and cognitive adjustment</i>)	12	2.0	79	13.2	201	33.5	308	51.3	1.67	2
Overall Mean (M)									1.68	

Data from Table 2.3 show that the stress-coping skills of lower secondary school students in Que Vo Town remain quite limited, with an overall mean score of only 1.68/4, corresponding to a "low-average" level. Among the three groups of skills, the ability to identify stressors and stress symptoms had the highest mean score ($M = 1.73$), indicating that students have a basic awareness of their own stress and tension. However, the other two skill groups—identifying coping strategies ($M = 1.64$) and implementing stress-reduction actions ($M = 1.67$)—were both low, showing that students still lack the practical skills needed to control and overcome stress effectively.

These results indicate that while some lower secondary students have begun to correctly recognize the causes of stress and have attempted to cope with it, their ability to apply coping strategies remains limited and unsystematic. The findings reflect a general deficiency in effective stress-coping skills, emphasizing the need for life skills education, psychological counseling, and emotional self-regulation training in lower secondary schools.

A deeper examination revealed that students' awareness of specific stress-causing factors in learning, daily life, and social interactions is uneven across categories. Specifically, academic stressors, such as "learning and exam pressure," accounted for the highest proportion, followed by "expectations from parents and teachers," and then "competitive learning environments." In reality, students—especially those in Grade 6 who have just entered lower secondary school—often struggle to adapt to new learning environments and methods. Moreover, frequent exams and final assessments place additional academic pressure, identified as the leading cause of stress. Under the 2018 General Education Curriculum, which has recently been implemented, students are required to engage in continuous and intensive learning to meet new, demanding standards. This

makes many students anxious about exams, especially when they lack effective time management, leading to persistent academic stress.

In addition to the difficulty of adapting to new learning conditions, excessive parental expectations also contribute to student stress. Furthermore, students often face a heavy knowledge load and struggle with comprehension, which exacerbates their sense of inadequacy. These factors are considered major contributors to stress among lower secondary school students.

Interviews with students further support these findings. N.T.M., a 7th-grade student, shared: "It wasn't until this year that I could finally adapt to the teaching and learning style at secondary school. In Grade 6, I was anxious almost every day, and every exam made me nervous and scared."

Other students remarked: "I study a lot but still don't understand the lessons, so I feel like I'm not capable and honestly afraid of studying."

These interviews confirm the survey results: while some students demonstrate effective study methods, confidence, and good academic performance—allowing them to self-assess their stress-coping skills as "good"—many others still struggle with emotional control, proactive learning, and time management.

In conclusion, for lower secondary students, it is essential to alleviate academic pressure, apply effective learning strategies, and maintain emotional balance and healthy social relationships. These are vital and necessary measures to help students reduce stress and achieve well-being in both study and life.

4. Discussion

Based on the research into the causes of stress and the current state of stress-coping skills among lower secondary school

students in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province, it can be seen that in today's modern society, academic pressure and challenges from the living environment have a significant impact on students' mental well-being, with stress emerging as a common yet insufficiently addressed issue.

Through the process of research and analysis, the study clarified that the stress-coping skills of lower secondary school students in Que Vo Town remain at a modest level, with variations across different skill groups. A small number of students are able to recognize the causes and symptoms of stress; however, their coping skills are not yet well developed. These findings highlight the necessity of raising awareness about stress and integrating stress-coping education into the formal curriculum. In particular, the support and guidance of schools, parents, and the community play a crucial role in creating a safe and positive learning environment for students. Developing stress-coping skills not only helps students handle academic and life challenges more effectively but also contributes to the sustainable development of local education. The results of this study not only help improve the quality of education in lower secondary schools in Que Vo Town but also provide a valuable reference for other schools in designing and implementing programs on stress management education. This serves as an important foundation to help students become more confident in overcoming learning and life challenges, while fostering humanistic values and essential life skills for their future.

5. Recommendations

For lower secondary schools

As schools are the primary institutions responsible for implementing educational activities related to stress-coping skills, they should: Develop specific and context-appropriate plans tailored to each school's characteristics, integrating stress-coping education into both classroom teaching and extracurricular activities. Encourage teachers to participate in professional training and update their knowledge in school psychology. Maintain school counseling teams, organize regular counseling sessions, and provide timely support for students facing difficulties. Organize extracurricular activities such as thematic discussions and life skills workshops to help students practice stress-reduction techniques. Create a friendly learning environment, including relaxation areas and green spaces, to help students relieve stress. Strengthen collaboration with parents through meetings and instructional materials to ensure a shared approach in supporting students. Regularly evaluate and adjust programs based on feedback from students, teachers, and parents to improve effectiveness.

For teachers at lower secondary schools in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province

Teachers play a crucial role in guiding and accompanying students; therefore, they should: Actively participate in professional development programs on stress-coping skills to enhance their expertise. Integrate stress-coping education into lessons, particularly in subjects such as Civic Education and Homeroom activities. Observe and detect early signs of stress

in students to provide timely interventions. Create an open and supportive classroom atmosphere, encouraging students to share emotions and difficulties. Apply creative teaching methods to reduce academic pressure, such as learning through games or group discussions. Collaborate closely with parents to monitor and support students both at school and at home.

For students at lower secondary schools in Que Vo Town, Bac Ninh Province

Students should take an active role in developing their own stress-coping skills for personal growth. They are encouraged to: Participate fully in life skills lessons and activities organized by the school. Recognize and manage their emotions, especially in stressful situations. Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, or light physical exercise. Share difficulties with teachers, parents, or school counselors when they need support. Join life skills clubs to strengthen adaptability and communication abilities. Maintain balance between study and leisure, avoiding excessive self-imposed pressure. Adopt a healthy lifestyle, including proper nutrition, adequate sleep, and regular physical activity.

6. Conclusion

The research results indicate that school-related stress is an issue of significant concern among lower secondary school students in the current context of educational reform. Factors such as academic pressure, parental expectations, and inadequate study skills are the main causes of stress. Meanwhile, students' stress-coping skills remain limited, falling short of meeting the demands of modern learning and life.

Educating and training students in stress-coping skills is therefore essential, as it helps them develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and positive behavioral adjustment. Schools, teachers, and parents need to collaborate closely to design psychological support programs and strengthen life skills education for students.

This study provides practical evidence to support school psychological interventions and contributes to the orientation of sustainable development in general education.

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