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Academic Coping Under Examination Pressure: Determinants and Intervention Effects in Vietnamese Secondary Education

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Abstract. Academic stress has become an increasingly important concern in examination-oriented educational systems, in which students are expected to cope with sustained academic demands while maintaining psychological well-being. Although adolescent academic stress has been widely investigated, less attention has been paid to how examination-oriented educational conditions influence coping responses, and whether school-based interventions can strengthen adaptive coping. This study examined academic coping among lower secondary students (grades 6–9; ages 11–15), in Vietnam, using a two-phase quantitative design comprising a cross-sectional survey (N = 700) and a six-week quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest intervention (n = 186). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and independent-sample and paired-samples t-tests. The findings showed that students relied more on emotion-focused and avoidance-oriented coping than on problem-focused coping. Academic workload and family expectations were negatively associated with problem-focused coping, whereas perceived teacher support emerged as the strongest positive predictor of adaptive coping. Participation in the intervention was associated with moderate improvements in problem-focused coping and emotional regulation, together with a small

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reduction in avoidance coping. Although the intervention findings should be interpreted cautiously because of the absence of a control group, the study highlights the importance of supportive educational environments and suggests that school-based coping programmes may help strengthen adolescents' adaptive coping in examination-oriented educational contexts

Keywords: Academic coping; academic stress; teacher support; school intervention; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Academic pressure has become a defining feature of many examination-oriented educational systems, particularly in societies in which academic achievement strongly influences students' future educational opportunities. For adolescents, academic stress extends beyond the demands of schoolwork itself. Frequent examinations, parental expectations, peer comparison, and concerns about future success may gradually transform academic performance into a persistent source of psychological pressure (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Compas et al., 2001). This issue is especially relevant during lower secondary education, when students are still developing emotional regulation and self-management skills while adapting to increasing academic expectations.

Students do not respond to academic stress in the same way. Some actively address academic challenges through planning, problem solving, or seeking support, whereas others rely more on emotional responses or avoidance behaviors. These different coping strategies have been associated with important differences in academic engagement, psychological well-being, and resilience (Skinner et al., 2003). At the same time, coping responses are unlikely to depend solely on individual characteristics. They may also reflect how students perceive academic demands and the educational environments in which those demands are experienced.

Accordingly, increasing attention has been given to the role of school environments in helping students cope with academic stress. Positive teacher-student relationships, emotional encouragement, and supportive classroom practices have been associated with more adaptive coping and better psychological adjustment among adolescents (Wentzel, 1998; Suldo et al., 2008). However, much of the existing literature has examined coping primarily from an individual psychological perspective. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the ways in which examination-oriented educational conditions and everyday school experiences may shape students' coping responses over time.

Although adolescent academic stress has been extensively investigated, several issues remain insufficiently understood. Existing studies have largely documented stress levels or examined relationships among psychological variables, whereas fewer have explored how examination-oriented educational environments influence the development of coping responses. Similarly, while intervention studies have reported positive outcomes, evidence from authentic

school settings remains relatively limited, particularly in examination-oriented contexts. Vietnam provides an appropriate context for addressing these questions because examination pressure, parental expectations, and academic competition continue to influence students' educational experiences throughout lower secondary education. Recent Vietnamese studies confirm that academic pressure remains a pervasive stressor across educational levels and is consistently linked to elevated anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced psychological well-being (Nguyen & Phan, 2024; Ho et al., 2023). Despite these contextual characteristics, empirical evidence on coping-focused school interventions among Vietnamese lower secondary students remains limited.

Against this background, the present study examined academic coping among lower secondary students within an examination-oriented educational context in Vietnam. Rather than viewing coping as a relatively stable individual characteristic, the study conceptualized coping as a dynamic process influenced by educational conditions, relational support, and students' experiences of academic pressure. Specifically, the study investigated how examination-oriented educational conditions are associated with students' coping responses, the role of perceived teacher support in coping processes, and the extent to which a school-based intervention may strengthen more adaptive coping among lower secondary students.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The present study examined academic coping among lower secondary students in an examination-oriented educational context in Vietnam. Specifically, it investigated how examination-oriented educational conditions, academic workload, family expectations, and perceived teacher support are associated with students' coping responses. In addition, the study examined whether participation in a school-based coping intervention is associated with improvements in adaptive coping among lower secondary students.

1.2 Significance of Study

This study contributes to the growing literature on adolescent academic stress by examining coping not as a fixed individual trait but as a response shaped by examination-oriented educational conditions, family expectations, and teacher support. By combining a contextual survey with a school-based intervention, the study offers evidence that is directly relevant to teachers, school counsellors, and policymakers seeking practical, classroom-based strategies for strengthening students' adaptive coping under sustained academic pressure. The findings are particularly timely for examination-oriented educational systems, such as Vietnam, in which empirical evidence on coping-focused interventions at the lower secondary level remains limited.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Academic Stress in Examination-Oriented Educational Contexts

Examination-oriented educational systems are often characterized by high evaluative pressure, competitive academic selection, and strong social expectations surrounding student performance. In such contexts, examinations

function not only as assessment tools but also as mechanisms that influence future educational opportunities and social mobility. As a result, academic achievement may gradually become associated with personal worth, family expectations, and long-term aspirations.

Within the transactional model of stress and coping, stress arises not solely from external demands but from individuals' appraisal of whether available coping resources are sufficient to manage those demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In examination-oriented contexts, adolescents may perceive academic tasks as highly consequential yet only partially controllable. Such perceptions may intensify emotional pressure and increase psychological vulnerability, particularly when academic competition becomes continuous and socially reinforced. This pattern has been corroborated in other academic settings: a large cross-sectional survey of secondary school adolescents in Kathmandu, Nepal, found that nearly half of the participants reported high perceived academic stress, with workload and examinations as the strongest correlates (Karki et al., 2026). Similarly, a study of Italian adolescents showed that perceived academic pressure reflects the interaction between individual vulnerabilities and school climate, rather than academic demands alone (Borgogno et al., 2026).

Previous research has linked excessive academic workload, parental expectations, and performance pressure to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced well-being among secondary school students (Deb et al., 2015; Pascoe et al., 2020; Compas et al., 2017). Recent evidence suggests that academic stress continues to represent significant educational and public health concern among adolescents worldwide. A growing body of systematic reviews has shown that sustained academic pressure is consistently associated with poorer psychological well-being, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced academic engagement, particularly in highly competitive educational systems (Deng et al., 2022; Jagiello et al., 2025).

These findings indicate that academic stress remains a persistent issue despite increasing attention to student mental health in schools. Equally, Vietnamese evidence shows comparable patterns, with academic stress predicting depressive symptoms among adolescents (Ho et al., 2023) and academic workload emerging as a leading stressor among Vietnamese students (Nguyen et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2024). Similar findings have been reported across many Asian educational systems, in which academic achievement remains closely associated with future educational and occupational opportunities. Considered together, these studies suggest that examination-oriented educational environments influence not only the level of academic stress experienced by adolescents but also the ways in which they respond to sustained academic demands.

Academic stress, however, should not be understood solely as an individual psychological issue. Educational environments themselves may influence how students interpret academic demands and evaluate their own coping capacity. Examination-oriented systems characterized by frequent testing, rigid evaluation practices, and strong external expectations may increase students' feelings of

uncertainty, while reducing their perceived control over learning. Consequently, coping responses are likely to reflect not only individual emotional tendencies but also the educational conditions under which academic stress is experienced.

The present study approached academic coping within examination-oriented education as a contextually shaped process rather than a fixed individual disposition. This perspective provided the theoretical basis for examining how structural educational pressures may influence coping orientations among lower secondary students in Vietnam.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Students in examination-oriented educational contexts are more likely to rely on emotion-focused and avoidance-oriented coping responses than on problem-focused coping.

2.2 Contextual Determinants of Coping Responses

Students' coping responses to academic stress are influenced not only by individual emotional tendencies but also by how they perceive the manageability and controllability of academic demands. Within the transactional model of stress and coping, coping reflects individuals' cognitive appraisal of stressful situations and their perceived ability to respond effectively (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When students believe that academic challenges can be managed through effort, planning, or support-seeking, they are more likely to adopt problem-focused coping strategies. In contrast, when academic demands are perceived as overwhelming or beyond their control, emotion-focused or avoidance-oriented coping may become more common.

Academic workload has consistently been identified as a major source of stress among adolescents. Excessive assignments, frequent examinations, and continuous performance monitoring may reduce students' sense of autonomy and increase emotional strain, particularly in highly competitive educational environments. Previous studies have associated sustained academic workload with emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and maladaptive coping among secondary school students (Pascoe et al., 2020).

Similarly, strong parental expectations may intensify students' fear of failure and heighten performance-related anxiety, especially in educational cultures in which academic achievement is closely linked to family aspirations and future educational opportunities. This pattern is corroborated in comparable Southeast Asian contexts: research among Indonesian students has shown that stronger family support and self-regulated learning increase academic self-efficacy, which in turn reduces maladaptive academic behaviors, such as procrastination (Adiyono et al., 2025), underscoring the relevance of family-related contextual factors to students' coping capacity across similar educational cultures.

Educational experiences, however, are shaped not only by academic demands but also by the quality of interpersonal support available within schools. Supportive teacher–student relationships may strengthen students' sense of emotional security, encourage help-seeking behaviour, and improve their confidence in

managing academic challenges. Previous research has shown that students who perceive greater teacher support are more likely to demonstrate stronger academic engagement, resilience, and adaptive coping under stressful conditions (Ruzek et al., 2016; Suldo et al., 2008). Teacher support therefore represents not only an important interpersonal resource but also an educational condition that may influence how students interpret and respond to academic pressure. Recent longitudinal research further suggests that supportive relationships with parents and teachers contribute not only to students' emotional well-being but also to the development of more adaptive engagement-oriented coping over time (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the view that coping responses are shaped through ongoing interactions between individual appraisal and supportive educational contexts rather than through individual characteristics alone.

Taken together, existing research suggests that coping responses develop through the interaction between individual appraisal and contextual influences. Academic workload, family expectations, and teacher support should therefore be considered complementary rather than independent influences on students' coping behaviour. Examining these contextual factors simultaneously provides a more comprehensive understanding of coping responses among adolescents studying in examination-oriented educational environments. This joint influence of contextual stressors and support has also been observed elsewhere: examination-related stress among pre-service teachers in Ghana clustered around workload and evaluative demands (Quansah, 2025), while coping self-efficacy among Filipino senior high school students declined as academic stress intensified (Regalado, 2024), reinforcing the relevance of these contextual determinants beyond the Vietnamese setting.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Academic workload and family expectations are negatively associated with problem-focused coping among lower secondary students.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Perceived teacher support is positively associated with problem-focused coping among lower secondary students.

2.3 Gender Differences and Coping Development

Previous research has frequently reported gender-related differences in adolescents' responses to academic and emotional stress, although the findings have not always been consistent across educational contexts. Female students have often been found to report greater use of emotion-focused coping, emotional expression, and interpersonal support-seeking, whereas male students are generally more likely to adopt problem-focused coping or minimize emotional disclosure (Compas et al., 2017; Eschenbeck et al., 2007). These differences are commonly interpreted in relation to developmental, emotional, and sociocultural influences rather than as fixed behavioural characteristics. Consequently, gender may influence coping preferences without necessarily determining how students respond to academic stress across different educational contexts.

Beyond gender differences, increasing attention has been directed toward the extent to which coping responses remain responsive to educational intervention. Rather than viewing coping as a stable individual characteristic, recent research suggests that coping skills can be strengthened through structured learning experiences that promote emotional regulation, problem-solving, self-awareness, and peer support (Durlak et al., 2011; Feiss et al., 2019). Such interventions appear particularly relevant during lower secondary education, when students are still developing emotional and self-regulatory capacities.

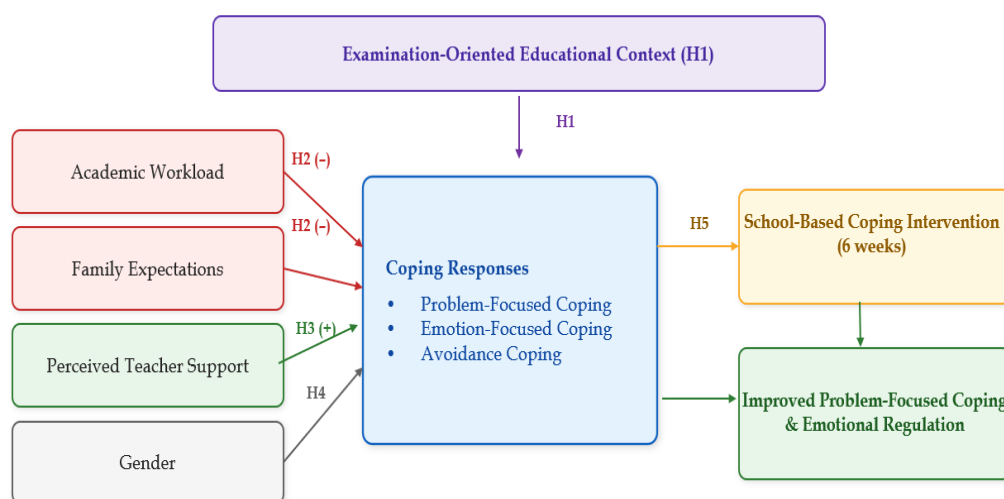
Recent systematic reviews have also reported that school-based social-emotional learning programmes and coping interventions produce small-to-moderate improvements in emotional regulation, resilience, and adaptive coping among adolescents, particularly when interventions are integrated into regular school activities rather than delivered as isolated psychological programmes (Jagiello et al., 2025; Taylor et al., 2017). This pattern has also been observed in a neighboring examination-oriented East Asian context: an app-based coping intervention among Chinese secondary school students produced measurable reductions in perceived stress, anxiety, and depression, although gains in active stress-coping behaviors were more limited (Zhou et al., 2023), underscoring the need for further evidence on how school-based coping interventions perform in similarly examination-oriented settings such as Vietnam.

Within examination-oriented educational systems, school-based coping interventions may help students reinterpret academic demands as more manageable while encouraging greater use of adaptive coping strategies. However, evidence regarding the effectiveness of such interventions remains relatively limited in examination-oriented educational contexts, particularly in developing countries. Further investigation is therefore needed to examine whether structured school-based support is associated with meaningful improvements in students' coping responses under authentic educational conditions.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Female students report higher levels of emotion-focused coping than male students.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Participation in the school-based coping intervention is associated with increased problem-focused coping and emotional regulation among lower secondary students.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual framework underlying hypotheses 1 to 5, illustrating how examination-oriented educational conditions, contextual determinants, and the school-based intervention are hypothesized to relate to students' coping responses.



Note. Solid arrows indicate hypothesised associations (H1–H5); (–) and (+) denote the hypothesised direction of association.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework illustrating the hypothesized relationships among examination-oriented educational conditions, academic workload, family expectations, teacher support, gender, coping responses, and the school-based coping intervention (H1–H5)

2.4 Research Questions

1. How do examination-oriented educational conditions influence lower secondary students' coping responses to academic stress?
2. To what extent is perceived teacher support associated with students' coping responses under sustained academic pressure?
3. To what extent is participation in a school-based coping intervention associated with changes in adaptive coping among lower secondary students?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a two-phase quantitative research design. The first phase adopted a cross-sectional survey to examine coping profiles among lower secondary students and to investigate the relationships among academic workload, family expectations, perceived teacher support, gender, and coping orientations. This phase provided baseline evidence regarding the contextual factors associated with students' coping responses in an examination-oriented educational environment.

The second phase employed a quasi-experimental one-group pretest–posttest design to examine changes in students' coping responses following participation in a six-week school-based coping intervention. A quasi-experimental approach was considered appropriate because the intervention was implemented under routine school conditions, in which random assignment and the establishment of a control group were not practically feasible.

Combining these two phases enabled the study to address both descriptive and intervention-related research questions within the same educational context. The survey phase identified contextual factors associated with academic coping,

whereas the intervention phase examined whether participation in the coping-skills programme was associated with changes in problem-focused coping and emotional regulation. Using the same conceptual framework across both phases also provided a coherent basis for interpreting the findings.

The absence of a control group should be acknowledged as a limitation of the intervention design. Consequently, improvements observed between the pretest and posttest should be interpreted as changes associated with participation in the programme rather than definitive evidence of causal effectiveness. Nevertheless, implementing the intervention in authentic school settings enhanced the ecological validity of the study and allowed the programme to be evaluated under conditions that closely reflected everyday educational practice.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The study was conducted in several lower secondary schools in Northern Vietnam, where examination performance plays an important role in educational progression and is strongly influenced by parental expectations. Students at this level are regularly exposed to classroom assessments, periodic examinations, and increasing academic competition, making this educational context appropriate for investigating coping responses to sustained academic pressure.

The survey phase involved 700 students recruited through cluster sampling. Intact classes from participating schools were selected in consultation with school administrators according to school schedules and administrative feasibility. The sample comprised students from grades 6 to 9, aged between 11 and 15 years, and included both male and female participants. This sampling approach enabled the collection of data from students representing different stages of lower secondary education while minimizing disruption to normal school activities.

The intervention phase involved 186 students drawn from the same educational context. Participants voluntarily enrolled in a six-week school-based coping programme that was implemented during regular school hours with the cooperation of classroom teachers and school administrators. Using participants from the same educational context enhanced the consistency between the survey and intervention phases and allowed the intervention to be examined under authentic school conditions.

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the participating schools before data collection commenced. Students were informed of the purpose of the research, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any stage without academic consequences. Because all participants were lower secondary students, parental consent and school approval were obtained before questionnaire administration and implementation of the intervention. All questionnaire responses were collected anonymously and used exclusively for research purposes.

3.3 Research Instruments

Data was collected using a structured self-report questionnaire comprising four sections: academic workload, family expectations, perceived teacher support, and

coping responses to academic stress. The questionnaire was developed based on the conceptual framework of the study and adapted from established measures commonly used in research on adolescent stress and coping. Items were reviewed and revised to ensure their relevance to the examination-oriented educational context of Vietnamese lower secondary schools.

The academic workload section of the questionnaire assessed students' perceptions of study pressure, examination frequency, assignment demands, and the difficulty of managing school-related tasks. The family expectations section measured students' perceptions of parental expectations and academic pressure experienced within the family. Perceived teacher support was measured through items addressing emotional encouragement, academic guidance, classroom responsiveness, and supportive teacher–student interactions. Coping responses were assessed across three dimensions: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance coping.

The coping scale was adapted from established coping frameworks developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and subsequent research on adolescent coping (Compas et al., 2017). Questionnaire items examined students' typical responses to examination-related academic stress, including planning, help-seeking, emotional regulation, withdrawal, and avoidance behaviors.

Before the main survey, the questionnaire was piloted with a small group of lower secondary students to assess item clarity, linguistic appropriateness, and overall comprehensibility. Feedback obtained during the pilot study was used to make minor revisions to wording and contextual expressions before large-scale data collection. This process was intended to improve content validity and ensure that the questionnaire was appropriate for the target population.

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Reliability values indicated acceptable internal consistency across all major constructs: academic workload ($\alpha = .81$), family expectations ($\alpha = .78$), perceived teacher support ($\alpha = .84$), problem-focused coping ($\alpha = .76$), emotion-focused coping ($\alpha = .82$), and avoidance coping ($\alpha = .79$). These coefficients exceeded the commonly accepted threshold for research instruments, indicating satisfactory reliability for subsequent statistical analyses.

3.4 School-Based Coping Intervention

The school-based coping intervention was implemented over a six-week period during regular school hours in the participating schools. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and addressed common sources of academic stress identified during the survey phase, including examination pressure, fear of poor academic performance, parental expectations, and difficulties in managing academic workload. The content of the programme was developed to reflect the everyday academic experiences of lower secondary students studying in an examination-oriented educational environment.

The intervention was designed around practical coping skills rather than formal psychological counselling. Weekly sessions included small-group discussions, guided reflection, peer-sharing activities, and scenario-based problem-solving tasks based on typical school situations. Students were encouraged to identify stressful academic situations, reflect on their usual coping responses, and explore alternative strategies for managing academic pressure more effectively. Throughout the programme, emphasis was placed on problem-focused coping, emotional regulation, constructive communication, and appropriate help-seeking behaviors.

To promote consistency across the intervention period, all sessions followed the same instructional structure and were implemented according to a common session plan. Activities were delivered during normal school hours under comparable classroom conditions with the cooperation of classroom teachers and school administrators. Although the study did not employ a formal trustworthiness assessment, the intervention content, duration, and sequence of activities were implemented consistently across participating groups.

Participants completed the coping questionnaire immediately before the first intervention session and again after finishing the six-week programme. Changes in problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, emotional regulation, and avoidance coping were subsequently examined by comparing pretest and posttest scores. Because the intervention employed a one-group pretest–posttest design without a control group, the findings should be interpreted as changes associated with participation in the programme rather than definitive evidence of causal intervention effects.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were first calculated to examine general patterns of students' coping responses across the three coping dimensions.

Pearson correlation analysis was then performed to examine the relationships among academic workload, family expectations, perceived teacher support, and students' coping responses. These analyses provided preliminary evidence regarding the associations among the principal study variables.

To test hypotheses 2 and 3, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether academic workload, family expectations, perceived teacher support, and gender were associated with problem-focused coping. Prior to the regression analysis, multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factor (VIF) values, which were all below 2.5, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern.

To examine H4, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare coping responses between male and female students.

To evaluate H5, paired-samples t-tests were used to compare participants' coping scores before and after the six-week intervention. In addition to statistical significance, Cohen's d was calculated to estimate the magnitude of the observed changes and to facilitate interpretation of the practical significance of the intervention outcomes. For all statistical analyses, the level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the research was obtained from the participating schools. Students were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without academic consequences.

Because the participants were lower secondary students, parental consent and school approval were obtained before questionnaire administration and implementation of the intervention. To protect participants' privacy, all questionnaire responses were collected anonymously, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. The data were used exclusively for research purposes and were reported only in aggregate form to ensure confidentiality.

Throughout both phases of the study, the intervention activities were designed to support students' coping skills within normal educational practice. Participation did not affect students' academic assessment or school evaluation, and all activities were conducted during regular school hours in collaboration with classroom teachers and school administrators.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Coping Responses

Descriptive statistics were examined to identify general coping patterns among lower secondary students experiencing examination-related academic pressure. The mean scores and standard deviations for the three coping dimensions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for coping dimension (N = 700)

Coping Dimension	Mean (M)	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Problem-Focused Coping	2.91	0.63	1.20	4.68
Emotion-Focused Coping	3.37	0.67	1.50	4.84
Avoidance Coping	3.18	0.69	1.40	4.90

Emotion-focused coping had the highest mean score ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.67$), followed by avoidance coping ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.69$). Problem-focused coping showed the lowest mean score among the three coping dimensions ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.63$).

The findings suggest that students tend to rely somewhat more on emotional and avoidance-oriented responses than on direct problem-solving strategies when dealing with examination-related academic stress. The relatively moderate mean scores across all three dimensions also indicate that students used a mixture of coping responses rather than relying exclusively on a single coping orientation. Overall, the descriptive findings were generally consistent with H1.

4.2 Correlations Among Study Variables

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among academic workload, family expectations, perceived teacher support, and problem-focused coping. The correlation coefficients are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlations among study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Academic Workload	—					
2. Family Expectations	.42***	—				
3. Perceived Teacher Support	-.18**	-.12*	—			
4. Problem-Focused Coping	-.29***	-.21***	.31***	—		
5. Emotion-Focused Coping	.27*	.23*	-.20	-.28*	—	
6. Avoidance Coping	.24**	.19***	-.18**	-.36***	.41*	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Academic workload and family expectations were negatively correlated with problem-focused coping but positively correlated with both emotion-focused coping and avoidance coping. Students who experienced greater academic demands and stronger parental expectations tended to rely more on emotion-oriented and avoidance coping strategies while engaging less frequently in active problem-solving strategies.

Perceived teacher support was positively associated with problem-focused coping ($r = .31$, $p < .001$) and significantly negatively associated with avoidance coping ($r = -.18$, $p < .01$); its association with emotion-focused coping was negative but did not reach statistical significance ($r = -.20$, ns). These patterns suggest that supportive teacher-student relationships may encourage more adaptive coping responses under examination pressure.

Emotion-focused coping was moderately and positively correlated with avoidance coping ($r = .41$, $p < .05$), indicating that students who relied more on emotional coping were also more likely to adopt avoidant strategies when facing academic stress. Overall, the correlation patterns were broadly consistent with the expected relationships described in hypotheses 2 and 3.

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Problem-Focused Coping

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether academic workload, family expectations, perceived teacher support, and gender were associated with problem-focused coping. The regression results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Multiple regression analysis predicting problem-focused coping

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Academic Workload	-0.18	0.03	-.24	-6.42	< .001
Family Expectations	-0.12	0.04	-.16	-3.11	.002
Perceived Teacher Support	0.21	0.03	.29	7.12	< .001
Gender (Male = 1)	0.07	0.03	.09	2.18	.030

Note. $R^2 = .27$, Adjusted $R^2 = .26$, $F(4, 695) = 64.83$, $p < .001$

Effect size: Cohen's $f^2 = R^2 / (1 - R^2) = .27 / (1 - .27) = 0.37$, indicating a large effect (Cohen, 1988) for the overall regression model.

The regression model explained approximately 27% of the variance in problem-focused coping ($R^2 = .27$). The overall effect size of the regression model was large (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.37$), indicating that the predictors collectively explained a substantial proportion of variance in problem-focused coping. Perceived teacher support was positively associated with problem-focused coping and had the strongest association in the model ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$). Students who perceived greater emotional and academic support from teachers were more likely to report active problem-solving responses to academic stress.

Academic workload and family expectations were negatively associated with problem-focused coping. Students experiencing heavier academic demands and stronger parental expectations tended to report lower levels of constructive coping responses in examination-related situations.

Gender showed a relatively small positive association with problem-focused coping ($\beta = .09$, $p = .030$), suggesting that male students reported slightly higher levels of problem-focused coping than female students. Overall, the regression findings were generally consistent with the expected relationships described in H2 and H3.

4.4 Gender Differences in Coping Responses

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences across the three coping dimensions. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Gender differences in coping responses

Coping Dimension	Male (M $\pm$ SD)	Female (M $\pm$ SD)	t	p
Problem-Focused Coping	3.01 $\pm$ 0.61	2.84 $\pm$ 0.64	2.18	.030
Emotion-Focused Coping	3.29 $\pm$ 0.65	3.43 $\pm$ 0.68	-2.11	.035
Avoidance Coping	3.11 $\pm$ 0.67	3.25 $\pm$ 0.70	-1.98	.048

The results indicate several modest gender differences in coping responses. Male students reported slightly higher levels of problem-focused coping, whereas female students reported somewhat higher levels of emotion-focused and avoidance coping. Although the observed differences were relatively small, the overall pattern suggests that female students were somewhat more likely to rely on emotional and avoidance-oriented responses when dealing with examination-related academic stress. These findings were generally consistent with H4.

4.5 Effects of the School-Based Coping Intervention

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to examine changes in coping responses following participation in the six-week coping-skills intervention program. The pre-post comparison results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Pre-post changes in coping and emotional regulation (n = 186)

Variable	Pre M	Post M	t	p	Cohen's d
Problem-Focused Coping	2.79	3.24	8.21	< .001	0.58
Emotional Regulation	3.01	3.45	8.68	< .001	0.61
Avoidance Coping	3.28	3.17	-2.91	.004	0.21

Problem-focused coping increased following participation in the intervention program, while emotional regulation scores also improved over the six-week period. In contrast, avoidance coping showed a small decrease following the intervention. The largest changes were observed in problem-focused coping and emotional regulation, although the observed effect sizes were moderate. These findings suggest that participation in the coping-skills program was associated with more constructive coping responses and better emotional regulation among participating students. Because the intervention was conducted without a separate control group, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Nevertheless, the overall pattern was generally consistent with H5.

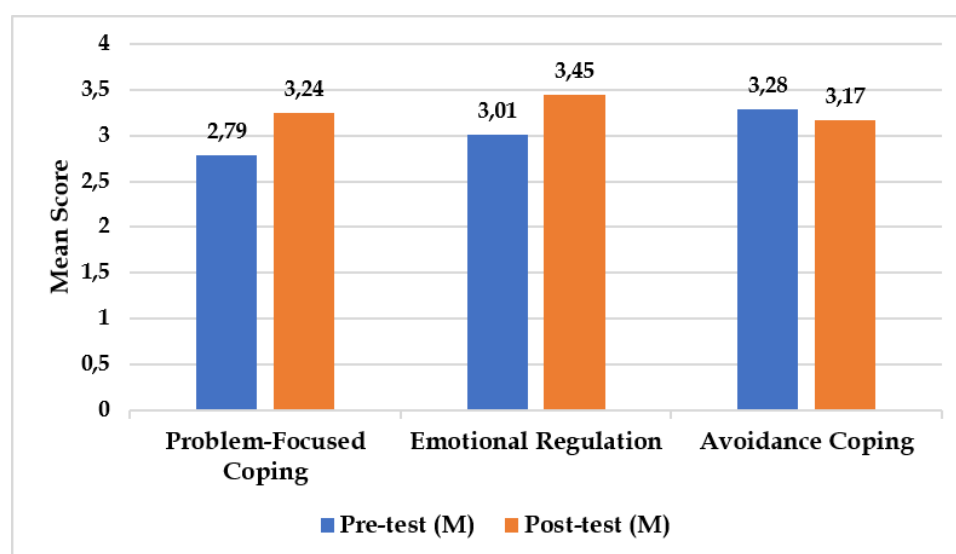


Figure 2: Pre-post changes in problem-focused coping, emotional regulation, and avoidance coping following the six-week school-based coping intervention (n = 186), based on the means reported in Table 5

5. Discussion

5.1 General Coping Patterns Among Lower Secondary Students

The present study found that lower secondary students tended to rely more on emotion-focused and avoidance-oriented coping than on problem-focused coping when responding to examination-related academic stress. Rather than simply indicating a preference for particular coping strategies, this pattern suggests that many students may perceive academic demands as exceeding their available coping resources, a finding that is consistent with the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

One possible explanation lies in the characteristics of examination-oriented educational environments. Frequent testing, continuous performance evaluation, and strong expectations from both schools and families may reduce students' perceived control over academic outcomes. Under such conditions, coping strategies aimed at regulating emotions or temporarily avoiding stressful situations may become more accessible than strategies requiring active problem-solving. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies reporting that adolescents exposed to sustained academic pressure often adopt emotion-focused coping when stressors are perceived as difficult to change (Compas et al., 2017; Putwain, 2007).

It is important, however, not to interpret these findings as evidence that lower secondary students lack effective coping skills. The moderate mean scores observed across all coping dimensions suggest that students used multiple coping strategies rather than relying exclusively on a single coping orientation. Coping during adolescence is likely to be flexible and influenced by situational demands, previous experiences, and the availability of social support. Consequently, the predominance of emotion-focused and avoidance-oriented coping in the present study should be understood reflecting the educational context in which students were learning rather than as a fixed characteristic of adolescent behaviour.

These findings also have practical implications for schools. If examination-oriented educational environments encourage students to respond primarily through emotional regulation or avoidance, schools may need to provide more systematic opportunities for students to develop problem-focused coping skills before academic stress becomes overwhelming. This perspective supports the rationale for examining school-based coping interventions in the second phase of the present study.

5.2 Academic Stressors and Problem-Focused Coping

The negative associations between academic workload, family expectations, and problem-focused coping suggest that students experiencing greater academic pressure may find it more difficult to engage in active coping behaviors. From the perspective of the transactional model, prolonged academic demands may reduce students' perceived coping resources, making stressful situations appear less controllable and consequently encouraging less adaptive coping responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Rather than actively addressing academic challenges,

some students may prioritize short-term emotional relief or disengagement when they perceive that their efforts are unlikely to influence academic outcomes.

Family expectations appear to represent an additional contextual influence on students' coping responses. In many examination-oriented educational settings, academic achievement is closely linked to parental aspirations and future educational opportunities. Under these circumstances, students may experience pressure originating not only from school demands but also from concerns about disappointing their families. This combination of academic and familial expectations may further reduce students' confidence in managing stressful situations through problem-focused strategies.

The findings are broadly consistent with previous research demonstrating that sustained academic pressure and high parental expectations are associated with less adaptive coping and poorer psychological adjustment among adolescents (Deb et al., 2015; Pascoe et al., 2020). However, the relationships observed in the present study were moderate rather than strong. This suggests that academic workload and family expectations represent important contextual influences, but they are unlikely to explain students' coping responses on their own. Individual characteristics, peer relationships, classroom climate, and other school experiences may also contribute to how adolescents respond to academic stress. An alternative interpretation should also be considered: because the data are cross-sectional, it is equally plausible that students with weaker problem-focused coping elicit greater parental concern and, in turn, heightened family expectations, rather than family expectations acting solely as a unidirectional cause of reduced coping.

These findings have important educational implications. Efforts to strengthen students' coping capacity should not focus exclusively on individual resilience or stress-management skills. Reducing unnecessary academic pressure, promoting realistic parental expectations, and creating supportive learning environments may also contribute to more adaptive coping among lower secondary students. Such an approach recognizes that coping is shaped not only by individual psychological characteristics but also by the educational context in which students learn.

5.3 Teacher Support and Coping Responses

Among the contextual variables examined in this study, perceived teacher support showed the strongest positive association with problem-focused coping. This finding suggests that supportive teacher–student relationships may enhance students' confidence in managing academic challenges rather than eliminating academic stress itself. From the perspective of the transactional model, supportive teachers may strengthen students' perceptions of available coping resources, thereby encouraging more active and constructive responses to academic demands.

One possible explanation is that teacher support provides both emotional reassurance and practical academic guidance during stressful learning situations. When students perceive their teachers as approachable, responsive, and willing to provide assistance, they may be more inclined to seek help, discuss learning difficulties, and adopt problem-solving strategies instead of avoiding academic challenges. In examination-oriented educational settings, in which students frequently experience evaluative pressure, such supportive interactions may reinforce students' sense of competence and reduce feelings of helplessness.

The present findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that supportive teacher-student relationships are associated with greater academic engagement, resilience, and psychological adjustment among adolescents (Roeser et al., 2000; Suldo et al., 2008). More recent evidence has similarly highlighted teacher support as a protective factor that promotes students' psychological adjustment and adaptive coping across diverse educational contexts, suggesting that supportive classroom relationships remain an important component of school-based well-being initiatives (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the findings should not be interpreted as indicating that teacher support alone is sufficient to offset the effects of sustained academic pressure.

Academic coping is likely to result from the combined influence of individual characteristics, family expectations, peer relationships, and broader educational conditions. Teacher support, therefore, appears to function as one important protective factor within a more complex educational system. It should also be acknowledged that this association may operate in both directions: students who already engage in more active, problem-focused coping may be more likely to approach teachers and, consequently, to perceive and report greater support, rather than support unidirectionally producing more adaptive coping.

From a practical perspective, these findings highlight the importance of strengthening teachers' supportive roles alongside their instructional responsibilities. Professional development programmes that encourage responsive communication, emotional support, and constructive classroom interactions may contribute to creating learning environments in which students are better equipped to cope with academic stress. Such initiatives may be particularly valuable in examination-oriented educational systems, in which opportunities for supportive teacher-student interaction can help students respond to academic challenges in more adaptive ways.

5.4 Gender Differences in Coping Responses

The present study identified statistically significant gender differences in coping responses; however, these differences were relatively modest in magnitude. Although female students reported greater use of emotion-focused coping and male students reported slightly higher levels of problem-focused coping, the findings suggest that gender alone explains only a small proportion of variation in adolescents' coping responses. The practical significance of these differences should therefore be interpreted with caution.

A possible explanation for any gender-related differences in coping is that these variances are influenced by socialization processes during adolescence rather than by inherent behavioural characteristics. Female students may be more likely to express emotional concerns and seek interpersonal support, whereas male students may be encouraged to adopt more problem-oriented responses. These tendencies, however, are likely to be shaped by family, school, and cultural expectations and may vary across educational contexts.

The findings are broadly consistent with previous studies reporting modest gender differences in adolescent coping (Compas et al., 2017; Hampel & Petermann, 2005). At the same time, the relatively small differences observed in the present study suggest that contextual factors, including academic demands, teacher support, and family expectations, may exert a greater influence on students' coping responses than gender itself. This interpretation is also supported by the regression analysis, in which gender showed a comparatively weaker association with problem-focused coping than perceived teacher support. From an educational perspective, these findings suggest that coping-support programmes should not be designed primarily on the basis of gender. Instead, interventions may be more effective when they address the academic and social conditions that influence students' coping experiences while remaining responsive to individual differences in coping preferences and emotional needs.

5.5 Effects of the School-Based Coping Intervention

The findings indicate that participation in the six-week school-based coping programme was associated with improvements in problem-focused coping and emotional regulation, accompanied by a small reduction in avoidance coping. Although statistically significant changes were observed across the intervention period, the effect sizes were generally moderate. These findings suggest that relatively short educational interventions may contribute to strengthening adaptive coping skills, while also indicating that meaningful changes in coping are likely to require sustained support over time.

A possible explanation is that the intervention provided students with structured opportunities to reflect on their responses to academic stress and to practice alternative coping strategies in a supportive learning environment. Through guided discussions, peer interaction, and scenario-based activities, students were encouraged to reconsider stressful academic situations and explore more constructive ways of responding to examination pressure. Such experiences may have enhanced students' confidence in managing academic challenges and increased their willingness to adopt problem-focused coping strategies.

The present findings are broadly consistent with previous research demonstrating that school-based programmes can improve adolescents' coping skills, emotional regulation, and psychological adjustment (Durlak et al., 2011; Feiss et al., 2019). Recent reviews further indicate that school-based coping interventions generally produce modest but meaningful improvements in students' emotional regulation and coping competence, particularly when programmes are delivered over multiple weeks and embedded within routine educational practice (Jagiello et al.,

2025; Taylor et al., 2017). However, the moderate effect sizes observed in this study suggest that the intervention should not be viewed as a complete solution to academic stress. Students continued to learn within the same examination-oriented educational environment, in which academic demands and external expectations remained unchanged throughout the intervention period. It is therefore reasonable that improvements were meaningful but not substantial.

The intervention findings should also be interpreted considering the study design. Because the programme was evaluated using a one-group pretest–posttest design without a control group, it is not possible to conclude that the observed changes resulted solely from participation in the intervention. Other influences, including normal developmental changes, classroom experiences, or concurrent school activities, may also have contributed to the observed improvements. Future studies employing controlled or longitudinal designs would provide stronger evidence regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of school-based coping interventions.

From a practical perspective, the findings, nevertheless, suggest that coping skills can be supported through educational practice rather than being regarded as fixed individual characteristics. Incorporating structured coping activities into routine school programmes may provide students with additional opportunities to strengthen emotional regulation and problem-focused coping while responding more effectively to examination-related academic stress.

5.6 Implications for Practice

The findings offer practical implications for examination-oriented educational systems. For teachers, the strong association between perceived support and problem-focused coping suggests that responsive communication and academic guidance during stressful periods can meaningfully strengthen students' coping, even without formal counselling training; schools may likewise consider moderating unnecessary workload and embedding brief, teacher-led coping-skills activities into routine practice.

For policymakers, these recommendations align with evidence from other Southeast Asian contexts, in which coping self-efficacy among Filipino students has been shown to decline under intensified academic stress (Regalado, 2024) and family-based support has been linked to more adaptive academic behaviour among Indonesian students (Adiyono et al., 2025), and large-scale surveys among high school students in Bangkok, Thailand, have similarly documented substantial rates of psychological distress in this population (Thanachoksawang et al., 2024). Together, this regional evidence suggests that coping-focused, socio-emotional components in curricula and teacher training may be broadly relevant across examination-oriented systems in Southeast Asia.

5.7 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the present study. First, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by students' subjective perceptions, social desirability, and response bias. Although anonymity was ensured throughout data collection, self-reported

measures may not fully capture students' actual coping behaviors in everyday academic situations.

Second, the intervention employed a one-group pretest–posttest design without a comparison group. Consequently, although improvements in coping responses were observed following participation in the programme, these changes cannot be attributed exclusively to the intervention. Other factors, including normal developmental processes, ongoing classroom experiences, or external academic influences, may also have contributed to the observed outcomes. Future studies incorporating control groups or randomized experimental designs would provide stronger evidence regarding intervention effectiveness.

Third, the study was conducted in several lower secondary schools in Northern Vietnam. Because educational practices, parental expectations, and examination cultures may differ across regions and school systems, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other educational contexts. Replication in different geographical regions and educational settings would help establish the broader applicability of the findings.

Fourth, the intervention was relatively brief, lasting only six weeks. Although moderate improvements in adaptive coping were observed, the study did not examine whether these changes were maintained over time. Therefore, longitudinal research is needed to investigate the sustainability of intervention effects and to explore whether longer or more intensive school-based programmes produce greater improvements in adolescents' coping capacities. Future research may also examine additional contextual factors, such as peer support, school climate, and students' self-efficacy, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of academic coping in examination-oriented educational environments.

6. Conclusion

This study examined academic coping among lower secondary students within an examination-oriented educational context in Northern Vietnam, integrating a contextual survey with a school-based coping intervention. Overall, the findings indicate that students relied more on emotion-focused and avoidance-oriented coping than on problem-focused coping. Academic workload and family expectations were negatively associated with problem-focused coping while perceived teacher support was positively associated with it. Gender differences in coping were present but modest, and participation in the six-week intervention was associated with improvements in problem-focused coping and emotional regulation.

With respect to the study's three research questions, the findings suggested the following. First, examination-oriented educational conditions were associated with a general reliance on emotion-focused and avoidance-oriented coping rather than problem-focused coping, consistent with the view that sustained evaluative pressure can reduce students' perceived control over academic outcomes. Second, perceived teacher support was consistently and positively associated with

students' coping responses, emerging as the strongest contextual predictor of problem-focused coping among the variables examined. Third, participation in the school-based coping intervention was associated with meaningful, although moderate, improvements in adaptive coping and emotional regulation, providing preliminary evidence that coping responses remain responsive to structured educational support even within a relatively brief six-week programme.

These conclusions should be interpreted considering the study's limitations, including its reliance on self-report measures, the absence of a control group in the intervention phase, the restriction of the sample to lower secondary schools in Northern Vietnam, and the relatively short duration of the intervention. Future research should employ controlled or longitudinal designs, examine additional contextual factors, such as peer support and school climate, and extend this line of enquiry to other regions and educational systems within Vietnam and the broader Southeast Asian region.

The study contributes to literature by extending the understanding of academic coping beyond individual psychological characteristics to include the influence of educational context, and by demonstrating that coping responses among adolescents in an examination-oriented system can be strengthened through relatively brief, school-embedded support. Collectively her, the findings suggest that supporting students' coping capacity is not solely an individual responsibility but a shared educational task, and that even modest investments in teacher support and structured coping instruction may help students navigate sustained academic pressure while safeguarding their psychological well-being.

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