

Transforming School Psychological Counseling Management in Vietnamese High Schools: Evidence from Dong Thap Province in the Era of Educational Change

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Abstract—School psychological counseling has been increasingly introduced into Vietnam’s secondary education system; however, its implementation remains uneven, particularly in semi-urban contexts where institutional capacity and professional resources are still developing. This study investigates how school-based counseling is organized and enacted in four public high schools in Cao Lanh Ward, Dong Thap Province, with a focus on the gap between policy expectations and everyday practice. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through surveys of school administrators and teachers, while qualitative insights were obtained from document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The integration of these data sources enabled a grounded understanding of how counseling activities function in practice rather than relying solely on policy-level descriptions. Findings indicate that counseling services remain largely fragmented and reactive. Schools tend to respond to emerging student issues instead of implementing systematic, preventive approaches. This pattern is associated with several interrelated constraints, including a shortage of trained counseling personnel, limited use of data in planning, inadequate infrastructure for confidential support, and inconsistent understanding among school staff regarding the broader role of counseling beyond disciplinary functions. The study suggests that the key challenge lies not only in resource limitations but also in the absence of institutionalized mechanisms linking policy to practice. Strengthening internal coordination, developing data-informed routines, and investing in sustained professional development are essential for improving service effectiveness. By situating the analysis in a semi-urban Vietnamese context, this study provides empirical insights into how school counseling systems operate in practice and highlights the need to stabilize and professionalize existing school-based support structures.

Keywords— School psychological counseling; educational management; mixed-methods; adolescent mental health; Vietnam; school implementation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ongoing socio-economic transformation and rapid digitalization have fundamentally reshaped the developmental ecology of adolescents. High school students are now navigating intensified academic demands alongside a complex constellation of psychosocial pressures, including identity-related tensions, exposure to online risks (e.g., cyberbullying), and increasing emotional and behavioral vulnerabilities. These challenges extend beyond individual well-being, as they are

closely associated with patterns of academic engagement, school adjustment, and longer-term developmental outcomes (WHO, 2021; OECD, 2020). In this context, school psychological counseling is no longer peripheral but constitutes a core component of contemporary student support systems.

Internationally, school counseling has evolved toward a structured, multi-tiered model integrating prevention, early identification, and targeted intervention within the school environment. The ASCA National Model conceptualizes counseling as a comprehensive program aligned with academic, career, and social-emotional development, emphasizing data-informed planning, accountability, and systemic integration (ASCA, 2019). Complementary global frameworks highlight whole-school approaches and cross-sectoral coordination as critical to effective student mental health provision (UNESCO, 2021; WHO, 2021). Despite these advances, the extent to which such principles are realized in practice varies considerably across contexts.

In Vietnam, policy efforts have sought to formalize school psychological counseling, most notably through Circular No. 31/2017/TT-BGDĐT issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2017). While this framework establishes an important regulatory foundation, its translation into practice has been uneven. Empirical observations and prior studies suggest that counseling activities in many high schools remain fragmented, with limited professionalization, weak integration into school governance, and a lack of systematic planning and evaluation mechanisms (Tran Thi Minh Đức, 2017; UNICEF, 2022). These patterns reflect broader challenges typical of developing education systems, where institutional capacity often lags behind policy ambition.

This situation is particularly evident in semi-urban settings such as Cao Lanh Ward, Dong Thap Province. Preliminary observations indicate that counseling services have yet to be fully embedded within the organizational and pedagogical structures of schools. Responsibilities are frequently assigned to teachers on a concurrent basis without formal training in counseling or psychology. Infrastructural conditions remain limited, operational procedures are often informal, and stakeholder awareness—among school leaders, teachers, students, and parents—appears uneven. Together, these factors

constrain both access to and the perceived credibility of counseling services, thereby reducing their overall effectiveness.

II. SCIENTIFIC AND PRACTICAL BASIS

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

School psychological counseling is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that integrates developmental psychology, educational management theory, and school counseling models. Taken together, these perspectives provide both explanatory insight into students' psychosocial development and an operational basis for designing and managing counseling systems within educational institutions.

From a developmental psychology perspective, adolescence (approximately 15–18 years of age) constitutes a critical period characterized by rapid neurocognitive development, heightened emotional sensitivity, and the consolidation of personal identity. Within Erikson's psychosocial framework, this stage is defined by the central crisis of identity versus role confusion, where individuals are required to establish a coherent sense of self across social, academic, and personal domains (Erikson, 1968). The successful resolution of this developmental task is associated with psychological stability and adaptive functioning, whereas unresolved identity formation may manifest in identity diffusion, emotional dysregulation, maladaptive coping strategies, and disengagement from academic and social roles (Berk, 2018).

Contemporary empirical research further indicates that adolescence is a period of heightened vulnerability to mental health challenges. A substantial proportion of mental health disorders emerge before early adulthood, with common manifestations including anxiety, depression, peer victimization, and school-related stress (WHO, 2021). These patterns underscore the importance of early identification and the provision of school-based psychosocial support systems that are both accessible and developmentally responsive (OECD, 2020).

From the perspective of educational management theory, school psychological counseling should be understood not as an auxiliary or peripheral service but as an integral subsystem within the broader educational organization. Its effectiveness depends on the systematic application of core management functions, including planning, organizing, leading, and evaluation (Nguyen Quoc Chi & Nguyen Thi My Loc, 1996; Nguyen Phuc Chau, 2010). Within this framework, counseling services must be strategically embedded in school governance structures, aligned with institutional goals, and supported by data-informed decision-making processes. In the absence of such systemic integration, counseling activities are likely to remain fragmented, reactive, and limited in impact.

Within the school counseling literature, particularly the comprehensive developmental model advanced by the American School Counselor Association, counseling is conceptualized as a structured and programmatic system that integrates preventive, developmental, and remedial functions (ASCA, 2019). This model emphasizes the alignment of counseling services with three core domains of student

development: academic, career, and social–emotional. It further highlights the importance of program accountability, professional standards, and continuous evaluation in ensuring service effectiveness.

Synthesizing these perspectives, school psychological counseling can be conceptualized as a multi-level intervention system that fulfills several core functions: (i) supporting students' mental health and emotional well-being; (ii) strengthening adaptive coping and resilience; (iii) preventing the emergence and escalation of behavioral and psychological difficulties; and (iv) promoting holistic development across cognitive, emotional, and social domains. These functions position counseling as a critical component of contemporary educational systems, particularly in contexts characterized by rapid social and technological change.

2.2. Practical Foundations

In the Vietnamese educational context, accumulating evidence indicates a steady increase in psychosocial difficulties among secondary and high school students. Both national reports and international assessments suggest that a considerable proportion of adolescents experience academic stress, anxiety, emotional instability, and interpersonal challenges that require timely and appropriate psychological support (MOET, 2017; WHO, 2021). These trends are closely linked to broader socio-educational transformations, including intensified academic competition, the expansion of digital environments, shifting family structures, and evolving cultural expectations.

Despite the growing demand for school-based psychological support, the institutional capacity to provide such services remains uneven and, in many cases, limited. Existing studies consistently point to several structural and operational constraints. First, counseling infrastructures are often underdeveloped, with few schools possessing formalized systems or dedicated spaces for psychological support. Second, there is a significant shortage of professionally trained counselors, leading to the assignment of counseling responsibilities to teachers without formal qualifications in psychology or counseling. Third, counseling activities tend to be implemented in a fragmented and reactive manner, lacking continuity, systematic planning, and long-term developmental orientation. Finally, the integration of counseling services into broader school management systems remains weak, limiting both coordination and sustainability (Tran Thi Minh Đức, 2017; UNICEF, 2022).

This gap between increasing student needs and limited institutional capacity reflects a broader structural imbalance within the educational support system. It highlights the need for systemic reform, particularly in relation to governance mechanisms, professional capacity development, and investment in school-based mental health infrastructure. Without such reforms, school psychological counseling is unlikely to evolve beyond its current fragmented state or to effectively respond to the complex psychosocial demands of contemporary students.

2.3. Current Situation of School Psychological Counseling in High Schools in Cao Lanh Ward, Dong Thap Province

This study was conducted in four public high schools located in Cao Lanh Ward, Dong Thap Province, namely Thien Ho Duong High School, Do Cong Tuong High School, Cao Lanh High School, and Tran Quoc Tuan High School. These institutions may be considered broadly representative of public upper-secondary schools in the Mekong Delta, where educational development is occurring under conditions of moderate resource availability alongside increasingly complex student psychosocial needs.

In recent years, school-based psychological counseling has been formally recognized within the Vietnamese education system as an integral component of student support, particularly in the context of the General Education Curriculum Reform (MOET, 2018), which emphasizes holistic student development and well-being. Nevertheless, there remains a noticeable gap between policy expectations and actual implementation at the school level. Previous studies (e.g., Tran Thi Minh Duc, 2017; UNESCO, 2021) have pointed to uneven institutional capacity across regions, and the present research context reflects many of these broader systemic tensions.

Against this backdrop, the selected schools provide a relevant empirical setting for examining how counseling services are currently conceptualized, organized, and enacted within semi-urban public high schools, where both traditional educational practices and emerging student support demands coexist.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional design within a convergent mixed-methods framework to examine the organization and implementation of school psychological counseling in selected high schools in Cao Lanh Ward, Dong Thap Province, Vietnam. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and integrated through triangulation to provide a comprehensive understanding of both structural patterns and contextual dynamics (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2. Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in four public high schools in Cao Lanh Ward. A purposive sample of 80 participants was recruited, including 12 school administrators and 68 teachers involved in student support activities, all with at least one year of professional experience.

For the qualitative component, 12 semi-structured interviews (4 administrators, 8 teachers) were conducted to ensure representation across roles. Data collection took place from September to December 2025.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected using three complementary methods.

First, a 35-item questionnaire (five-point Likert scale) was developed to assess five dimensions: awareness, organizational practices, human resources, infrastructure, and perceived effectiveness. The instrument demonstrated

acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78-0.86$) and content validity through expert review.

Second, semi-structured interviews explored implementation practices, professional competencies, and institutional constraints.

Third, document analysis was conducted to examine school plans and counseling records, enabling comparison between policy frameworks and actual practices.

3.4. Data Analysis and Ethics

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies). Qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis, with partial double-coding to enhance reliability.

Findings were integrated through triangulation to ensure interpretive validity. Ethical procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation, and strict confidentiality of all data

IV. FINDINGS AND LIMITATIONS

4.1. Awareness and Conceptual Orientation

School leaders and teachers generally recognize the importance of psychological counseling; however, their understanding remains limited. Counseling is predominantly framed as a reactive response to immediate student difficulties rather than as a continuous developmental process embedded within the school's educational mission. This instrumental orientation aligns with patterns observed in comparable contexts, where counseling is often associated with crisis management rather than preventive and developmental functions (ASCA, 2019; WHO, 2021). Consequently, counseling occupies a peripheral position within school systems.

4.2. Planning and Organizational Structure

Counseling activities lack systematic and long-term planning, with implementation largely occurring on an ad hoc basis. Interventions are typically triggered by emerging issues without prior needs assessment or preventive programming. Key limitations include the absence of data-informed planning, minimal use of early identification tools, and a predominance of short-term interventions. These findings indicate that counseling remains at an early stage of institutional development (UNICEF, 2022; Tran Thi Minh Duc, 2017).

4.3. Human Resources and Professional Competence

A critical constraint is the shortage of professionally trained personnel. Counseling responsibilities are commonly assigned to teachers without formal training, resulting in practices grounded more in personal experience than in established psychological frameworks. The lack of structured professional development and supervision further limits service quality. This contrasts with international standards emphasizing specialized training and professionalization (ASCA, 2019; OECD, 2020).

4.4. Infrastructure and Resources

Infrastructural conditions remain inadequate, particularly the absence of private and confidential counseling spaces. Limited access to standardized assessment tools and intervention materials leads to largely informal practices. Such conditions may reduce both service quality and students' willingness to seek support, given the importance of confidentiality in adolescent help-seeking behavior (WHO, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

4.5. Implementation Effectiveness and System Coordination

Overall effectiveness is limited and uneven. Student engagement remains low, coordination among schools, families, and external agencies is weak, and referral and follow-up mechanisms are underdeveloped. As a result, counseling services remain fragmented and have yet to achieve substantive impact, consistent with challenges reported in resource-constrained settings (WHO, 2021; OECD, 2020).

Collectively, these findings indicate that school psychological counseling in this context is still at an early stage of development, characterized by weak systemic integration. The identified limitations are interdependent, suggesting that isolated interventions are unlikely to yield significant improvement. A systemic approach is required, focusing on professional capacity building, data-informed planning, infrastructural enhancement, and strengthened coordination. More fundamentally, counseling must be reconceptualized as a core, preventive, and developmental component of schooling rather than a reactive support function.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings point to a persistent mismatch between students' increasing psychosocial needs and the current capacity of school-based counseling services in the surveyed high schools. Quantitative results indicate that the perceived effectiveness of counseling activities remains modest, with a mean score of $M = 2.87/5$, suggesting that existing services are not meeting expected support levels. This pattern is further corroborated by qualitative data, where several interview participants described counseling activities as "mostly occasional" and "activated only when problems become visible," rather than functioning as a continuous support system.

From a systems perspective, this gap reflects not only operational limitations but also a deeper issue related to the partial institutionalization of counseling within school governance structures. Although awareness of counseling roles among administrators reached a relatively high level ($M = 3.94/5$), this has not translated into systematic implementation. Counseling remains loosely organized and is rarely embedded in formal planning or quality assurance processes. Similar discrepancies between policy recognition and institutional practice have been reported in other developing contexts (UNESCO, 2021; WHO, 2021). However, in contrast to findings from more urbanized settings where structured pilot models have begun to emerge, the

present study suggests that in semi-urban areas such as Cao Lanh, institutional integration remains limited and uneven.

A key constraint concerns managerial and organizational capacity. The data show that planning and coordination mechanisms received relatively low ratings ($M = 2.76/5$), indicating the absence of structured, data-informed management processes. Interview data reinforce this finding, with school leaders acknowledging that counseling plans are often "combined into general school activities" rather than developed as independent strategic components. This aligns with broader evidence suggesting that weak governance structures significantly constrain the effectiveness and sustainability of school mental health initiatives (OECD, 2020). At the same time, the findings diverge from some recent studies in better-resourced systems, where data-driven planning has become a central feature of counseling program management.

The issue of professional capacity also emerges as a critical limitation. Survey results show that human resource readiness for counseling activities was rated at $M = 2.63/5$, reflecting a shortage of trained personnel. Most counseling responsibilities are undertaken by teachers without formal preparation in psychology, which contributes to variability in service quality. Several interviewees explicitly noted that they "rely mainly on personal experience" when addressing student issues. This finding is consistent with international literature emphasizing the importance of specialized training, supervision, and professional standards in ensuring effective counseling practice (ASCA, 2019; WHO, 2021). Unlike contexts where school counselors operate as dedicated professionals, the current model in the studied schools remains transitional and underdeveloped.

Another important finding relates to the limited integration of counseling services within the broader school ecosystem. Quantitative results indicate moderate-to-low levels of coordination among stakeholders ($M = 2.71/5$), while qualitative data highlight weak collaboration between schools, families, and external support services. Counseling activities are rarely linked to teaching practices, student assessment systems, or community-based support mechanisms. This fragmentation reduces continuity in student support and limits the system's capacity to respond to complex psychosocial needs. While similar coordination challenges have been reported globally, they appear more pronounced in decentralized and resource-constrained settings such as the Mekong Delta.

Taken together, these findings suggest that school psychological counseling in the studied context remains at an early stage of institutional development. The absence of a structured, multi-tiered framework encompassing prevention, early intervention, and targeted support indicates a clear gap between current practices and internationally recognized models of school mental health systems.

In practical terms, these results point to the need for systemic reforms that prioritize governance strengthening, professional capacity development, and institutional integration. Rather than expanding counseling activities in an ad hoc manner, schools need to establish clearer

organizational structures, invest in targeted training, and develop more coherent coordination mechanisms. Such efforts are particularly important in semi-urban contexts, where resource constraints and transitional institutional conditions require context-sensitive approaches rather than direct replication of international models.

Overall, the study contributes empirical evidence from a Mekong Delta setting, highlighting how structural, professional, and organizational factors interact to shape the effectiveness of school counseling systems. These insights underscore the importance of moving beyond policy recognition toward more grounded and contextually adapted implementation strategies.

VI. MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Based on the empirical findings—particularly the relatively low ratings in planning capacity ($M = 2.76/5$), human resource readiness ($M = 2.63/5$), and stakeholder coordination ($M = 2.71/5$) this study proposes four context-sensitive management solutions to strengthen school psychological counseling in semi-urban high schools in Dong Thap Province. Rather than relying on complex or high-cost innovations, these solutions emphasize gradual improvement, practical feasibility, and alignment with existing school conditions.

6.1. Strengthening Awareness through Continuous and Accessible Communication

Although awareness of school counseling among staff was relatively high ($M = 3.94/5$), the findings indicate that this awareness has not been translated into consistent practice. Interview data suggest that communication about counseling remains occasional and lacks continuity.

To address this gap, schools should shift from one-time awareness campaigns to regular and structured communication activities, such as integrating brief psychoeducational content into homeroom sessions, organizing monthly thematic discussions, and sharing simple guidance materials with students and parents.

Basic digital channels already familiar in the Mekong Delta context such as school websites, Zalo groups, or internal communication platforms can be used to disseminate information on stress management, emotional regulation, and help-seeking behaviors. This approach improves accessibility while remaining feasible within existing infrastructure, as it can be implemented through available communication tools already familiar to schools. However, its effectiveness depends on several conditions, including sustained teacher engagement, basic digital literacy among staff, and the consistency with which communication activities are conducted over time.

6.2. Improving Planning through Basic Data Use and Monitoring Practices

Given the low rating of planning and organizational capacity ($M = 2.76/5$), the study suggests strengthening basic data-informed planning practices rather than introducing complex data systems. Schools can begin by developing

simple student monitoring records that include attendance, behavioral observations, and teacher feedback, which can be managed using spreadsheets or existing school management tools. Periodic review meetings (e.g., once per semester) can then be used to identify at-risk students and adjust counseling plans accordingly.

Rather than relying on advanced analytics, the focus should be on the consistent and practical use of available data to support decision-making. This approach is feasible within current school conditions, as it requires only basic training in record-keeping and data interpretation, can be implemented incrementally across school terms, and depends primarily on sustained administrative commitment and consistency in practice.

6.3. Enhancing Professional Capacity through Hybrid Training Approaches

The low level of human resource readiness ($M = 2.63/5$) reflects the current reliance on teachers who have not received formal training in counseling, with interview findings indicating that many depend primarily on personal experience when supporting students. In this context, a hybrid capacity-building model is recommended, combining short-term, school-based training with accessible online learning opportunities, with priority given to practical competencies such as active listening, basic counseling techniques, and early identification of student difficulties.

Where possible, schools can organize peer-sharing sessions or collaborate with local training institutions to provide periodic workshops, while online courses can supplement these efforts, particularly in areas where access to professional expertise is limited. This approach is suitable for schools without dedicated counseling staff; however, its effectiveness requires support from local education authorities and depends on sustained teacher participation and engagement in professional development activities.

6.4. Strengthening School Family Community Coordination

The findings indicate weak coordination among stakeholders ($M = 2.71/5$), particularly between schools and families. Counseling activities are often implemented within schools without sustained engagement from parents or external support services.

To improve coordination, schools should establish clear and consistent communication mechanisms with parents, such as scheduled meetings, regular updates, or class-based communication groups. In addition, schools can gradually build connections with available local services, such as health centers or community support organizations, for referral in more serious cases.

Given the semi-urban context of Dong Thap, where specialized psychological services may be limited, coordination efforts should be developed gradually and based on locally available resources.

This approach depends on several practical conditions, including the level of parental involvement and the availability of local support services. Effective implementation also requires the establishment of clear and consistent communication protocols within schools. However, these

efforts may be constrained by limited external resources and uneven access to community-based support systems. Taken together, these solutions suggest that improving school psychological counseling does not primarily depend on advanced technology, but on strengthening fundamental organizational practices, professional capacity, and coordination mechanisms.

In the context of semi-urban schools in the Mekong Delta, effective reform should prioritize incremental, feasible, and context-adapted strategies, rather than the direct adoption of

complex digital models. While digital tools can support implementation, their role should remain appropriate to local capacity and infrastructure conditions.

This approach is consistent with international recommendations emphasizing that school mental health systems should be developed in alignment with institutional readiness and contextual realities (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2020; WHO, 2021). All proposed solutions are synthesized and visually represented in Figure 1 below.

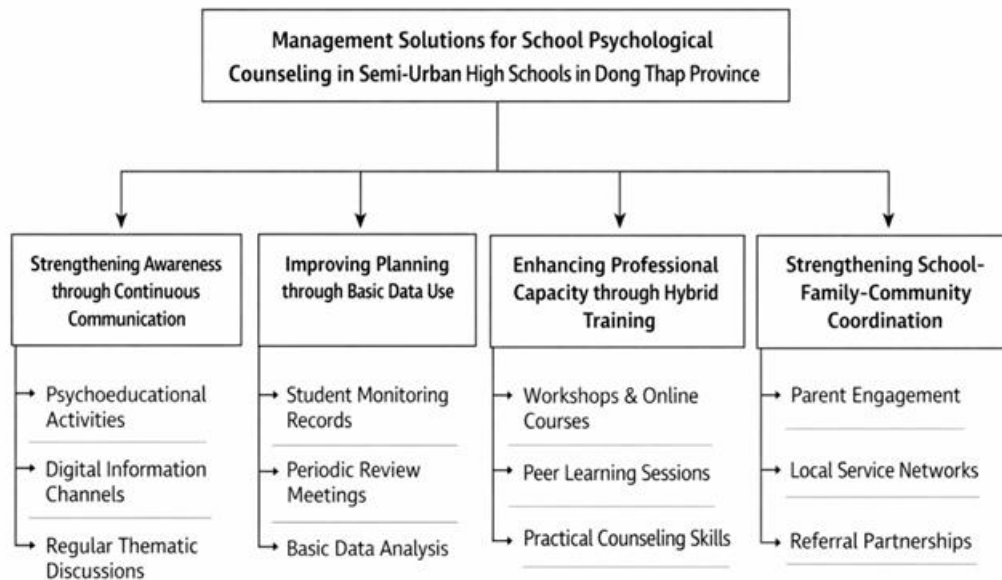


Figure 1. Management Solutions for School Psychological Counseling in Semi-Urban High School in Dongthap Province

VII. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the management of school psychological counseling should be understood not as a peripheral activity, but as a core component of school governance with direct implications for student well-being and learning outcomes. Drawing on empirical data from high schools in Cao Lanh Ward, Dong Thap Province, the findings indicate that counseling activities remain at an early stage of institutional development, with planning capacity rated at $M = 2.76/5$, human resource readiness at $M = 2.63/5$, and stakeholder coordination at $M = 2.71/5$. These results suggest that counseling services are still implemented in a fragmented and largely reactive manner, with limited professionalization and weak integration into school management systems.

This gap between policy recognition and school-level practice highlights the need for more grounded and context-sensitive reforms. In particular, the findings show that challenges are not only related to resource limitations, but also to the absence of structured planning processes, consistent data use, and coordinated support mechanisms. In the semi-urban context of the Mekong Delta, where teachers often assume multiple roles and access to specialized psychological services is limited, these constraints become more pronounced and require practical rather than idealized solutions.

Based on these findings, the study emphasizes the importance of strengthening core management functions, including systematic planning, capacity building for teachers, and more consistent coordination with families and local support services. Rather than focusing primarily on advanced technological solutions, the results suggest that incremental improvements in existing practices—supported by appropriate and accessible digital tools—are more feasible and potentially more sustainable in the current context.

From a research perspective, this study contributes empirical evidence from a relatively underexplored setting, highlighting how structural, professional, and contextual factors interact to shape the effectiveness of school counseling systems. Future research should further examine how simple monitoring tools and school-based support mechanisms can be adapted and scaled in resource-constrained environments. In addition, comparative studies across different regional contexts would help clarify how variations in infrastructure and institutional capacity influence the implementation of counseling services. Longitudinal research is also needed to assess the long-term impact of management interventions on student well-being and school functioning.

In conclusion, advancing school psychological counseling in Vietnam requires a shift toward more structured, contextually grounded, and coordinated approaches. Such a shift will enable schools to respond more effectively to

students' psychosocial needs and to function as supportive environments that foster both academic and personal development.

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