

Culturally Responsive School Psychological Counseling in Ethnic Minority Semi-Boarding Schools in Northern Vietnam: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Implementation and Pilot Outcomes

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the implementation and preliminary outcomes of school psychological counseling in ethnic minority semi-boarding schools in Northern Vietnam, a context characterized by linguistic diversity, geographical isolation, and limited institutional resources. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 478 teachers and school administrators, 384 students, and 384 parents across 23 schools, and were subsequently complemented by qualitative interviews, structured observations, and a four-week pilot intervention.

The findings indicate that school psychological counseling was present but only partially institutionalized, operating primarily through teacher-led and relationally embedded support practices rather than professionally specialized services. Among the examined variables, teachers' counseling competencies demonstrated the strongest association with counseling activities, followed by stakeholder awareness and contextual support conditions. Counseling activities were negatively associated with students' psychological difficulties, which were most strongly related to language barriers, academic pressure, emotional restraint, and homesickness in the semi-boarding context.

The pilot intervention further suggests that a culturally responsive and teacher-facilitated support model can enhance students' emotional expression, help-seeking behavior, peer communication, and perceived social support under routine school conditions. These findings highlight the importance of culturally and linguistically responsive psychosocial support in multilingual and under-resourced educational settings.

This study contributes to the international literature by proposing a systems-oriented and context-sensitive framework for understanding school psychological counseling as a culturally embedded support ecology in marginalized school contexts. It also provides preliminary empirical evidence for a feasible and scalable model of school-based psychosocial support in low-resource educational environments.

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1. Introduction

School psychological counseling is increasingly recognized as a fundamental component of whole-child education because it supports not only crisis intervention, but also prevention, emotional development, social adjustment, and academic engagement (American Psychological Association, 2020; National Association of School Psychologists, 2010). International research has demonstrated that school-based counseling and psychosocial support can reduce stress, strengthen emotional regulation, improve peer relationships, and enhance students' adjustment to school environments (Greenberg, 2023; Gysbers & Henderson, 2008; Margaretha et al., 2023). In Vietnam, the significance of school psychological counseling has likewise been formally acknowledged through systematic policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education and Training, including Circular No. 31/2017/TT-BGDĐT, the 2020 Guidelines for organizing student psychological support, and Official Dispatch No. 2345/BGDĐT-GDTrH (Ministry of Education and Training, 2017, 2020, 2022b). These institutional directives formally position psychological counseling as a core administrative and pedagogical responsibility of general education institutions, establishing the framework for organizing specialized personnel, spaces, and operational procedures to support students' holistic well-being.

However, a critical distinction must be maintained between school counseling as a foundational psychosocial support function and its implementation as an institutional practice. While the former defines the developmental and educational purposes of counseling, the latter dictates how services are operationalized, resource-allocated, and experienced within daily school life. This division is highly consequential: schools may formally mandate the existence of a counseling program to satisfy policy regulations, yet the functional accessibility, student trust, and consistency of such services often remain

fragmented. In resource-constrained educational systems, exploring this gap between nominal institutional service provision and actual utilization becomes paramount to understanding the true quality and efficacy of school-based support.

This challenge is especially pronounced in educational settings characterized by geographical isolation, limited infrastructure, and profound cultural-linguistic diversity, such as ethnic minority semi-boarding schools in Northern Vietnam. In these unique contexts, students encounter overlapping structural and emotional difficulties. Living away from family at a young age within the semi-boarding system introduces intense homesickness, emotional restraint, and adjustment strain. These socio-emotional vulnerabilities are further compounded by language barriers—where limited proficiency in Vietnamese hampers both classroom engagement and personal articulation—and intense academic pressure. Such conditions heavily shape not only the students' psychological distress but also the institutional conditions under which counseling can be effectively organized, accessed, and trusted as a safe avenue for help-seeking behavior.

Existing scholarship has well established the developmental and ecological significance of school counseling. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory emphasizes that child development is recursively shaped by the interactions between proximal environments like the family and school, while Erikson (1968) highlights the role of systematic psychosocial support for identity formation and social adaptation during adolescence. In the Vietnamese context, previous studies have brought substantial attention to student counseling needs and the expanding roles of teachers in providing frontline support (Dinh et al., 2019; Truong et al., 2020; Huynh, 2021; Huynh & Vu, 2021). Furthermore, contemporary

East and Southeast Asian literature suggests that school counseling systems across marginalized, ethnically diverse, and low-resource environments remain unevenly developed, frequently limited by a lack of specialized personnel and a shortage of culturally and linguistically responsive toolkits (Larranaga & Hein, 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, several crucial gaps remain in the literature. First, prior studies have rarely operationalized school counseling as a multi-actor ecosystem involving teachers, students, and parents simultaneously. Second, existing research has seldom modeled the complex interrelationships among stakeholder awareness, teacher competencies, institutional conditions, student difficulties, and perceived effectiveness within a single analytical framework. Third, intervention-oriented evidence remains profoundly scarce in ethnic minority semi-boarded schools where licensed professionals are completely absent.

This study addresses these gaps by conceptualizing school psychological counseling in ethnic minority semi-boarded settings not as a narrow, isolated clinical service, but as a culturally embedded and relationally mediated ecology of support. It contributes to both international and domestic literature by: (1) building an integrated analytical model linking institutional inputs to psychosocial student outcomes; (2) utilizing a multi-informant survey design; (3) investigating an underrepresented educational context in mountainous Northern Vietnam; and (4) providing preliminary empirical data from a low-resource, culturally responsive pilot intervention facilitated entirely by frontline teachers.

Accordingly, this investigation addresses the following research questions:

1. How is school psychological counseling currently implemented in ethnic minority semi-boarded schools in Northern Vietnam?
2. What psychological difficulties do students experience in these school settings?

3. Which factors are associated with counseling implementation and perceived effectiveness?

4. What initial outcomes emerge from a culturally responsive pilot support model?

By addressing these questions, the study provides evidence critical to ongoing educational reforms in Vietnam and informs broader international dialogues regarding equitable, context-sensitive, and resource-efficient school mental health systems in marginalized regions. This study represents a direct continuation of our ongoing research regarding education and cognitive capacity building in the mountainous and ethnic minority regions of Northern Vietnam (Vu, T. B., 2021; 2025).

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a **sequential explanatory mixed-methods design** to investigate the implementation and perceived effectiveness of school psychological counseling in ethnic minority semi-boarded schools in Northern Vietnam. The mixed-methods approach was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of counseling practices, students' psychological needs, contextual challenges, and the outcomes of counseling interventions through the systematic integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence.

The investigation was structured and executed in two distinct, interconnected phases:

- **Phase 1 (Quantitative):** This initial phase focused on assessing the current status of school psychological counseling awareness, measuring implementation practices and specific counseling activities, evaluating teacher counseling competencies and school contextual conditions, and mapping student psychological difficulties along with stakeholder support needs across a broad sample.
- **Phase 2 (Qualitative):** Following the survey, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, structured observations, and stakeholder discussions. This

phase was specifically designed to explain, contextualize, and further elaborate upon the quantitative findings, particularly the observed discrepancies and disconnects between nominal institutional service provision and students' lived experiences of counseling accessibility, trust, and functional utilization in everyday school life.

In addition to the cross-sectional assessment of current practices, the study incorporated a **four-week pilot intervention phase**. A culturally responsive, teacher-led counseling model was developed and implemented within routine school conditions to explore the feasibility, practical applicability, and preliminary short-term psychosocial outcomes of culturally and linguistically responsive support strategies in low-resource and marginalized educational settings. This unified multi-phase framework ensures that the empirical results possess both demographic breadth and interpretive depth, capturing the collaborative and culturally embedded support ecology of the studied environment.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

The study was conducted in 23 ethnic minority semi-boarding schools located in Lao Cai and Lai Chau provinces in Northern Vietnam. These schools were selected because they represent educational settings characterized by cultural diversity, multilingual environments, geographical remoteness, and limited access to specialized psychological support services.

A total of 1,246 participants were involved in the quantitative phase of the study, including 478 teachers and school administrators, 384 students, and 384 parents. Among the teacher and administrator group, 46 participants (9.6%) were school managers and 432 (90.4%) were teachers. Approximately 73.8% had more than ten years of professional experience. The student sample comprised 201 primary school students (52.3%) and 183 lower secondary school students (47.7%). Among parents, 55.7% were farmers and 65.48% had completed lower secondary education. The participating schools served a total student population of 9,013, which constituted the sampling frame for student selection.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling based on school accessibility, administrative approval, and voluntary participation. Although the sampling strategy was non-probabilistic, efforts were made to include diverse stakeholder groups in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of school psychological counseling from multiple perspectives.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was employed to select teachers, students, school leaders, and parents with direct experience in counseling-related activities. Selection criteria emphasized participants' involvement in student support, counseling implementation, and school management processes, enabling deeper exploration of the contextual and cultural factors affecting counseling practices.

The pilot intervention phase involved 40 students who were assigned to experimental and control groups. Prior to implementation, baseline equivalence between groups was examined to ensure comparability on key psychosocial indicators. The intervention was conducted over a four-week period and focused on culturally responsive, teacher-facilitated psychosocial support activities integrated into routine school contexts.

2.3. Instruments

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to assess multiple dimensions of school psychological counseling and psychosocial support in ethnic minority semi-boarding schools. The instrument comprised seven domains: (1) awareness of school psychological counseling, (2) counseling activities and implementation practices, (3) teacher counseling competencies, (4) contextual and institutional conditions, (5) student psychological difficulties, (6) perceived effectiveness of counseling support, and (7) support needs.

Questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies and relevant policy documents on school psychological counseling and student support. The instrument was subsequently contextualized to reflect the linguistic, cultural, and

communication characteristics of ethnic minority students in semi-boarding school settings. All items were measured using Likert-type response scales. In addition to the questionnaire, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, structured observations, and discussions with teachers, school administrators, students, and parents. These instruments were designed to obtain deeper insights into counseling implementation, perceived challenges, cultural considerations, and contextual factors influencing psychosocial support practices. The reliability of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Reliability estimates ranged from .78 to .86 across the major scales, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency. To assess construct validity, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation. The results supported the multidimensional structure of the instrument, with factor loadings exceeding .40 and no substantial cross-loading concerns. These findings provided support for the use of composite scale scores in subsequent analyses.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the contextual adaptation of the measurement instruments, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was not conducted. Future research is recommended to further validate the measurement model across culturally diverse educational contexts.

2.4. Procedure

The study was implemented in several sequential stages following the logic of a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design.

First, the research instruments were developed based on a review of relevant literature, policy documents, and previous studies on school psychological counseling and psychosocial support. The instruments were adapted to the cultural and linguistic characteristics of ethnic minority semi-boarding school settings and were subsequently reviewed prior to administration.

Second, quantitative data were collected from teachers, school administrators, students, and parents across 23 ethnic minority semi-boarding

schools. The survey aimed to examine stakeholders' awareness of school psychological counseling, counseling implementation practices, teacher counseling competencies, contextual conditions, student psychological difficulties, perceived effectiveness of counseling support, and support needs. Third, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, structured observations, and stakeholder discussions. Participants included teachers, school leaders, students, and parents with direct experience in counseling-related activities. This phase was designed to provide deeper insights into the quantitative findings and to explore contextual, cultural, and institutional factors influencing counseling implementation and accessibility. Fourth, a pilot intervention was designed and implemented to examine the feasibility of a culturally responsive and teacher-facilitated counseling model. The intervention involved 40 students who were assigned to experimental and control groups. Prior to implementation, baseline equivalence between groups was examined to ensure comparability. The intervention was conducted over a four-week period and integrated psychosocial support activities into routine classroom practices and school activities.

Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during the interpretation stage. Qualitative evidence was used to explain and contextualize statistical results, while findings from the pilot intervention provided preliminary insights into the practical applicability of culturally responsive counseling approaches in ethnic minority semi-boarding schools.

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were first calculated to summarize the major study variables, including awareness of school

psychological counseling, counseling activities, teacher counseling competencies, contextual conditions, student psychological difficulties, perceived effectiveness, and support needs.

To examine the psychometric properties of the measurement scales, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation. The results were used to evaluate the dimensional structure of the scales and to provide evidence of construct validity. Pearson correlation analysis was subsequently employed to examine bivariate relationships among the principal study variables. Particular attention was given to the associations among stakeholder awareness, teacher counseling competencies, contextual conditions, counseling activities, student psychological difficulties, perceived effectiveness, and support needs. For the pilot intervention component, descriptive pre–post comparisons were conducted to explore patterns of short-term change between the experimental and control groups across targeted psychosocial domains. Given the exploratory nature and limited scale of the intervention, the findings were interpreted as preliminary indicators of potential effectiveness rather than conclusive evidence of intervention impact.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews, observations, and stakeholder discussions were analyzed using thematic coding procedures, including open coding, axial coding, and selective

coding. The qualitative findings were subsequently integrated with the quantitative results to provide contextualized explanations of counseling implementation, accessibility, and effectiveness within ethnic minority semi-boarding schools. This integration enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural, linguistic, and institutional factors shaping psychosocial support practices in the study context.

3. Results

3.1. Awareness of School Psychological Counseling

Levels of awareness regarding school psychological counseling differed significantly across the three stakeholder groups. Teachers and school administrators reported the highest level of awareness ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.63$), followed by parents ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.67$), while students reported the lowest level of awareness ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.69$). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that this difference among the three respondent groups was statistically significant, $F(2, 1243) = 18.72$, $p < .001$, indicating that school psychological counseling was more clearly recognized by stakeholders involved in the organization and observation of school processes than by the students who were expected to access and benefit from counseling support directly.

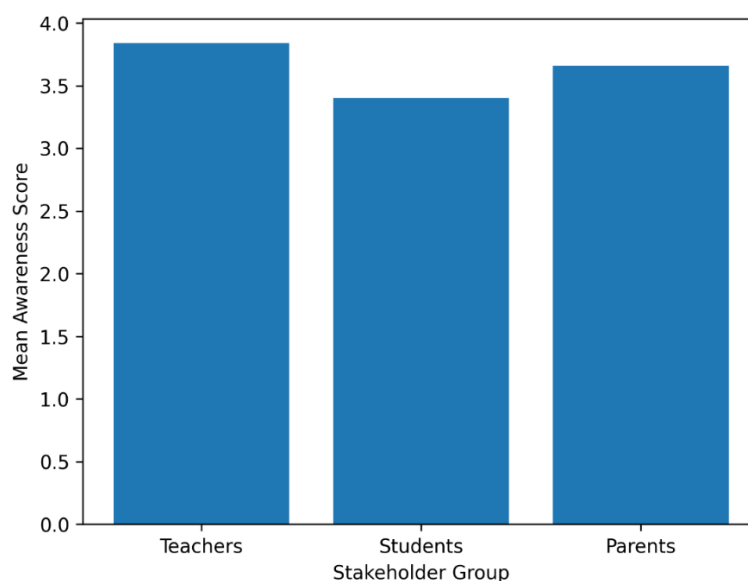


Figure 1. Mean Awareness Score by Stakeholder Group

This statistical pattern indicates a potential disconnect between institutional awareness and students' perceptions of counseling accessibility. Qualitative findings derived from interviews and stakeholder discussions further elucidated this pattern. While school administrators and teachers generally conceptualized school psychological counseling as a necessary, formal, and recognizable component of student support within the educational environment, students experienced these services much more ambiguously. Many students acknowledged that teachers could provide emotional or practical assistance in times of distress; however, they frequently hesitated to identify school counseling as a distinct, approachable, and psychologically safe support mechanism available to them.

Parents likewise recognized the overarching importance of psychological support for their children's well-being, yet many expressed profound uncertainty regarding how formal communication and coordination with schools should occur in practice. Taken together, these mixed-methods findings suggest that while awareness of school psychological counseling was present across all stakeholder groups, it was not equally translated into clarity of access, functional utilization, or relational trust. This discrepancy reinforces the critical analytical

distinction between the formal, nominal existence of counseling activities and students' lived experiences of counseling accessibility within everyday semi-boarding school contexts.

3.2. Organization and Implementation of Counseling Activities

Teachers reported a moderate level of implementation of school psychological counseling activities. The highest-rated indicator was teachers' attention to students' psychological well-being ($M = 3.78$), followed by the existence of counseling activities within schools ($M = 3.58$).

Lower ratings were reported for institutional support conditions, including counseling rooms ($M = 3.12$), counseling materials and guidelines ($M = 3.02$), and access to specialist support services ($M = 2.85$). Student help-seeking behavior was rated at $M = 3.10$.

The most frequently implemented counseling activities reported by teachers were direct teacher–student conversations ($M = 3.37$) and life-skills education activities ($M = 3.30$). Individual counseling ($M = 3.09$) and group counseling ($M = 3.02$) received lower ratings.

Students most frequently reported peer sharing ($M = 3.44$), conversations with teachers ($M = 3.27$), and participation in life-skills activities ($M = 3.24$).

Table 1. Selected indicators of counseling implementation

Indicator	Mean
School has counseling activities	3.58
Dedicated counseling room/space	3.12
Counseling materials/guidelines	3.02
Access to specialist support	2.85
Direct teacher–student counseling exchanges	3.37
Life-skills activities	3.30
Individual counseling	3.09
Group counseling	3.02
Student peer sharing	3.44
Student talks with teachers	3.27

Interview and observation data indicated that support was commonly provided through

classroom interactions, class meetings, after-class conversations, and life-skills activities.

3.3. Teacher Counseling Competencies

Teachers reported moderate to moderately high levels of counseling competencies.

The highest mean scores were observed for listening and understanding skills ($M = 3.68$) and questioning skills ($M = 3.42$). Lower scores were reported for identifying at-risk students ($M = 3.18$), coordinating with parents and stakeholders ($M = 3.24$), organizing counseling activities ($M = 3.24$), and adapting support practices to cultural and social contexts ($M = 3.18$).

Qualitative data showed that teachers were generally perceived as approachable and supportive in daily school interactions.

3.4. Student Psychological Difficulties

Across all three respondent groups, the two most prominent student psychological difficulties identified were language barriers and academic pressure. Teachers rated language barriers at $M =$

3.70 and academic pressure at $M = 3.69$, while students reported corresponding mean scores of $M = 3.66$ and $M = 3.62$, respectively. Parents similarly identified these difficulties as highly salient, with mean scores of $M = 3.62$ for language barriers and $M = 3.58$ for academic pressure. Additional difficulties reported with high consistency across all groups included a reluctance to share personal concerns, difficulties in emotional expression, peer conflict, and homesickness associated with living away from family in the semi-boarding context. The structural alignment of these findings across teachers, students, and parents is analytically significant. It suggests that these challenges were not isolated perceptions confined to a single stakeholder group, but were instead recurring, socially recognized, and systemic features of students' psychosocial experiences within ethnic minority semi-boarding schools.

Table 2. Student psychological difficulties by respondent group

Difficulty	Teachers	Students	Parents
Academic pressure	3.69	3.62	3.58
Peer conflict	3.51	3.45	3.42
Reluctance to share	3.61	3.54	3.50
Difficulty expressing emotions	3.53	3.47	3.45
Language barriers / difficulty using Vietnamese	3.70	3.66	3.62
Homesickness	3.60	3.54	3.50

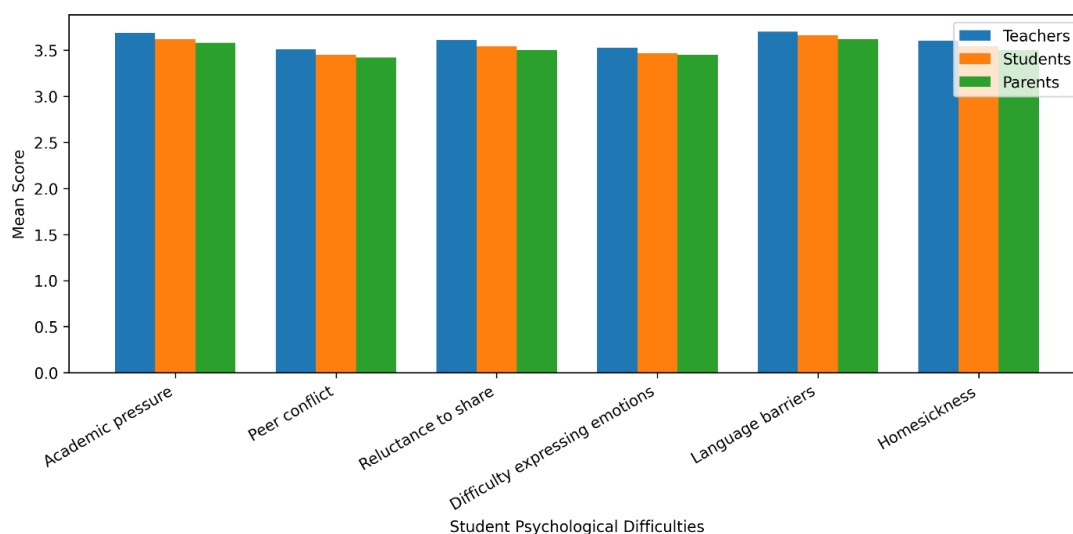


Figure 2. Student psychological difficulties reported by teachers, students, and parents.

Qualitative findings derived from interviews and structured observations further illuminated the nuanced and interconnected nature of these psychological difficulties. Many students described a profound hesitation to speak in class or disclose personal concerns to school staff. This reticence was deeply rooted in limited Vietnamese language proficiency, a pervasive fear of public embarrassment, and concern about negative peer evaluation. In this context, language emerged not merely as a neutral medium of academic instruction, but as a primary structural condition for emotional expression, relational disclosure, and help-seeking behavior.

Furthermore, teachers reported that students' emotional distress was rarely identified through explicit verbal disclosure; instead, it was most frequently recognized indirectly through observable behavioral shifts, such as sudden social withdrawal, reduced classroom participation, and declining academic engagement.

Interviews with parents clarified another dimension of the semi-boarded ecology. While parents frequently observed homesickness, emotional restraint, and adjustment difficulties during home visits, many acknowledged having extremely limited day-to-day access to their children's school-based emotional experiences due to the physical separation imposed by the semi-boarded system and the vast geographical distances between their villages and the schools.

Taken together, these mixed-methods results indicate that student psychological difficulties in ethnic minority semi-boarded schools are simultaneously academic, emotional, linguistic, social, and relational in nature. Rather than representing isolated individual or clinical problems, students' psychosocial distress is closely intertwined with broader communication barriers, institutional boarding-school adjustment demands, and culturally mediated patterns of social interaction within the educational environment.

3.5. Associations Among Awareness, Teacher Competencies, Counseling Activities, and Student Outcomes

Pearson correlation analyses revealed significant associations among the principal study variables.

Teacher counseling competencies showed the strongest positive association with counseling activities ($r = .62, p < .001$), followed by stakeholder awareness ($r = .58, p < .001$) and contextual conditions ($r = .55, p < .001$).

Counseling activities were negatively associated with student psychological difficulties ($r = -.44, p < .001$).

Student psychological difficulties were positively associated with counseling support needs ($r = .57, p < .001$).

Perceived effectiveness was positively associated with counseling support needs ($r = .52, p < .001$).

Table 3. **Correlations among key study variables**

Variable pair	r	p
Awareness – Counseling activities	.58	< .001
Teacher skills – Counseling activities	.62	< .001
Contextual factors – Counseling activities	.55	< .001
Counseling activities – Student difficulties	-.44	< .001
Student difficulties – Counseling needs	.57	< .001
Perceived effectiveness – Counseling needs	.52	< .001

3.6. Pilot Intervention Effects

The four-week pilot intervention produced positive, observable short-term changes across all targeted psychosocial domains within the experimental group. Quantitative tracking indicated that mean scores for emotional sharing increased markedly from 2.8 to 4.0, help-seeking behavior rose from 2.5 to 3.8, understanding of the counseling role improved from 3.1 to 4.2, peer communication enhanced from 2.7 to 3.9, and confidence in emotional expression developed from 2.6 to 3.7. In stark contrast, the

control group demonstrated only minimal, statistically negligible changes across the same indicators during the identical intervention period.

These quantitative trajectories suggest that the culturally responsive and teacher-facilitated support model was highly feasible under routine school conditions and was directly associated with improvements in students' psychosocial engagement, emotional communication, and willingness to seek help.

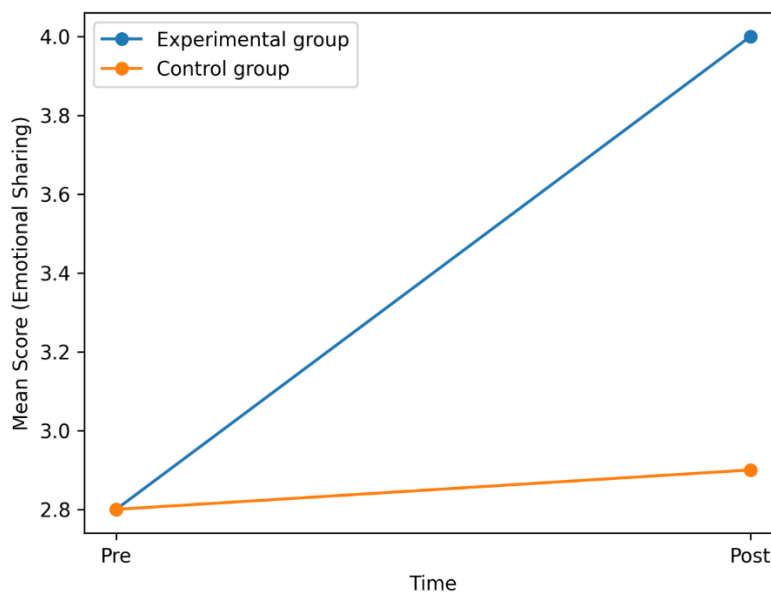


Figure 3. Pre-post changes in emotional sharing between experimental and control groups.

Qualitative findings derived from post-intervention interviews, observations, and stakeholder discussions strongly reinforced and enriched these preliminary quantitative patterns. Teachers reported that by embedding interactive, participatory psychosocial support activities into regular classroom routines rather than organizing them as separate, clinical counseling sessions, the barrier of psychological stigma was substantially reduced. Consequently, ethnic minority students became increasingly willing to participate in classroom-based emotional support activities and displayed significantly greater openness in day-to-day interactions with both their teachers and peers.

During qualitative interviews, students themselves described a heightened sense of comfort and relational safety when expressing

personal concerns, discussing sensitive emotional experiences, and actively seeking help when encountering academic or interpersonal difficulties within the school environment. Furthermore, despite the physical and geographical distance inherent in the semi-boarding context, several parents observed modest but meaningful improvements in communication, emotional openness, and relational warmth within home interactions during weekend family visits following the intervention period.

Taken together, these mixed-methods findings suggest that integrating low-resource, culturally responsive, and relationally embedded psychosocial support activities directly into routine educational practices can effectively strengthen students' emotional participation and

help-seeking behaviors in under-resourced ethnic minority school settings. The results of the pre-post comparison point toward meaningful initial improvements in students' social and emotional competencies following the intervention.

However, from an academic and methodological standpoint, given the exploratory design of this component, the relatively brief four-week duration of the implementation, and the limited sample size ($n = 40$), these positive outcomes must be interpreted cautiously. They should be treated as preliminary indicators of contextual feasibility and initial promise rather than definitive or generalizable evidence of long-term intervention effectiveness. Consequently, further longitudinal, rigorously controlled, and larger-scale experimental studies remain essential to thoroughly evaluate the sustainability, scalability, and broader institutional impact of culturally responsive school counseling interventions across diverse, multilingual, and resource-constrained educational environments.

4. Discussion

The present study advances the international literature on school psychological counseling by providing empirical evidence from ethnic minority semi-boarding schools in Northern Vietnam—a unique educational context characterized by intersecting linguistic diversity, structural resource constraints, and geographical isolation. By operationalizing an integrated, multi-informant mixed-methods design, the findings offer a significant reconceptualization of school counseling in marginalized settings. Rather than evaluating counseling solely through the lens of highly professionalized, distinct clinical services common in resource-rich Western contexts, this study demonstrates that effective psychosocial support in under-resourced environments operates fundamentally as a culturally embedded and relationally mediated ecology of support. A central theoretical contribution of this study is the empirical documentation of the critical gap between school counseling as a nominal institutional practice and its functional accessibility as a support function. Quantitative

results indicated that while school leaders and teachers reported high administrative awareness and moderate implementation of counseling activities, students exhibited significantly lower levels of awareness and active help-seeking behavior ($M = 3.40$ and $M = 3.10$, respectively). This alignment with previous global scholarship emphasizes that the mere structural presence of school-based mental health programs—even when mandated by macro-level policies such as Circular 31/2017/TT-BGDĐT—does not automatically guarantee that vulnerable student populations perceive them as safe, trustworthy, or accessible. In multilingual and ethnically diverse environments, a student's willingness to disclose deep-seated psychological distress is heavily mediated by language barriers, socio-cultural norms regarding emotional restraint, and the degree of relational trust established with the provider. Therefore, this study argues that "access" to mental health support must be redefined from a simple administrative metric (the presence of a counseling room) to a dynamic, relationally and culturally negotiated process.

Interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Erikson's (1968) psychosocial developmental framework, the findings elucidate how student psychological difficulties are structurally and culturally constructed within the semi-boarding ecosystem. Across teachers, students, and parents, language barriers ($M = 3.70, 3.66, \text{ and } 3.62$) and academic pressure ($M = 3.69, 3.62, \text{ and } 3.58$) consistently emerged as the most salient sources of distress. This multidimensional distress underscores that language proficiency in minority contexts is not merely an academic or cognitive tool, but a fundamental condition for emotional survival, self-advocacy, and psychological disclosure. When students lack fluency in the dominant language of instruction (Vietnamese), their capacity to express complex emotions or seek formal help is severely compromised, leading to the social withdrawal and emotional reticence captured in our qualitative data. This finding carries broader international relevance for multilingual educational systems where minority students' mental health needs are frequently

masked by language-related barriers to communication.

Furthermore, the robust positive correlation observed between teacher counseling competencies and counseling activities ($r = .62$) underscores the pivotal role of educators as frontline psychosocial responders. In resource-constrained environments where specialized psychiatrists or licensed school counselors are completely absent, teachers' interpersonal capacities—specifically listening and empathetic questioning—function as a necessary substitute for formal institutional structures rather than a mere complement. However, our findings also reveal a critical vulnerability in this model: teachers scored lowest on culturally adaptive practices and systemic stakeholder coordination ($M = 3.18$ and 3.24). This indicates that while informal relational warmth is abundant, systematic multicultural competence remains underdeveloped. Relying solely on teacher initiative without providing structured, culturally responsive guidelines risks making support highly fragmented, volatile, and unsustainable over time. This aligns with recent national observations emphasizing that expanding teacher capacity must go hand-in-hand with creating enabling, structured institutional environments (Vu & Phung, 2025).

To address these systemic vulnerabilities, this study proposes a context-sensitive, systems-oriented framework that conceptualizes effective school counseling in low-resource, culturally diverse settings across three interrelated dimensions:

1. **Distributed Implementation:** Psychosocial support cannot be confined to an isolated, specialized counseling office. Instead, it must be strategically distributed across routine classroom interactions, homeroom class meetings, and everyday educational activities led by trained teachers.
2. **Functional Accessibility:** Educational institutions must ensure that the linguistic, cultural, and relational conditions of the school environment actively minimize the stigma of

help-seeking, making support genuinely usable and trusted by the student population.

3. **Contextual Adaptability:** All counseling frameworks and toolkits must be dynamically aligned with local institutional constraints, language proficiencies, and the specific socio-cultural realities of the communities they serve.

The short-term success of our four-week pilot intervention provides preliminary, exploratory evidence for the utility of this three-dimensional model. The observed gains in students' emotional sharing, help-seeking, and peer communication within the experimental group suggest that embedding low-resource, participatory, and culturally responsive psychosocial exercises into routine school days can effectively bypass the stigma associated with clinical therapy. By utilizing familiar educational relationships, the intervention fostered a micro-ecosystem of relational safety that significantly enhanced students' social-emotional engagement. This reinforces previous arguments that specialized pedagogical interventions tailored to the cultural and geographic context of mountainous regions are vital for fostering student capacity and resilience (Vu, T. B., 2025).

4.1. Practical Implications

The empirical and theoretical insights yielded by this study generate clear imperatives for educational policy and reform in Vietnam and comparable international contexts. First, macro-level educational policies must shift from mandating nominal counseling rooms to investing heavily in grass-roots teacher capacity building, specifically focusing on multicultural counseling efficacy and basic psychological first aid. Second, pre-service teacher training curricula should integrate core counseling competencies as a standard requirement. Third, because semi-boarding school students suffer intense homesickness and separation strain, structured communication and coordination mechanisms between geographically remote parents and schools must be formalized to create a continuous web of family-school support.

4.2. Limitations and Future Research

Several methodological limitations must be accounted for when interpreting these results. First, the cross-sectional quantitative survey is correlational in design and precludes any definitive causal inferences among awareness, competencies, and student outcomes. Second, the pilot intervention component was strictly exploratory, implemented over a brief four-week duration, and utilized a small sample size ($n = 40$), which inherently limits the external generalizability of its findings. Third, the substantial reliance on self-reported questionnaires introduces potential social desirability and response biases. To build upon this study, future research should employ rigorous longitudinal tracking and large-scale cluster-randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to definitively assess the causal impact, long-term sustainability, and scalability of culturally responsive, teacher-facilitated psychosocial models across diverse ethnic minority regions.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the implementation and perceived effectiveness of school psychological counseling in ethnic minority semi-boarding schools in Northern Vietnam. The findings indicate that school psychological counseling in these settings is available but remains only partially institutionalized, relying primarily on teacher-led and relationship-based support practices embedded within everyday school activities. The study identified language barriers, academic pressure, emotional restraint, reluctance to seek help, and homesickness as the most prominent psychological difficulties experienced by students. These challenges appear to be closely associated with the linguistic, cultural, and boarding-related conditions that

characterize ethnic minority semi-boarding schools. In addition, teacher counseling competencies emerged as the strongest factor associated with counseling implementation, highlighting the pivotal role of teachers in providing psychosocial support where specialist counseling services are limited. The findings further suggest that effective school psychological counseling depends not only on the existence of counseling activities but also on students' ability to access, trust, and engage with available support. Counseling implementation was influenced by the combined effects of teacher competencies, stakeholder awareness, and contextual support conditions, underscoring the importance of a systems-oriented approach to student psychosocial support. The pilot intervention provided preliminary evidence that culturally responsive and teacher-facilitated counseling activities can promote students' emotional sharing, help-seeking behavior, peer communication, and confidence in emotional expression. Although exploratory in nature, these results indicate the potential value of integrating low-resource psychosocial support strategies into routine educational practice. Overall, this study contributes empirical evidence from an underrepresented educational context and supports a context-sensitive understanding of school psychological counseling in culturally diverse and resource-constrained environments. The findings suggest that strengthening counseling services in ethnic minority semi-boarding schools requires not only policy support but also sustained investment in teacher capacity, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative school-family support systems. Future research should further examine the long-term effectiveness of counseling interventions and test the proposed framework across diverse educational contexts.

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8. Author Declaration

The authors declare that this manuscript is an original work and has not been published previously, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. All authors have made substantial contributions to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and preparation of the manuscript and have approved the final version for publication.

The authors further declare that all sources used in this study have been appropriately acknowledged and cited in accordance with academic and ethical standards.

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. No financial, personal, or professional relationships have influenced the research process, data interpretation, or reporting of findings.