

## Understanding student coping with school violence: A comparative study of primary and secondary education in Vietnam



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 3 December 2025

Received in revised form

15 April 2026

Accepted 4 May 2026

#### Keywords:

School violence

Coping behaviors

Primary and secondary students

Help-seeking behavior

Vietnam

### ABSTRACT

This study examined how primary and secondary school students in Vietnam respond to witnessing or experiencing school violence, with a focus on developmental differences. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 690 students (300 primary and 390 secondary) from Bac Kan, An Giang, and Quang Binh provinces. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with a 4-point Likert scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS. The findings showed that primary school students tended to use more passive strategies; although most reported not remaining idle (70.3%) or walking away (66.6%), only 33.5% reported incidents to teachers. Among victims, most stated they did not cry or plead (92.6%) and did not suffer in silence (81.1%). In contrast, secondary school students demonstrated more proactive responses: 54.4% often tried to prevent violence, 66.2% informed a teacher or adult, and 61.8% sought help from a homeroom teacher or Youth Union leader, although use of formal support services remained limited (49.5%). Overall, clear developmental differences were identified, with primary students relying more on passive strategies and secondary students engaging more in help-seeking and preventive actions, highlighting the need for age-appropriate and culturally sensitive interventions.

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### 1. Introduction

School violence is a widespread social and educational problem that endangers the safety, well-being, and academic achievement of millions of children worldwide (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). It can emerge in several forms, including physical hostility, bullying, psychological intimidation, sexual harassment, and cyberbullying, with students acting as perpetrators, victims, or bystanders. Approximately one in three students globally has experienced bullying, leading to lasting impacts on mental health, academic engagement, and social relationships (Halliday et al., 2021; Han et al., 2025). Victims may display heightened levels of melancholy, anxiety, and psychosomatic disorders, while spectators may experience distress, fear, or guilt for not intervening. School violence negatively affects individuals and undermines the general educational

atmosphere, so it is recognized as a public health and educational priority.

School violence in Vietnam has become a substantial concern for educators, legislators, and parents. Recent research reveals that physical bullying and verbal harassment continue to exist in elementary and secondary schools, despite national campaigns promoting "Schools Without Violence" (Mooij, 2005; Wang et al., 2009). The Vietnamese cultural context shapes children's experiences and responses to violence. Traditional values of respect for authority, collectivism, and familial honor may deter children from reporting incidents, particularly if disclosure is perceived as a cause of shame for their families. Furthermore, despite Vietnam's implementation of child protection hotlines and school counseling programs, accessibility is still patchy, especially in remote or resource-constrained regions. Many educational institutions lack experienced psychological counselors, and children may be unaware of or reluctant to utilize the available resources (Nguyen et al., 2013). This raises questions regarding the coping strategies employed by Vietnamese kids in reaction to violence and whether these strategies differ according to developmental stages.

Studies on coping mechanisms indicate that children's reactions to violence change as they

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<https://doi.org/10.21833/ijaas.2026.05.005>

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mature and develop cognitively. Primary school students, in the nascent phases of socio-emotional development, frequently exhibit avoidant or passive actions, like disregarding the issue, weeping, or remaining mute. These replies align with [Piaget's \(2013\)](#) theories of moral and cognitive development, suggesting that younger children predominantly depend on concrete thinking, self-preservation, and authority-based reasoning. Conversely, secondary school students, especially adolescents who exhibit enhanced abilities in abstract thinking, empathy, and moral reasoning, which empower them to employ constructive strategies such as soliciting assistance from teachers, reporting incidents, or advocating for peers ([Noddings and Brooks, 2017](#)). [Nguyen-Thi et al. \(2024\)](#) found that peer pressure, educational stress, and academic performance are interrelated factors shaping high school students' willingness to seek professional psychological help. These developmental disparities are significant as they influence whether youngsters remain passive observers or evolve into proactive players in mitigating violence.

Observers markedly affect the outcomes of school violence. Research repeatedly indicates that when bystanders intervene, by offering comfort to victims, alerting teachers, or preventing aggression, the likelihood of escalating violence significantly decreases ([Coker and Clear, 2014](#)). Conversely, when bystanders display passivity, abstain from involvement, or implicitly support aggressors, they sustain a culture of silence and impunity. While many international studies have investigated spectator roles in Western contexts, there is limited comprehension of how children in Asian settings, such as Vietnam, perceive and enact these roles. Given Vietnam's collectivist culture and emphasis on social peace, students may encounter a dilemma between protecting their friends and avoiding confrontation. The analysis of spectator behavior is especially relevant to understanding school violence in Vietnam.

The strategies for coping of victims differ significantly, affecting both psychological resilience and institutional response. Certain children employ internalizing methods, such as withdrawal or quietness, which may shield them from immediate injury but elevate the risk of long-term psychological discomfort. Some individuals utilize externalizing methods, such as retaliation or vengeance, which can intensify conflict and sustain cycles of violence. Constructive solutions, like soliciting assistance from educators, family, or formal services, correlate with improved long-term outcomes but are affected by students' trust in authority, school atmosphere, and cultural expectations ([Knoester et al., 2025](#)). Research indicates that in several Asian contexts, adolescents inadequately utilize formal programs due to apprehensions regarding confidentiality, stigma, or perceived ineffectiveness ([Chiang et al., 2022](#)). Comprehending the degree to which Vietnamese students utilize these tactics is crucial for developing culturally attuned treatments.

Although worldwide research has identified developmental discrepancies in addressing school violence, empirical evidence from Vietnam is still inadequate. A considerable number of contemporary research studies focus on the prevalence rates of violence rather than on students' coping strategies or bystander participation. Given the unique cultural, social, and institutional dynamics of Vietnam, one cannot assume that trends observed in Western contexts are immediately relevant to Vietnamese educational institutions. Furthermore, scant studies have examined the distinctions between primary and secondary students, leading to an inadequacy in comprehending the development of coping strategies across age cohorts in this context.

This study examines the reactions of elementary and secondary school students in three Vietnamese regions to school violence, focusing on their experiences as both spectators and victims. This study investigates the extent to which children employ passive, avoidant, retaliatory, or constructive coping strategies, and whether these change significantly by developmental stage. This research improves the understanding of the developmental and cultural dimensions of school violence by highlighting both similarities and differences among age groups. The findings are expected to inform age-appropriate, culturally sensitive interventions that empower children, improve institutional responses, and reduce the incidence and effects of school violence in Vietnam.

## 2. Methodology

The study involved 690 participants, comprising 300 elementary school pupils and 390 secondary school students from three provinces in Vietnam: Bac Kan, An Giang, and Quang Binh. The sample size was deemed sufficient to ensure representativeness and comparability among several demographic groups, including gender, grade level, and provincial distribution ([Table 1](#)).

**Table 1:** Overview of participants

Characteristics		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Primary student</b>			
Gender	Boy	131	43.7
	Girl	167	55.7
	Others	2	0.7
Grade	Grade 4	54	18.0
	Grade 5	246	82.0
Province	Bac Kan	100	33.3
	An Giang	100	33.3
	Quang Binh	100	33.3
Total	300	100.0	
<b>Secondary student</b>			
Gender	Boy	197	50.5
	Girl	190	48.7
	Others	3	0.8
Grade	Grade 6	143	36.7
	Grade 7	133	34.1
	Grade 8	80	20.5
	Grade 9	34	8.7
	Bac Kan	130	33.3
Province	An Giang	134	34.4
	Quang Binh	126	32.3
Total	390	100.0	

The primary student group comprised 300 pupils, nearly evenly divided by gender, albeit with a slight majority of girls. In all, 131 students (43.7%) were boys, 167 students (55.7%) were girls, and 2 students (0.7%) identified as non-binary. This gender balance offered a comprehensive view of any disparities in experiences or reactions between male and female students. A lesser percentage of the sample consisted of Grade 4 pupils, totaling 54 (18.0%), but the bulk were in Grade 5, with 246 individuals (82.0%). This indicates a focus on older elementary kids who are perhaps more capable of expressing their experiences. The sample was deliberately balanced throughout the three provinces in terms of geographical dispersion. Bac Kan, An Giang, and Quang Binh each sent 100 students (33.3%), ensuring equitable representation from various areas of Vietnam. The secondary school cohort consisted of 390 participants, with an almost equal gender distribution. In this cohort, 197 students (50.5%) were boys, 190 students (48.7%) were girls, and 3 students (0.8%) identified as other genders. This distribution underscores equitable gender representation, essential for discerning any gender-based disparities in psychological, social, or academic results. Students were selected from four grade levels, with the most substantial cohorts in Grade 6 and Grade 7. A total of 143 kids (36.7%) were enrolled in Grade 6, 133 students (34.1%) in Grade 7, 80 students (20.5%) in Grade 8, and 34 students (8.7%) in Grade 9. This indicates that the sample predominantly favored the younger secondary grades while still encompassing the entire lower secondary school spectrum. Similar to the primary school participation, the secondary student cohort exhibited geographical diversity, albeit with small disparities among provinces. Bac Kan comprised 130 students (33.3%), An Giang comprised 134 students (34.4%), and Quang Binh had 126 students (32.3%).

Participants originally provided demographic information, including gender (male, female, or other), grade level (Grades 4–5 for primary students and Grades 6–9 for secondary students), and province (Bac Kan, An Giang, or Quang Binh). These parameters were utilized to define the sample characteristics and to ensure comparability among groups throughout the analysis of the results.

A compilation of items was derived from recognized surveys on bullying and peer aggression to assess student behaviors in reaction to school violence. This study evaluated the prevalence of student engagement in several strategies, including attempting to prevent violence, assisting aggressors, endorsing violent conduct, notifying instructors or adults, helping victims, remaining passive, or retreating to avoid involvement. For example, the items included statements such as “When I witness someone being assaulted, I strive to intervene” and “When I face violence, I adopt a passive stance.” Responses were assessed on a four-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = Never, 2 = Seldom, 3 = Sometimes, and 4 = Usually, with higher scores signifying

increased frequency of the designated approach. Each item was analyzed individually to assess the variety in students' bystander responses.

The coping strategies of students who experienced school violence were assessed using a different set of items derived from established victimization response instruments. The items illustrated a spectrum of coping strategies, encompassing constructive methods (e.g., maintaining composure and seeking clarification, calling for assistance, notifying educators, or reaching out to formal services like the child protection hotline), avoidant tactics (e.g., evading confrontation or remaining disengaged), emotion-focused reactions (e.g., weeping, pleading, or acquiescing to aggressors' demands), and retaliatory measures (e.g., counterattacking or informing friends or family to pursue vengeance). Similar to bystander reactions, all items were evaluated using a uniform four-point Likert scale, ranging from Never to Usually.

The study was carried out during the 2024–2025 academic year in three provinces of Vietnam: Bac Kan, An Giang, and Quang Binh. Before data collection commenced, approval was obtained from the Departments of Education and Training, along with the participating schools. Parents or guardians provided informed consent, and children conveyed verbal assent prior to participation. All participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous and confidential, and that participation was completely optional. Data were collected in classroom settings during regular school hours. Research assistants distributed the paper-based questionnaires, while teachers supervised without interference. At the beginning of each session, the research assistants articulated the study's objective using clear and age-appropriate language, highlighted the lack of correct or incorrect answers, and guided children on the use of the four-point Likert-type response scale. The survey administration was succinct, taking approximately 5 to 10 minutes per class. Students autonomously completed the questionnaires at their desks, with research assistants available to clarify instructions as needed. Completed surveys were swiftly gathered to maintain anonymity, and no identifying information, such as names or student ID numbers, was recorded. To enhance participants' well-being, children were notified at the conclusion of the survey that they could seek assistance from teachers, parents, or the school's counseling services if they had encountered or observed violence. Contact details for the national Child Protection Hotline (111) were provided to ensure the availability of support resources.

All data were processed and analyzed utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 20.0 or superior. Before processing, all questionnaires were examined for completeness and precision. Responses containing absent or erroneous data were omitted to guarantee the validity of the results. Due to the study's descriptive objective, only

frequency analysis was utilized. Frequencies and percentages were computed for each question to demonstrate the frequency with which students reported engaging in specific behaviors when observing or experiencing school violence. The descriptive statistics facilitated a clear presentation of the prevalence and distribution of coping techniques among the participants.

### 3. Results

Table 2 summarizes the reactions of primary school pupils who witness or experience school violence. When students observed incidences of school violence, the predominant reaction was inaction, with 70.3% of students indicating they never intervened, followed by 20.9% who seldom intervened, and a small percentage (5.7% occasionally; 3.0% frequently) who stayed inactive. A significant proportion of students indicated that they refrained from participation by disengaging and allowing their classmates to resolve the issue independently (66.6% never; 23.3% occasionally). Conversely, hardly a minority indicated support for violent actions (91.2% never; 5.1% infrequently; 2.0% occasionally; 1.7% generally), implying that the active endorsement of violence was seldom. Less frequent reports were made regarding more constructive initiatives. For example, 33.5% of pupils typically reported their teachers, whereas 27.0% generally alerted a teacher or other adult during an event. Furthermore, 24.7% typically assisted injured peers by treating wounds, whilst 22.0% commonly endeavored to avert the escalation of violence.

Assisting bullies in retaliating was seldom (55.4% never; 18.6% rarely; 16.2% occasionally; 9.8% frequently).

Upon inquiry regarding their responses to experiencing violence, pupils indicated a combination of passive and active coping mechanisms. The predominant passive techniques were crying or begging (92.6% never; just 0.3% regularly) and enduring in quiet (81.1% never; 13.5% seldom; 4.4% sometimes; 1.0% usually). Seeking retribution by notifying close friends or family was infrequent (85.8% never; 8.4% rarely). In contrast, proactive tactics were relatively more prevalent. Approximately 37.2% never and 19.3% typically notified parents or family for assistance, whereas 29.0% never and 25.7% usually consulted with a homeroom teacher, Youth Union leader, or Team leader. Likewise, 11.5% typically sought assistance from school counseling services, and 9.5% generally contacted the child safety hotline (111), while the majority of students indicated they had never utilized these official resources (65.5% never phoned the hotline; 52.7% never accessed counseling services). Regarding immediate reactions to incidents, 37.8% never called for assistance, whereas 19.3% typically did. Approximately 21.3% of students indicated that they typically remained composed and requested their peers to elucidate their aggressive conduct. Conversely, 60.1% did not retaliate, whereas 12.2% typically engaged in retribution and sought assistance. Avoidance was a prevalent strategy, with 63.2% never and only 4.4% usually trying to avoid the situation.

**Table 2:** Primary school students' responses when witnessing or being victims of school violence

No.	Activities	Frequency			
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Usually
<b>Witnessing school violence</b>					
1	Prevent	25.3	26.7	26.0	22.0
2	Help bullies/violence fight back	55.4	18.6	16.2	9.8
3	Encourage people to commit violent acts	91.2	5.1	2.0	1.7
4	Call, find a way to notify the teacher or a nearby adult	30.1	21.6	21.3	27.0
5	Help a beaten friend treat their wounds or clean up	28.7	28.0	18.6	24.7
6	Tell your teacher about the incident	19.6	23.6	23.3	33.5
7	Stand by and do nothing	70.3	20.9	5.7	3.0
8	Find a way to get away from it so you don't get involved and don't interfere; let them solve their own problems	66.6	23.3	7.1	3.0
<b>When you are a victim</b>					
9	Stay calm and ask your partner to explain why he or she is being violent towards you	30.7	20.3	27.7	21.3
10	Find a way to avoid	63.2	20.9	11.5	4.4
11	Shout out to seek support from others around	37.8	23.3	19.6	19.3
12	Fight back fiercely, call for more support	60.1	18.2	9.5	12.2
13	Quickly meet your homeroom teacher or the leader of the Youth Union or Team to seek support	29.0	22.0	23.3	25.7
14	Call the child protection hotline 111	65.5	14.9	10.1	9.5
15	Meet with the school psychology counseling room or the school board for intervention and resolution	52.7	24.3	11.5	11.5
16	Inform parents and family of support	37.2	22.6	20.9	19.3
17	Inform close friends or family members to seek revenge	85.8	8.4	3.4	2.4
18	Cry, beg, do as the other person asks	92.6	5.4	1.7	0.3
19	Do nothing, suffer in silence	81.1	13.5	4.4	1.0

The data indicate that primary school pupils primarily employ passive or avoidance methods in response to school violence, regardless of whether they are spectators or victims. A minority of kids

participate in constructive help-seeking or intervention actions (e.g., notifying instructors or family), and dependence on official protective mechanisms like counseling services or hotlines

remains minor. Table 3 displays the responses of secondary school pupils who both witness and experience school violence. The majority of secondary school pupils, when queried about their responses to observing school violence, said that they participated in proactive, constructive acts instead of adopting a passive stance. Over half of the students (54.4% often; 24.6% occasionally) reported that they endeavored to avert violent behaviors, whilst merely 10.5% stated they never attempted to intervene. Likewise, informing teachers or adjacent adults was prevalent, with 66.2% typically and

20.0% occasionally participating in this action, while merely 6.2% refrained from doing so. In contrast, passive actions like inaction were infrequent, with 78.5% never remaining inactive and only 2.3% typically doing so. Avoidance was relatively prevalent, with 67.9% never engaging, while 15.4% seldom and 11.8% occasionally opted to disengage to evade interaction. Incitement to violence was exceedingly uncommon, with 94.6% indicating they had never engaged in such actions, and a minimal fraction (1.5% typically) acknowledging such activity.

**Table 3:** Secondary school students' responses when witnessing or being victims of school violence

No.	Activities	Frequency			
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Usually
<b>Witnessing school violence</b>					
1	Prevent	10.5	10.5	24.6	54.4
2	Help bullies/violence fight back	62.1	15.6	12.1	10.3
3	Encourage people to commit violent acts	94.6	2.6	1.3	1.5
4	Call, find a way to notify the teacher or a nearby adult	6.2	7.7	20.0	66.2
5	Stand by and do nothing	78.5	13.1	6.2	2.3
6	Find a way to get away from it so you don't get involved and don't interfere; let them solve their own problems	67.9	15.4	11.8	4.9
<b>When you are a victim of school violence</b>					
9	Stay calm and ask your partner to explain why he or she is being violent towards you	10.8	12.1	23.1	54.1
10	Find a way to avoid	72.3	13.6	9.2	4.9
11	Shout loudly to seek support from others around, and go to a crowded place to protect yourself	11.3	12.3	20.0	56.4
12	Fight back fiercely, call on more friends to support you in the fight back, and do not let yourself be disadvantaged	73.6	9.2	10.8	6.4
13	Quickly meet your homeroom teacher or the leader of the Youth Union or Team to seek support	5.1	7.7	25.4	61.8
14	Call the child protection hotline 111, or meet with the school psychological counseling department, or the school's Board of Directors for intervention and resolution	20.0	14.4	16.2	49.5
15	Notify parents and family for support	41.5	9.7	19.7	29.0
16	Inform close friends or family members to seek revenge	81.8	7.4	5.9	4.9
17	Cry, beg, do as the other person asks	88.2	7.2	2.8	1.8
18	Do nothing, suffer in silence	85.9	6.4	4.9	2.8

Secondary pupils who experienced school violence indicated proactive coping mechanisms more frequently than primary students. A majority of participants indicated they would remain composed and request clarification from the attacker, with 54.1% typically and 23.1% occasionally employing this strategy. Likewise, 56.4% typically cried for assistance or relocated to a populated area, whereas merely 11.3% never engaged in such behavior. A notable support-seeking behavior involved reaching out to a teacher or Youth Union leader, with 61.8% frequently and 25.4% occasionally participating in this action. Formal support services were utilized more extensively by older pupils than by younger students. Approximately 49.5% of the sample indicated they would contact the child safety hotline (111) or consult with the school's psychological counseling department or Board of Directors, while just 20.0% admitted never doing so. Notifying parents or family members was quite prevalent, with 29.0% typically and 19.7% occasionally undertaking this action, while 41.5% indicated they never informed their relatives. Retaliatory or passive techniques were far less prevalent. 73.6% never retaliated vigorously, while merely 6.4% typically did. Similarly, 81.8% did

not pursue retribution via friends or family, and 85.9% did not endure in silence. Instances of crying or begging were rare, with 88.2% of individuals never participating in such behavior, while only 1.8% doing so regularly.

Secondary school students exhibited a heightened dependence on constructive and help-seeking strategies relative to primary school students. The data suggest that these older pupils were more inclined to actively deter violence, inform teachers, and utilize formal protective measures, while exhibiting reduced tendencies toward passivity, silence, or revenge-seeking. The findings underscore developmental disparities in coping techniques, indicating that older kids are more adept or inclined to employ proactive methods when faced with school violence (Table 3).

#### 4. Discussion

This study analyzed the responses of primary and secondary school children who witnessed or experienced school violence. The findings indicated distinct developmental disparities, with younger children favoring avoidance and passive techniques,

whereas older students had a greater propensity for proactive and help-seeking behaviors.

#### 4.1. Witnessing school violence

The findings reveal a significant disparity in the responses of students in primary and secondary schools when observing peer aggression. Elementary school pupils had a pronounced inclination towards passive or avoidant tactics, predominantly opting to remain inactive or physically distancing themselves from the event. These trends are unsurprising, as younger children frequently lack the emotional regulation and social problem-solving abilities required to properly intervene in hostile situations (Matthys and Schutter, 2022).

The apprehension of retribution may further inhibit their actions, especially in environments characterized by robust peer hierarchies where aggressors possess social authority. From a developmental standpoint, elementary school children's dependence on withdrawal behaviors signifies a coping mechanism that emphasizes personal safety above communal duty, a tendency prevalent in the earliest phases of moral and cognitive development.

In contrast, secondary pupils exhibited a heightened readiness to engage productively. Over fifty percent indicated that they typically endeavored to prevent violent incidents or notify educators and other authorities. This signifies a developmental transition towards prosocial bystander behavior, aligning with previous research indicating that adolescents enhance their moral reasoning, empathy, and perspective-taking abilities, which are crucial prerequisites for intervention (Hollarek and Lee, 2022; Matthys and Schutter, 2023). Adolescents get advantages from extensive peer networks and school participation initiatives, such as Youth Union or student leadership groups in Vietnam, which may enable them to respond more appropriately upon witnessing violence.

Notably, both age cohorts exhibited minimal support for promoting violence, with over 90% indicating that they never incited anyone to partake in aggressive conduct. This indicates that although passive bystanding is prevalent, the explicit endorsement of hostility is deemed socially unacceptable among both elementary and secondary pupils. These findings align with research conducted in other nations, indicating that the majority of students, irrespective of age, disapprove of explicit promotion of violence, despite many remaining passive observers (Greco and Segura, 2025). The continued prevalence of high passivity among primary kids underscores the necessity of early intervention.

Teacher-led and peer-led anti-bullying activities, which offer role-playing exercises and promote safe intervention, can diminish passive bystanding and enhance students' confidence in asking for assistance (Gaffney et al., 2021).

#### 4.2. Being a victim of school violence

The strategies for coping reported by teenagers who experienced violence revealed further developmental inequalities. Elementary school students primarily relied on passive or emotionally driven responses, such as crying, begging, or being silent. These responses highlight the vulnerability of younger children, who may feel powerless in the face of aggression and are less likely to have effective coping strategies. The limited use of formal support systems, such as reporting to educators or seeking counseling, may reflect both developmental immaturity and contextual factors. In Vietnam, similar to numerous other cultural settings, children may perceive seeking assistance as an indication of weakness or fear that disclosing their difficulties will lead to familial shame. Cultural influences may exacerbate reliance on avoidance and silence among younger students, thus prolonging cycles of maltreatment.

In contrast, secondary students demonstrated a heightened reliance on proactive help-seeking strategies. They preserved their composure and attempted to negotiate with aggressors, requested assistance, or conferred with trustworthy individuals, such as instructors or Youth Union leaders. They generally contacted formal protective services, including the child safety hotline (111) and school counseling offices. This conclusion is significant, as it suggests that older students are aware of and willing to utilize institutional resources, thus indicating a growing trust in social and educational systems. Developmental psychology supports this trend, demonstrating that adolescents possess increased self-efficacy, resilience, and social awareness, which can facilitate adaptive coping.

Nevertheless, specific impediments remain. Although secondary students showed a preference for constructive strategies, a notable percentage nevertheless reported engaging in avoidance behaviors. Approximately seventy-five percent reported that they never retaliated, which, although reducing escalation risks, may also reflect a persistent reluctance to assertively confront animosity. Moreover, fewer than one-third of secondary students reported that they usually talked with their parents or families when victimized, suggesting that familial involvement in addressing school violence may be limited. This aligns with studies from other Asian contexts, where parental authority is valued, yet teenagers may refrain from "burdening" their families with academic concerns.

#### 4.3. Comparisons across age groups

The disparity between primary and secondary students highlights a developmental advancement in addressing school violence. Young children, constrained by their social and cognitive capacities, frequently prioritize self-protection through avoidance and inactivity.

In contrast, adolescents demonstrate more advanced coping mechanisms, including problem-solving, negotiation, and soliciting support from organizations. The developmental changes correspond with cognitive-developmental theories of moral reasoning and with prior empirical studies demonstrating that adolescents are more predisposed than younger children to adopt the role of defenders in bullying scenarios (Tian et al., 2025).

Notwithstanding this transition, both factions exhibited a steadfast repudiation of harsh punishments. The majority of individuals from both age demographics indicated that they did not engage in retaliation or seek vengeance. This indicates that aggressive coping is socially condemned among Vietnamese students, aligning with global research that shows educational institutions are progressively promoting non-violent norms. Although overt retaliation is infrequent, the continual avoidance behavior observed in primary children and the minimal utilization of official support resources in both groups indicate fundamental structural issues. Inadequate resource information, confidentiality issues, and cultural perceptions of authority may impede students from effectively employing protective measures.

The findings underscore the imperative for targeted, age-specific interventions. Initial interventions for primary students should emphasize the development of assertive communication abilities, the fostering of trust in educators, and the normalcy of soliciting assistance. Interventions for secondary pupils should enhance their proactive strategies and address the barriers that impede the full utilization of familial and institutional assistance. In both cases, incorporating anti-violence education into the comprehensive curriculum and involving parents, educators, and community leaders can create a supportive atmosphere that empowers children to respond safely and effectively to school violence.

#### 4.4. Cultural and school-level moderators

These developmental differences should also be understood in relation to contextual factors already described in this study, particularly cultural norms emphasizing respect for authority and school-level structures such as teacher availability and Youth Union support. Such factors may shape students' willingness to intervene or seek help, even in the absence of formal moderator analyses.

The findings of this study provide several important implications for educational policy, school practice, and future program development. The pronounced differences in reactions to school violence among elementary and secondary students highlight the need for age-specific interventions. Young children demonstrated considerable avoidance and silence, suggesting that primary-level therapy must focus on providing them with secure and aggressive coping strategies. This may include structured role-playing exercises, instructor

demonstrations of supportive behaviors, and classroom discussions on the safe reporting of violence. By standardizing prosocial bystander interventions at an early stage, educational institutions can commence the mitigation of the passive culture that sustains violence. Secondly, the increased dependence of secondary students on help-seeking tactics demonstrates that teenagers are both able and inclined to participate in constructive behaviors when provided with suitable resources. This highlights the necessity of enhancing institutional support mechanisms, including school counseling offices, student unions, and youth leadership initiatives. Enhancing the exposure of child protection hotlines and safeguarding confidentiality may motivate more students to utilize these services when needed. Educating teachers to promptly and effectively address reports of violence might enhance students' confidence in institutional authority. Ultimately, at a broader cultural level, the findings highlight the imperative of addressing the stigma surrounding the pursuit of assistance in Vietnam. Both primary and secondary students insufficiently leveraged parental or familial support, possibly reflecting cultural norms that prioritize self-reliance or a reluctance to burden family members. Awareness initiatives involving parents, community leaders, and media can promote the normalcy of discussions about school violence and encourage children to seek both familial and institutional support when victimized. These findings have direct implications for school-based intervention frameworks. At the primary level, interventions should focus on developing assertive communication skills, normalizing help-seeking, and providing structured opportunities for guided bystander intervention through role-play and teacher modeling. For secondary students, programs should strengthen existing prosocial tendencies by integrating peer-led initiatives, youth leadership roles, and clear reporting pathways within a whole-school violence prevention framework. Embedding these strategies within social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula may enhance both individual coping skills and collective responsibility for school safety.

While this study contributes valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The use of self-report questionnaires may introduce biases, such as social desirability and memory mistakes. Students may minimize retaliatory behavior or exaggerate positive coping mechanisms to improve their self-perception. Future research should adopt mixed methods designs, incorporating qualitative interviews, teacher reports, and observational data to triangulate findings and provide a more nuanced understanding of students' responses to school violence. Despite the uniform dispersion of the sample across three areas, it may not sufficiently represent the diversity of Vietnam's educational contexts. Disparities in educational resources, teacher training, and cultural norms among areas may affect student responses to violence. Integrating urban and rural locations, as well as ethnic minority

populations, into future research would enhance generalizability. The study did not directly examine contextual factors, like teacher intervention tactics, school environment, or familial relationships, all of which may influence student responses. Research demonstrates that classroom peer dynamics and teacher support are critical factors influencing students' propensity to intervene or remain passive in violent situations. Future research should include these environmental factors in a multi-faceted study. Ultimately, while the study documented both witness and victim experiences, it did not investigate the intersection between these positions. Previous studies demonstrate that several kids assume various roles (e.g., victim-bystander, bully-victim), potentially influencing their coping techniques in intricate ways. Integrating role overlaps into subsequent analyses may yield a more sophisticated comprehension of the dynamics of school violence.

## 5. Conclusion

This study emphasizes significant developmental disparities in the responses of elementary and secondary adolescents in Vietnam to school violence, both as observers and as victims. Primary pupils typically employed passive and avoidant methods, such as becoming inactive, silent, or emotional, whereas secondary students were more inclined to exhibit constructive and help-seeking behaviors, including preventing violence, alerting instructors, and seeking institutional assistance. Notwithstanding these favorable changes, the inadequate use of official protection mechanisms and the continued reliance on avoidance methods across both groups signify enduring concerns. These findings highlight the necessity for age-appropriate, culturally attuned treatments that enable younger children to respond securely, bolster adolescents' prosocial behaviors, and enhance trust in institutional and familial support structures. By considering both individual and contextual factors, educational institutions and policymakers can help diminish the occurrence and effects of school violence, thereby promoting safer and more supportive learning environments.

## Funding

The study was supported and approved by the Scientific Committee of the Youth Research Institute (Code: ĐT.KXĐTN 25-07).

## Compliance with ethical standards

## Ethical considerations

Although the participating institutions do not maintain a formal institutional review board, all procedures performed in studies involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki

and its subsequent amendments. Participation was strictly voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents and/or their guardians, and no personally identifiable information was collected at any stage of the research.

## Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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