The Stress Coping Mechanisms of Vietnamese Students in Gifted Schools

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To cite this article:

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Abstract

This article takes the familiar subject of student stress and transports it to an unfamiliar setting – "gifted schools" in Vietnam. Research by Vietnamese academics into stress among Vietnamese adolescents, has so far largely been quantitative and has focused on identifying the nature of this problem within Vietnam's high outcomes but high-pressure education system. This paper takes an alternative qualitative approach, focusing on accessing student voice and using this to understand the coping strategies that Vietnamese students develop. The focus on 'gifted schools', is because these highly selective institutions attain exceptionally high academic outcomes according to international comparisons but also consequently place upon their students very high expectations and an extremely high workload. It is also because these schools and their students were supportive in co-creating this study. Via the innovative use of text-based interview, a method that was co-designed in conversation with the participants, this article explores the coping strategies that these students have developed, and in the findings presents a story of how they have developed sophisticated and individualised strategies to cope with stress. This article therefore approaches this issue from a positive and empowering perspective in partnership with the participants in this study. As revealed in this study - the students emphasised the importance of self-reliance when finding strategies, accompanied by the need for self-definition of whether strategies are positive or negative. As one example: rumination, which in Western research is typically portrayed as negative was seen more positively by these Vietnamese students. However, despite the emphasis on finding their own solutions they also welcomed increases in formal mental health support. The results of this study have the potential to inform practice and also lay the groundwork for future research, particularly within the context of education in Vietnam but also within the area of student voice research more broadly.

Keywords: stress, coping mechanisms, Vietnamese gifted schools, mental health, Confucianism, student voice

The Stress Coping Mechanisms of Vietnamese Students In Gifted Schools

Gifted schools in Vietnam target academic achievement, in which students are considered gifted by passing an entrance exam with a high total score in three core subjects one of which they major in. These majors are: advanced mathematics, mainstream mathematics, literature and English (Khanh, 2019). Although the Vietnamese education system performs exceptionally well according to international comparisons, students face abundant pressure (Hoang et al., 2016). However, stress in Vietnamese gifted schools has been researched rarely and only very recently (Thai, Nguyen & Pham, 2021). This article therefore contributes to understanding in this area by using innovative methods of text-based interview, co-designed with participants to access student voice on this issue. This paper also contributes to this field by approaching the topic of stress in Vietnamese schools, via a positive and empowering exploration into not just the pressures these students face but also their coping strategies as skilled, autonomous individuals. With the above objectives in mind, this study set out to answer this research question: How do students in gifted schools in Vietnam cope with academic stress?

Conceptual framework

Despite massive changes that globalisation has brought, Confucian culture retains a significant role in guiding social conduct in Vietnam (Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2016). From Confucianism comes the principles of how children are educated and the context in which children develop their coping strategies. Through Wu Lun, the hallmark of Confucian social philosophy, an individual's identity is shaped via the way that their personal, familial, and social existence is constructed (Pham, 2010). A core Confucian belief is that teachers are more knowledgeable than students - which results in pressure on students to socially conform (Pham, 2010; Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2016). Meanwhile, at home, the Vietnamese concept of decency requires a child to acknowledge that filial duties come first (Hunt, 2005). For children of school age, honouring the family often means being exemplary students with commendable grades and good conduct. Meanwhile, for Vietnamese parents, their children's success as students is a priority (Mestechkina et al., 2014).

"Gifted schools" in Vietnam

Gifted high schools have been established in all provinces and cities by the Vietnamese government. The total number of "gifted high school students" accounts for nearly 2.1 percent of the number of high-school students nationwide (Son, 2018). Generally, gifted schools educate students who have a "gift" (to use the language of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training) for a specific subject, as evidenced by success in examinations (Khanh, 2019). These are usually mathematics, literature, or physics, which students select as their "major" and therefore focus most of their studies on. Due to the academic potential of the gifted students who attend these schools, the original mission of gifted schools up until 1990 was to prepare them for studying abroad before returning to serve their home country (Anh, 2015). This is a novel concept that is unique to Vietnam (Anh, 2015). Nowadays, such academically gifted students are often pushed into the role of gaining prestige for their schools through competitions at a provincial, national and even international level (Son, 2018).

Prior to obtaining a place at a gifted school, students must study for entrance exams where they compete against extremely high numbers of applicants (Do, 2017). Furthermore, successful applicants must then compete further to be selected for major-specialised exams. There are also additional pressures placed on those students not selected for further examinations. These students are required to attend additional classes in order to catch up with the class average (Do et al., 2017). Therefore, once students and their families have committed to entering gifted schools, they are at risk of experiencing increasing levels of stress (Thai, Nguyen & Pham, 2021).

Mental health in Vietnamese adolescent education

The limited research that has been conducted into these students' experiences has shown that the most common types of children's mental health problems in Vietnam, emerging from this highly pressured schooling culture, are 'those of internalising (e.g. anxiety, depression, loneliness) and externalising problems (e.g. hyperactivity and attention deficit issues)' (An, 2013, p.11). Students often seek the help of non-professionals, as shown in a recent study investigating the mental health literacy of students in Ho Chi Minh City (Giang, 2019), which also identified a lack of available professional support**.**

Coping mechanisms

This article focuses on the Vietnamese experience. However, it can be initially contextualised by research conducted in other Confucian societies. It has been suggested by research conducted within the last ten years that adolescents from Confucian heritage cultures such as China, Japan, Korea tend to have higher levels of anxiety than those sharing Western backgrounds due to the influence of cultural norms on their behaviours (Cao, Meng & Shang, 2018). Research into the experiences of Chinese students has also shown amongst Chinese students a strong reluctance to share worries for fear of burdening others, indicating a relationship between Confucianism and a tendency towards internalisation when battling against stress (Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2018). Other studies conducted in Asian countries such as Malaysia, China, and Korea have similarly reported that students rely far more on music, TV, sleep, food, and even daydreaming to distract themselves from stress, with occasional use of cigarettes and alcohol but almost no instances of asking for help (Padmanathan et al., 2013). This contrasts with a recent emphasis in Western countries on developing external structures for mental health support for school students (Garside et al., 2021). This in part is an economic phenomena but it cannot be simply reduced to this - as comparisons between countries with comparable economic resources such as the UK and Japan also show this disparity (Harding, 2017). Western research over a long period has primarily portrayed rumination and internalisation, without external support, as inherently problematic (Martin & Tesser, 1996; Pindek & Gazica, 2020).

There has only been limited research into adolescent stress conducted in Vietnam, but this has revealed similar results (An, 2010; Thuy, 2009). The most common mechanisms Vietnamese students applied when dealing with stress were reported to be listening to music or watching movies; they also often turned to cognitive restructuring, through which they could redefine the stressful situation they were in, in order to better cope with it (Thuy, 2009). These findings, together with research into other Confucianist societies mentioned above, suggests that students in Vietnamese gifted schools may deal with stress by relying on themselves rather than asking for help (Cao, Zhu and Meng, 2018). These concepts can be visualised in the following diagram (figure 1).

This conceptual diagram is constructed in this particular order and shape because it helps illustrate which structures inform and influence others. It is the cumulative impact of all these factors that influences how students cope with stress. Coping mechanisms, the main pillar of this study, are affected by:

1. Macro-level factors:
   a. Socio-cultural: Confucianism
   b. Institutional: Vietnamese gifted schools
   c. Societal: the mental health infrastructure in Vietnam
2. Micro-level factors:
   a. Individual: the adolescent's psychological and physical development
   b. Familial: parenting style

Figure 1

Stress in the context of Vietnamese gifted schools
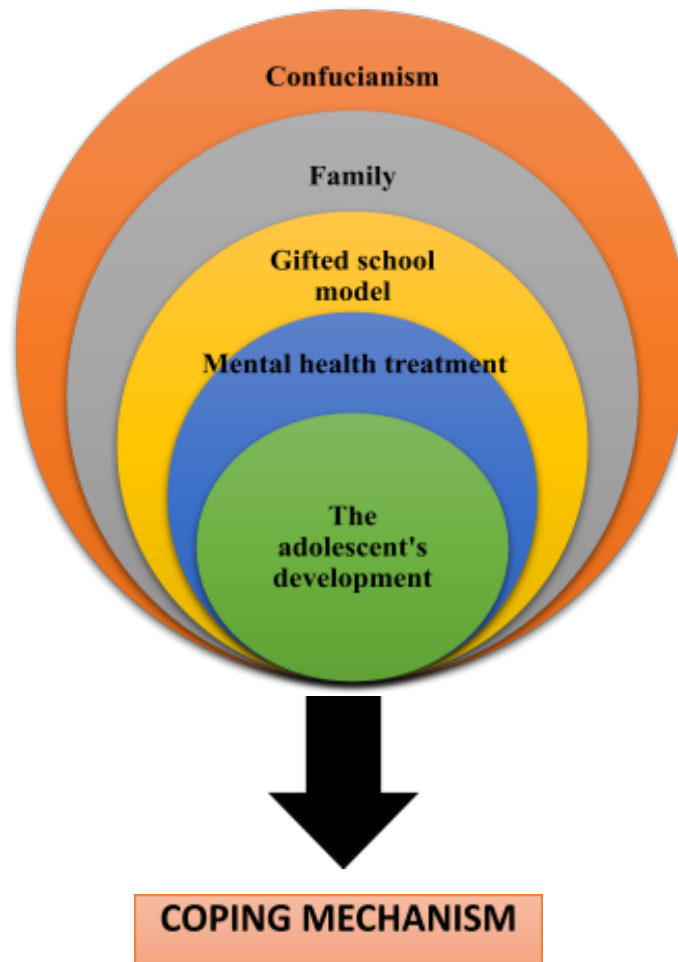
Research Design

This study is a qualitative study. However, at an early stage, a quantitative survey was used to identify self-defining stressed students in two gifted schools according to levels 'moderate to high', who were willing to be interviewed. Following this survey, six student interviews were conducted to gain insight into these students' stress coping strategies. These interviews were the primary data collection method, with the surveys used simply to select the participants for later interviews.

Sampling

The questionnaire that was used to discover participants was a pre-existing tool for assessing stress, widely used in schools – 'DASS-21', created by Australian psychologists (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Students were invited to complete the test and had the right to withdraw at any stage (BERA, 2018). Students,

who were willing to be interviewed, were asked to put their name and identification number on the front page of the survey in addition to answering the other questions. They were also asked to indicate whether they were prepared to be included in a further research interview by ticking a box showing consent. This was optional, and the survey could be completed anonymously. After reviewing the questionnaires, we randomly selected six students from the moderate to severely stressed levels who were willing to be interviewed (Silverman, 2019). The results from this survey indicated that in both schools over 70% of students who completed the survey self-defined as suffering moderate to severe stress. These results are broadly in line with other larger scale quantitative studies. (Nguyen et al, 2013; Hoang et al., 2016). However, as mentioned above this tool was used solely for identifying participants and providing context for the primary form of data.

Ethical considerations

Gatekeeper access was enabled via the gifted schools who supported this project. These schools have been anonymised as have all participants (BERA, 2018). Parental approval was gained via an information sheet and letter – whilst student approval was gained via letter and also by online meeting. The questionnaire used is a widely used tool already familiar to schools in Vietnam. The questionnaire was designed so as to focus on how the students developed enabling strategies. However, when discussing stress, from the outset, we acknowledged that sensitive issues may be discussed. It was agreed by the researchers that if issues were raised that the participants should be listened to and their answers acknowledged, whilst re-directing the interview back to the central theme. The researchers also liaised with the school so that they were fully aware of the school's safe-guarding processes. The text-based interview process was designed in partnership with the students, as part of this design we ensured the right to withdraw at any stage including after completion of the interview (BERA, 2018).

Text-based interview

In an initial pre-interview meeting the students were asked to co-design the interview process with us so that it would be a structure that they felt would most effectively capture their student-voice. The outcome was that the participants chose to be interviewed by text-messaging using a messaging platform similar to those students were already familiar with. The students expressed a preference for this approach, over conventional interviewing, describing how most of their social interaction is by text and how this is therefore more fitting with their lived experiences and also how text would enable them to consider a response, to edit and even delete. Engaging in the students' wishes and flexibly adapting the interview method to contemporary contexts helped the researchers and students easily converse (Silverman, 2019). By following the participants' requests and adhering to their preferred method for being interviewed we were able, in keeping with the design of the study, to implicitly emphasise the importance of student voice.

Some language that emerged and which is referred to later in this article is relatively informal. This is because we used the language of the participants to generate the language of analysis and presentation. Again, this is based on precedent in the field of research that focuses on student voice (Bell, 2014; Murray, 2021). All sub-headings in the findings and discussion sections of this article are based on the language that the students used.

At the start of the interviewing process all the interviewees were asked to select one blob figure who they identified with from the image below and to describe it in their own words (Wilson & Long, 2018). This provided an anonymised method for identifying the participants (Wilson & Long, 2018). All participants were also given an anonymised name to ensure confidentiality. Asking them why they chose this blob also provided the opening question for the text conversation**.**

Figure 2

Blob tree (Wilson & Long, 2018)
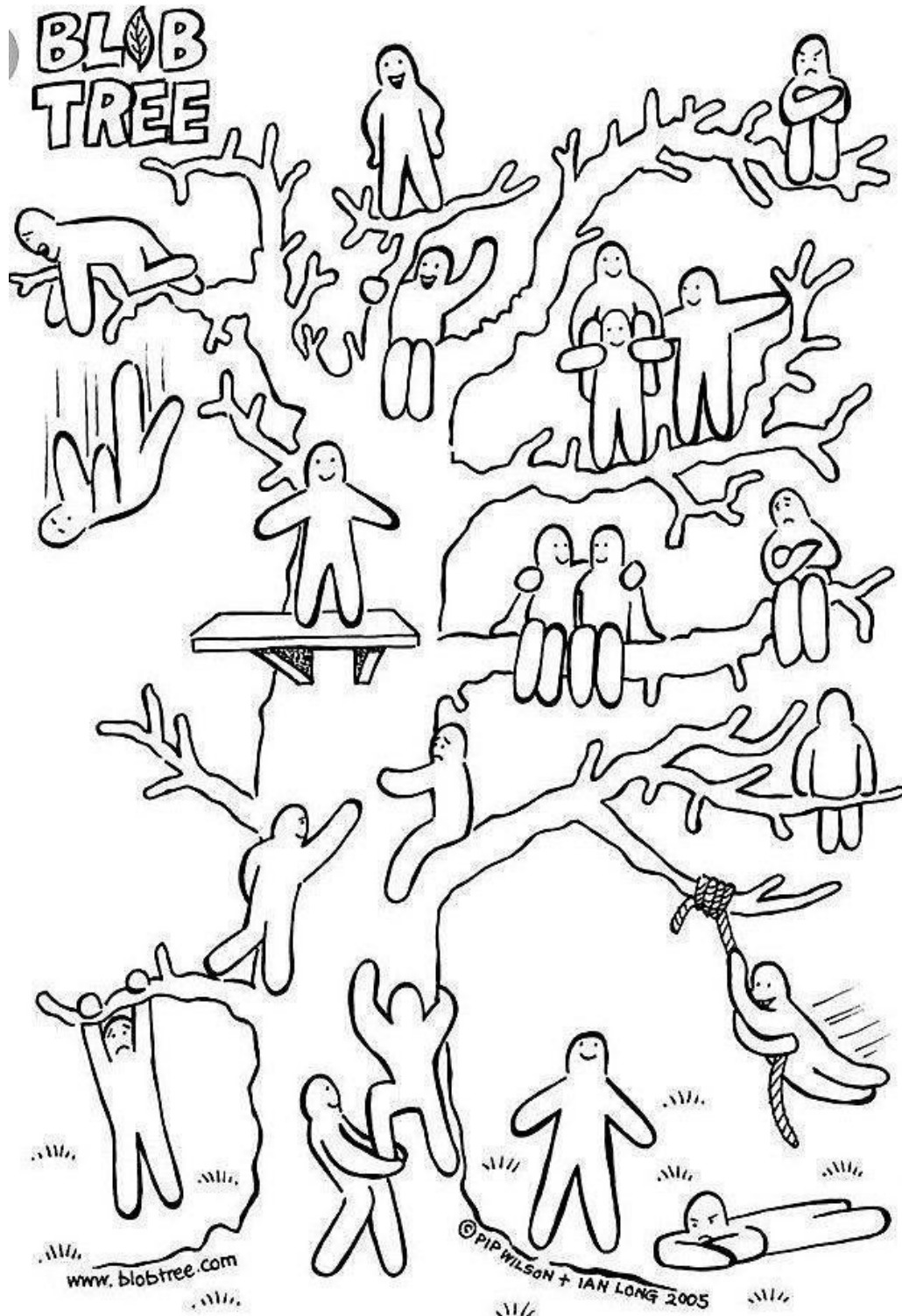
Findings and Discussion

As described in the section above, at the start of the interview students selected a blob from the blob tree image (Wilson & Long, 2018) and described their reasons for identifying with it. The bolded and italicised words below are students' own explanations for why they chose a specific blob figure. These short explanations beside the anonymised name they have been given makes their "blob" selection unique for each student.

The following students were interviewed:

- **B18: Giang**
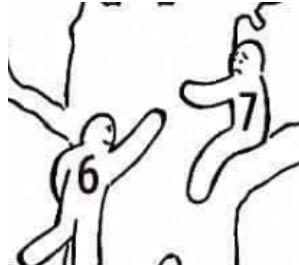Blob 18 (*the sociable and friend-dependent blob*): extremely-severely stressed, high-schooler

- **B11: Ha**
Blob 11 (*the happy-with-her-relationships blob*): severely stressed, high-schooler

- **B6: Vy**
Blob 6 (*the smiley, positive, and sociable helper*): moderately stressed, high-schooler

- **B4a: Hoa**
Blob 4 (*the carefree observer*): moderately stressed, high-schooler

- **B4b: Minh**
  Blob 4 (***the most contented, no-need-to-climb-high blob***): moderately stressed, middle-schooler

- **B8&9: An**
  Blobs 8 and 9 (***the half boisterous, half contemplative blob***): severely stressed, middle-schooler

Current and past methods of coping with stress:

Positives: The Light

A. Sharings

The first significant coping strategy identified by the students was the significance of having friendships with peers who they felt able to confide in. However, friendship was visualised in different ways by the interviewees. Therefore, although sharing with friends emerged as the most frequently mentioned theme, its intrinsic nature in helping reduce stress varied from one case to another.

Giang, when asked about her coping mechanisms, mentioned, with gratitude, the importance of having friends. In fact, friends had such a major impact on her identity that she had chosen her blob image because it represented having mutual support from friends:

> *Luckily, I have friends who always understand my struggles and sympathise with me. They helped me relieve my stress. I usually shared my sadness with them or asked them to hang out with me. It was they who took me away from the negative thoughts of my heavy mind.*

"Luckily" implies that perhaps she does not see friendship as an inevitable part of the human condition. She also links friendship to shared struggles, highlighting that to her, the defining nature of friendship, is one of

sharing sadness. Presumably from this statement, to her, sharing sadness is something that cannot occur in more formal relationships where there may be a pressure to put on a mask of positivity and outward success.

Another interesting stance about friends' serving as a buffer against stress was revealed by Hoa:

> *As my academic performance isn't as good as my classmates in many subjects, while they volunteered to answer the teacher's questions, I felt like I was only an observer in class for most of the time. However, as they were always cheerful, I felt less upset.*

Interestingly, although these classmates had the capacity to place her in a better mood, she did not consider them to be her "real friends." Instead, she referred to her friends as "acquaintances" and her true friend was someone she had never met in real life:

> *I can only meet my "bestie" online. We have never met face-to-face, but our friendship has lasted for more than six years as we share the same hobbies. This is different from my classmates as my interaction with them has just been surface-level. Therefore, I only confide in my real friend although she is in the north.*

It is here that Hoa clarifies what being someone's friend means to her. The term 'friends' was not defined by this student as a group of people in frequent contact with each other. Rather, Hoa dissociates friendship from physical proximity, since this does not affect her comfort when sharing ups and downs. Although shared hobbies is one element mentioned by Hoa of a 'real friendship', Hoa's response emphasises the necessity of establishing a deep bond with someone before calling him or her a 'friend'. This relational depth is what enables peer interactions to heal Hoa in stressful times. The quality of a relationship, hence, has proved more valuable than quantity (the number of friends one can have or the amount of time one spends with someone) in her case.

Occasionally confessing with friends about secret things, Minh, on the other hand, sometimes became frustrated because these peers could not keep secrets themselves. Therefore, she gradually (in her words) "kept it to herself, or at least shared with fewer people,". Friendship, in Minh's case, lies in shared secrets and following her rule that: "Once a secret, forever a secret." Failure to maintain this for her could result in a sense of betrayal and thus a loss of friendship. For Minh, friendship is fragile and demands a high level of mutual respect.

Relying less on friends, but still acknowledging their role in alleviating stress, Ha shared that sometimes she also rambled with complaints on Facebook with friends, whose comfort would ease her inhibition a bit. Meanwhile, An rarely shared negative feelings:

> *Unless I'm really snowed under with stress to the point that it affects my well-being, I will just ignore the things that bother me. If I do share, I will only confide in my most trusted friends. Otherwise I would just joke around and have fun with everybody.*

Apparently, sharing struggles for An is the last resort. Prioritising jolly moments, An described how she prefers laughing things off in a silly way with her friends rather than dwelling on poignant moments. This may have stemmed from her thoughtfulness and her reluctance to burden other people, or it may be that, through the common sense of humour that she establishes with her friend, An manages to find a shared identity which reduces her stress.

From a different perspective, friendship, to Vy, is not her entire buffer against stress: "I can ask my friends for advice, but if it doesn't suit my way of solving things, I will just listen to myself." Approaching friendship cautiously, Vy does not expect to have her issues always solved by her peers' counselling. Instead, the presence of friendship to Vy serves primarily as mental reassurance and soothes the fear of being alone, thereby alleviating stress even though it might not be helpful in solving her current problems. Overall, the students had different viewpoints regarding the role of the support of friends in alleviating stress, despite unanimously agreeing that friends, more than family, help elevate their mood. The way these students confide in their friends

also revealed the depth that each relationship must have for them before the students feel able to trust and share their struggles.

Conversely, none of the students had a relationship with family members close enough that it helped them to cope with stress. Only one interviewee demonstrated a close bond with her family. Vy mentioned having daily family dinners and occasional family talks while almost always visiting her grandmother on the weekends, which somewhat reduced her school worries and helped her learn the value of helping others instead of only focusing on her own needs. However, despite having a close-knit family, Vy's parental support was surprisingly very limited:

My father usually does not know I am stressed as he doesn't talk or ask me much; and although my mother talks with me quite a bit, I only share things that I know won't upset or anger her. Usually, therefore, us sisters would confide in each other.

This also highlights the stereotype in Confucian societies of women being the empathetic presence in the home while her father remains a bystander who directs his focus to the outside world. However, despite these assumed segregated roles, Vy still chooses to withhold her struggles from her mother.

Meanwhile, for Giang, establishing a deep familial bond was an even more challenging prospect due to difficulties establishing a relationship with her mother:

My mother used to always yell at me. She could nag at me from dusk to dawn. Even when I was hospitalised for a whole week, she didn't want to visit me. When she did come to see me, all I heard was her reprimands [laughing off her situation with a sarcastic emoji]. Actually, at that time I got used to this character of hers, but only when I went to high school and heard others talk about their mothers did I know my mom was a bit too much [sarcastically laughing again ":)))"].

Giang's narrative illustrates how the Confucian mindset has become deeply entrenched and widespread among parents and educators in Vietnam to the extent that it modifies their behaviours, in some ways to the detriment of children/students. The culture of discipline and respect within a Confucianist society is such that some of these participants found their family space to be one of stress rather than of relief from stress.

Nevertheless, despite these early difficulties it was Giang's mother who intervened in time and saved Giang from depression and more serious mental issues. In the end, sharing with family was, perhaps surprisingly considering her initial narrative, her most effective and thus crucial method of coping with stress:

I started to get stressed when I was in year 10. I thought this was just a normal amount of stress, and I tried to overcome it. But my stress became more and more intense. I felt frustrated, wanting to vanish from this life. After about one and a half months of being tormented like that, my mother took me to a psychiatrist at [a nearby] hospital. He said that I was both depressed and anxious but my anxiety disorder was worse. Only after this incident did I realise my mum's love for me. She also changed the way she talked to me, being as gentle as she normally would be with my younger brother. That was all I ever wanted.

These interviews revealed that family members can help adolescents to combat their stress and the complications that result from said stress. However, to achieve this environment, frequent and open communication where internalised emotions and struggles are freely expressed are of utmost importance, although such levels of communication are not always easily attainable by many families.

Although parents have a multi-faceted role, including trying to be friends with their children whilst also worrying about their children's future, friends do not share the same breadth of concerns. Due to this lack of responsibility for the peer's well-being in the future, friends tended to be favoured, by these participants, as a shoulder to lean on thanks to their less judgmental stance. This matter also extended to a lack of other reliable adults' presence in these adolescents' lives. None of the interviewees described an adult friend (or even an adult relative such as aunt or uncle) whom they might turn to when needing advice in their stressful times. The lack of this kind of relationship may stem not only from the assumed cultural power distance, between different age groups, posed by Confucianism but also from feeling insecure when sharing struggles and possibly being judged by this older friend or relative.

B. Leisure activities:

Besides confiding relationships, the six interviewees had other methods to lower their stress. The text based interviews, similar in style to their online chats with friends, yielded a variety of hobbies that they usually turned to in stressful times. These included: listening to music, drawing, reading, playing online games, writing diaries, and playing with pets. Disclosing her tips on "maintaining harmony within all of her relationships", Ha emphasised the importance of releasing her stress in silence via music and games:

> *When stressed, I would find a quiet place to play games or listen to music in peace, which helps me not to make a focus on myself. Even when I quarrelled with my family, I tried to keep silent for a while, waiting for the tension to cool down.*

Meanwhile, Hoa and Minh shared the same passion for drawing and have also majored in literature. Hoa described a love of reading, especially novels by Vietnamese authors. An, on the other hand, also spoke of her need for personal space and the enjoyment she gained from listening to piano music, which she described as soothing her"turbulent mind". With this method, she described how she never resorted to negative coping mechanisms.

Having overcome depression, Giang now had her cat to calm her down while she talked to him. Additionally, she has formed a diary-writing habit for any story that she felt that she could not "share or vent to her cat." Social media was also mentioned by Vy - surfing Facebook every evening after her family meal, to some extent, helped Vy restore energy to do her homework.

C. Other healthy activities to balance life after school

Two alternative positive strategies to cope with stress that the students' described and had adopted for a long time included firstly, a good night's sleep, which has been Minh and Vy's primary coping mechanism:

> *Minh – Sleep is my special stress coping method as having enough sleep is always invigorating, no matter how sad I can be the night before.*

> *Vy – I like the feeling of waking up early in the morning the most. As I always make sure to go to bed early for an eight-hour sleep, the moment of being fully recharged and ready for a new day is inexplicably joyful.*

The second strategy lies in knowing one's own limit. While moderate study was Ha's principle strategy; "setting small and short-term goals for easy implementation" helped Vy reduce the -pressure she felt on herself. This is a crucial tactic to Vy, as putting pressure on herself often resulted in Vy becoming highly stressed. She described how even when she failed to achieve her goals, she would switch to a smaller target. To Vy, the ultimate rule in her goal-setting lies in bettering herself: "As long as I'm moving forward, I'm happy." This was not with the aim of getting a higher rank in the class, as Vy aimed to avoid limiting herself to only academic targets. Instead, Vy aimed to improve herself as a well-rounded person, not just an outstanding gifted student, and stated that this has helped her to prioritise her own happiness.

Taboos: The self-defined dark

Whether or not the following strategies are 'negative', a word used by the participants, we as authors have not passed judgement on. However, we have placed them under this section because the interviewees admitted "feeling guilty" when implementing these methods. They have therefore been termed the "self-defined dark" in response to the students' own perceptions and using the students' own language. Furthermore, in all cases, students had made their own decisions to not use these strategies again after trying hard to discard the habits. Therefore, this section acknowledges complexity and is intended to do so with sensitivity. Throughout the interviews we did not seek or ask questions regarding these coping strategies described below. However, in keeping with the emphasis on respecting students' voices, with the consent of the interviewees, we have included them here, as they raised them.

A. Self-harm:

Hoa briefly mentioned self-harm accompanying her comments with a lot of "nervous laugh" icons:

It's a bit shameful to talk about this… but it involved bleeding. That mark didn't leave a scar but pinching to feel pain helped reduce my stress. I didn't do it much though, and I've managed not to resort to that anymore.

Despite Hoa's attempts to underplay the serious meaning behind her comment with contextualising emojis. The words "self-harm", "shameful" and "managed not to" reveal how much she was bothered by this stress coping mechanism. The concept of self-harm contains negative connotations, but the students may have felt that this method was necessary and could not be replaced by any other.

Meanwhile, Giang was more open when touching upon this topic. She did not seem to be troubled by sad memories in the past but chose to text about these reflectively and openly:

When the "exam season" came, I almost always felt very agitated. Every day passed in misery, saddening and torturing my soul. Therefore, when nobody was around, I hurt myself by using dangerous small objects like compasses, scissors, knives ... with occasional hallucinations. When those happened, I couldn't cram a single word into my head, and so my academic performance dragged me down even more.

While self-harm did at least help Hoa alleviate her stress, Giang's cuts worsened her state by adding more stress related to her fear of exams. Yet, both students acknowledged the negativity associated with self-harm, which helped them employ alternative coping strategies. Now having recovered from depression, both describe how they have become much happier and more sociable and that their optimism shields them from retreating to self-harm.

B. Venting on others

Before becoming depressed, Giang showed, what she now perceives to be, initial symptoms of emerging depression including getting frustrated with people around her without reason. Minh also experienced episodes of externalising anger, for example, on one occasion she threw her belongings and tore down her idol posters. Although other interviewees did not discuss venting their stress on others, further comments by these two participants implied that this may be a common way of dealing with stress.

Rumination: Where light meets darkness – the battle of the mind

Rumination has been defined as 'a class of conscious thoughts that revolve around a common instrumental theme and that recur in the absence of immediate environmental demands requiring the thoughts' (Martin & Tesser, 1996, p. 7), this quotation is consistent with current definitions from other writers (Pindek & Gazica, 2020). Rumination, in other words, is a process of deep contemplation about something, which for students in this research, could often result in increased stress or conversely assist with stress management. Rumination emerged as the most complicated of the stress coping methods that the students discussed. Starting with the individual's realisation of the existence of stress in their lives, rumination takes this a step further through an acknowledgment and analysis of how stress impacts on ones' well-being, which leads the brain to think of ways to deal with stress. It is at this stage that the students described developing coping plans, opting for positive, negative, and/or neutral methods. An example of this is An's tendency to keep the stress to herself, which she acknowledged could be effective but also can be risky.

It was from deep thinking that many students felt that they gained a chance to process things. For example, "loving oneself" is the central lesson that Vy described herself as having as a result of many years of rumination in middle school:

I used to pay a lot of attention to how people might judge me. That was when I got very pessimistic. But those days helped me realise one thing: there is no end to societal judgments. Later there'll be thousands of arrows shooting at me. And if I keep feeling fearful of these malicious sayings, nobody but me is to be harmed. My presence is in my hands. Therefore, I should not let those people tarnish it. In

fact, they may not even remember who I am after having harshly criticising me. Even if they do, they don't actually care about me that much. So now I'm just happy living my own life.

Rumination, in the perception of these students, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be a black hole, gathering one's wandering thoughts into "huge stacks of gloominess" with an "unescapable poignancy". However, it can also be a source of strength, as evident in Vy's case. Through deep self-reflection, Vy considered herself stronger having realised that "by living: in the present and for herself" she can be freed from stress. Moreover, now Vy has adopted a "fearless-to-be-oneself stance," she feels empowered to be positive and "cheer others up" when they are stressed themselves. Ignoring other people's judgments has also served as her "constant reminder to banish negative thoughts and protect her peace of mind". However, supporting herself mentally meant Vy had to be equipped to know how to make the right decisions based on her own needs and others' advice. Indeed, Vy shared that she feels that she constantly has to better herself, both by acquiring a lot of social knowledge in addition to academic wealth and spending time to self-reflect on mistakes and achievements.

Minh found some humour when analysing her connection with the "no-need-to-climb-high" blob image, saying:

Before doing anything that potentially destroys everything in my future, I'd go to great lengths to consider whether my temporary satisfaction at that moment can change anything or things will just stay the same. And so I don't think it's worth trading off my future for it. I might have a huge mountain of money, garages of luxurious cars, and other forms of prosperity in 20 years, who knows [lol].

Despite the humorous nature of her comment, her thoughts reflect how positive rumination can alleviate the pressures and strains of even discussing this subject matter, although she added that such thoughts are not always easily found when students are not in "their right mind".

Summary of the aforementioned stress coping mechanisms in categories

Figure 3 provides a summary of the categories of stress-coping strategies that we identified. All have been discussed in depth above other than suicidal ideation. This is because it emerged in a unique context, distinct from the others. Numerous students who participated in the survey (voluntarily and anonymously) described suicidal thoughts and the processing of these as a 'coping strategy'. We have therefore made the decision to respect their anonymised voice by acknowledging 'suicidal ideation' as one self-defined coping mechanism against stress within this concluding diagram. However, this theme was not raised by us in the interviews for ethical reasons in line with BERA (2018) guidelines, nor did the interviewees raise it themselves. This is a study into a new and potentially sensitive area of research in Vietnam and requires further investigation however, it was decided that it was beyond the scope of the present study and the researchers were not equipped to support students with suicidal ideation – beyond referring this information to schools in line with safe-guarding policies.

Figure 3

Stress coping mechanisms
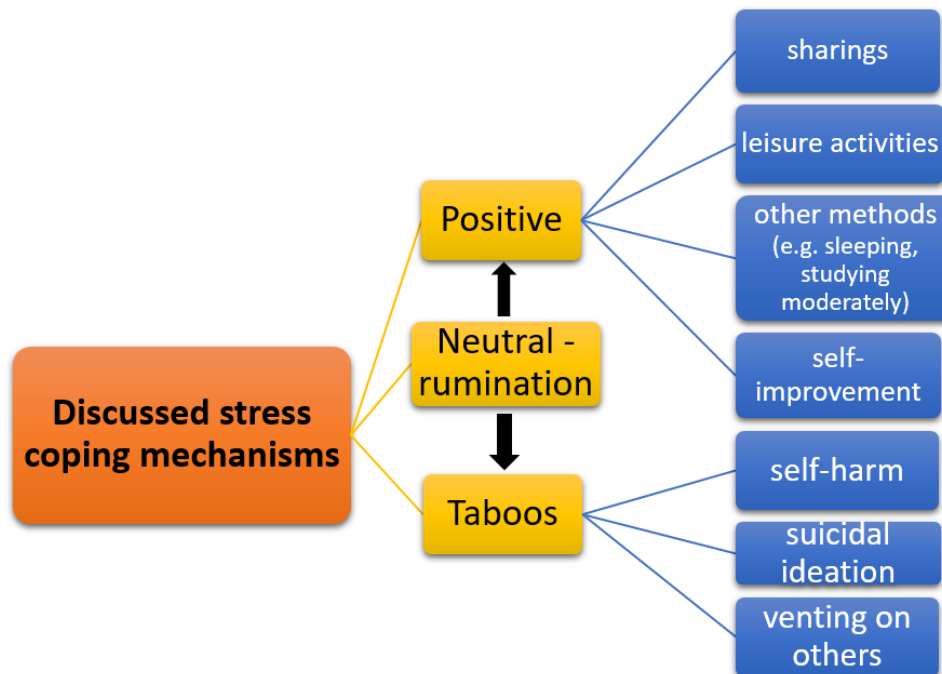
Conclusion

There has been some significant quantitative research into the extent of stress amongst gifted school students in Vietnam but very little qualitative research exploring the student experience. The initial scoping questionnaire for this article confirmed the presence of the landscape of stress identified in this previous quantitative research (Nguyen et al, 2013; Hoang et al., 2016). In this study it emerged from the students' sharings that these students had become very skilled at developing coping strategies to alleviate stress. Out of the six interviews, five (regardless of stress levels) described how they had succeeded in positively controlling their stress through turning inward to find methods of empowering themselves, after having tried out many strategies, and also how they have learned to move forward from what they defined as 'past mistakes'. This builds from previous research conducted in other Confucian societies that has suggested that students from these cultures would internalise the responsibility for developing their own coping strategies (Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2018). However, what has not been revealed by previous studies, but has within this study, is the resilience and creativity with which these students developed these strategies. The emphasis within the design of this study on student voice and on co-design enabled this to come through. This emphasises the importance of the need for further student voice research within Vietnam.

To these students, being defeated or strengthened by stress was viewed as a choice rather than a misfortune, which, in turn led them to perceive self-reliance as empowering as opposed to something that leaves students in a position of "solitude and poignancy". The co-existence of self-reliance and self-empowerment, in the viewpoint and language of the participants emerged as the underpinning foundation of an "upright fortress against stress attack". This mechanism also aligns with the findings of previous studies that have reported that students from Confucian heritage cultures usually rely on themselves to relieve their own stress (An, 2010). However, again the resilience and creativity of students were revealed in greater depth in this study. As stated in these findings, beginning from middle school, gifted students regularly face moderate to high levels of stress, which continue to rise when they enter high school. On the far end of their self-defined negative coping

methods, some of the participants in this study reported self-harm as one form of stress coping in addition to venting. However, on the other hand students described, self-defined, positive strategies far more extensively. These included talking with friends (noticeably more than with family), and hobbies being used as coping strategies to deal with stress. Other, self-defined as positive methods included reading, drawing, sleeping, listening to music, writing about their feelings in a diary, and sharing with pets.

One finding of this research is that, to these students, dividing coping mechanisms as simply good or bad is overly simplistic, perhaps especially within a broadly Confucian or specifically Vietnamese context. Whether a coping strategy is good or bad very much depends on how it is implemented by the individual. Also defining coping strategies as negative behaviours may only serve to increase stress and anxiety to the young person utilising them. The duality of rumination as both a cause of and coping strategy for stress, according to the perception of the participants, illustrates this complexity most clearly. In Western research rumination has been primarily defined as a negative strategy (Pindek & Gazica, 2020). However, in the viewpoint of these students it was more complicated than this. Within a Confucian cultural environment, that erects barriers to seeking help from others, rumination was interpreted as a potentially positive strategy too.

However, despite the emphasis throughout on self-reliance when developing coping strategies, in line with other research in Vietnam, the students also welcomed the creation and development of external forms of support (Giang, 2019). Altering the factors that cause students stress within Vietnamese gifted schools is a task easier said than done. Considering Vietnamese schools' limited resources, changes must occur from the bottom up, namely with teachers and then to the curriculum. However, by accessing and presenting student voices, without judgement or criticism, this paper presents for teachers, policy-makers and other stakeholders, a viewpoint that is vital in ensuring that meaningful change can be made.

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