

# Reconceptualizing the “Not Enough” Mindset (Overachiever Syndrome) Among High School Students: A Mixed-Methods Study in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam

Pham The Hung

Faculty of Political Education and Educational Management Dong Thap University, Vietnam

Corresponding Author: Pham The Hung

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/gijash.20260203>

## ABSTRACT

The contemporary educational landscape, characterized by heightened academic rigor and escalating socio-cultural expectations, has fostered the emergence of the “not enough” mindset, a form of overachiever syndrome among adolescents. This study investigates the prevalence, manifestations, and psychological determinants of this phenomenon within the specific context of high school students in Dong Thap province, Vietnam. Utilizing a robust mixed-methods design, the research analyzed data from a sample of 500 students, supplemented by qualitative insights from parents and educators to provide a holistic view of the adolescent experience. The findings reveal that while the “not enough” mindset can occasionally serve as a temporary performance catalyst, it predominantly manifests in maladaptive forms that compromise long term well-being. Specifically, over 50% of participants reported persistent self-critical tendencies, with chronic achievement dissatisfaction and pervasive peer comparison identified as the most salient psychological markers. These maladaptive traits are significantly driven by intense parental expectations, a systemic lack of self-awareness among students, and high-stakes socio-academic

competition. Consequently, this paper proposes a multi-level intervention framework that integrates cognitive restructuring strategies and emotional regulation training within school-based psychological curricula. These results offer critical implications for educational policy and the development of personalized counseling practices aimed at mitigating the “not enough” mindset in rapidly evolving academic environments

**Keywords:** Not enough mindset; Maladaptive perfectionism; Adolescent mental health; Overachiever syndrome; Psychological pressure; School-based intervention

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the current landscape of globalization and digital transformation, educational systems are increasingly performance-driven, placing significant psychological demands on students. In Vietnam, particularly in academically competitive contexts such as high schools in Dong Thap province, students are expected not only to succeed but to continuously surpass expectations. In my observation, this escalating standard has shifted the focus of learning from development to comparison, thereby

intensifying pressure on both achievement and self-evaluation.

Within this context, a notable psychological pattern has emerged, the “not enough” mindset (overachiever syndrome). This mindset is characterized by a persistent sense of inadequacy, where students remain dissatisfied with their achievements despite objectively strong performance. What I find particularly critical is the internal tension students experience between striving for excellence and maintaining psychological balance. This tension often operates implicitly and is rarely addressed within conventional, performance-oriented educational frameworks.

While high achievement motivation is traditionally considered beneficial, this study argues that, in the absence of self-regulation and psychological support, it can develop into maladaptive patterns, including chronic stress, anxiety, and instability in self-identity. From a practical standpoint, the issue is not the presence of ambition itself, but the way students cognitively interpret and emotionally respond to their own performance.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the extent, manifestations, and underlying causes of the “not enough” mindset among high school students, while also identifying empirically grounded and practically applicable interventions. Specifically, the study addresses four key questions: (1) how prevalent this mindset is among students, (2) how it manifests in both academic and personal domains, (3) what psychological and contextual factors contribute to its formation, and (4) which intervention strategies can effectively mitigate its negative impacts.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 *Conceptualizing the “Not Enough” Mindset*

In this study, the “not enough” mindset is conceptualized as a persistent cognitive–emotional schema in which individuals continuously perceive their efforts, achievements, or personal attributes as

insufficient, regardless of objective outcomes (Curry, 1961; D’Antonio, 2017). From my analytical standpoint, this mindset should not be reduced to a temporary emotional response; rather, it reflects a deeply internalized evaluative framework that shapes how individuals interpret success, failure, and self-worth.

The construct can be theoretically grounded in several well-established psychological traditions. First, it closely aligns with the concept of maladaptive perfectionism, which involves the tendency to set excessively high standards while engaging in critical self-evaluation and experiencing chronic dissatisfaction (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). These individuals do not derive satisfaction from achievement; instead, they reinterpret success as insufficient relative to ever-escalating standards.

Second, the “not enough” mindset can be understood through achievement motivation theory, particularly the distinction between striving for success and avoiding failure (Atkinson, 1964; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). In this framework, individuals dominated by feelings of insufficiency tend to shift toward avoidance-oriented motivation, where the primary goal is not growth but the prevention of perceived inadequacy.

Third, self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) provides a compelling explanatory lens. The persistent gap between the “actual self” and the “ideal” or “ought” self generates emotional discomfort, including shame, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. In adolescent populations, such discrepancies are often intensified by external expectations and identity formation processes.

Building on these perspectives, I argue that the “not enough” mindset represents a distortion in self-regulatory processes, in which self-worth becomes contingent upon externally defined achievements rather than internally constructed values. This distortion not only undermines intrinsic motivation but also perpetuates a cycle of chronic dissatisfaction.

## **2.2 The Dual-Dimensional Nature of Overachievement**

A key theoretical contribution of this study is the reconceptualization of overachievement as a dual-dimensional construct, consisting of both adaptive and maladaptive components. This distinction is essential for understanding why high achievement does not necessarily equate to psychological well-being.

On the one hand, the adaptive dimension of overachievement reflects a constructive and development-oriented mindset. Individuals operating within this dimension demonstrate persistence, intrinsic motivation, and a commitment to self-improvement. Their perception of “not enough” functions as a motivational signal, encouraging reflection, effort, and continuous growth. This aligns with literature highlighting the positive aspects of perfectionistic striving (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

On the other hand, the maladaptive dimension represents a fundamentally different psychological process. Here, the perception of insufficiency becomes internalized as a stable self-belief, leading to excessive self-criticism, emotional exhaustion, and vulnerability to anxiety and depressive symptoms. Importantly, achievement does not resolve this sense of inadequacy; rather, it reinforces it, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of striving without satisfaction (Prudential Vietnam, 2023).

Recent research has shown that maladaptive perfectionism and performance pressure are increasingly prevalent among adolescents, particularly in competitive educational environments (Curran & Hill, 2019). From my perspective, the critical issue is not the presence of ambition itself, but the cognitive and emotional interpretation of achievement. When success is continuously redefined as insufficient, even high-performing students become psychologically vulnerable.

Thus, the dual-dimensional framework allows us to differentiate between healthy striving (adaptive) and pathological overstriving (maladaptive), providing a

more nuanced understanding of student behavior and well-being (Nguyen, 2023).

## **2.3 Determinants of the “Not Enough” Mindset**

To explain the emergence and persistence of the “not enough” mindset, this study adopts an integrative approach that considers both external (contextual) and internal (intrapersonal) determinants.

### **2.3.1 External Determinants**

At the contextual level, the development of this mindset is strongly influenced by social and cultural environments. One of the most significant factors is parental expectation, particularly in educational contexts where academic success is closely tied to family reputation and future opportunities. Research has shown that controlling or overly demanding parenting styles are associated with higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism in adolescents (Soenens et al., 2005).

In addition, peer comparison plays a critical role during adolescence. According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals evaluate themselves based on comparisons with others. In competitive school environments, constant comparison with high-achieving peers can intensify feelings of inadequacy, especially when success is narrowly defined.

Moreover, broader societal standards of success, often reinforced through media and digital platforms, contribute to the internalization of unrealistic expectations. These standards emphasize visible achievement, productivity, and excellence, thereby narrowing the criteria for self-worth and reinforcing the “not enough” perception.

### **2.3.2 Internal Determinants**

At the intrapersonal level, several psychological mechanisms mediate how external pressures are internalized. A central factor is self-concept clarity, defined as the degree to which individuals have a clear and stable understanding of themselves (Campbell et al., 1996). Individuals with low self-concept clarity are more likely to rely on external validation, making them

particularly vulnerable to feelings of insufficiency.

Another important factor is the presence of perfectionistic cognitive schemas, which equate self-worth with flawless performance and interpret mistakes as failures rather than learning opportunities. These schemas tend to be rigid and self-reinforcing, contributing to chronic dissatisfaction.

Finally, fear of failure and self-doubt act as underlying emotional drivers. According to achievement motivation research (Elliot & Church, 1997), fear of failure shifts individuals toward avoidance-oriented goals, increasing anxiety and reducing adaptive functioning. In this state, students are not striving to succeed but are instead attempting to avoid being “not enough.”

In short, this theoretical framework conceptualizes the “not enough” mindset as a multidimensional psychological phenomenon emerging from the dynamic interaction between socio-cultural pressures and individual cognitive processes. By integrating perspectives from perfectionism, achievement motivation, and self-discrepancy theories, the study provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding both the developmental potential and psychological risks associated with overachievement (Lesser, 2020).

Importantly, from a practical standpoint, this framework suggests that addressing the “not enough” mindset requires more than individual-level interventions. It necessitates a systemic approach, including educational reform, family awareness, and the development of students’ self-awareness and emotional regulation capacities (Peng & Rogier, 2020). This integrative perspective directly informs the empirical analysis and intervention strategies presented in the subsequent sections of the study.

### **3. MATERIALS & METHODS**

This study employed a mixed-methods design to examine the “not enough” mindset from both empirical and experiential perspectives. From my standpoint, this approach was essential to capture not only

the prevalence and patterns of the phenomenon but also the underlying psychological processes shaping students’ self-evaluation. The study followed a convergent design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and interpreted in an integrated manner, thereby enhancing the validity, depth, and interpretive coherence of the findings.

The sample consisted of 500 high school students, 169 teachers, and 48 parents from multiple schools in Dong Thap province. Participants were selected using a purposive and stratified approach to ensure representation across different academic levels and school contexts. In my design, the inclusion of teachers and parents was intentional, as it allowed the study to reflect the multi-layered educational environment influencing students’ psychological development, rather than relying solely on student self-reports.

Data collection was conducted through a triangulated system of instruments, including structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observational notes. The questionnaires (Likert-scale and multiple-choice) provided standardized measures of awareness, manifestations, and perceived impacts of the “not enough” mindset. Interviews offered deeper insights into students’ subjective experiences, particularly their perceptions of achievement, pressure, and self-worth. Observational data further complemented these sources by capturing real behavioral patterns within the school context, thereby strengthening the authenticity of the dataset. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and percentage analysis to identify dominant trends, while qualitative data were processed through thematic analysis, focusing on recurring cognitive and emotional patterns. To ensure rigor, the study applied methodological triangulation, cross-validation of findings, and consistent coding procedures. Ethical principles, including voluntary participation and confidentiality, were strictly

maintained. Overall, this methodological framework ensures that the findings are both scientifically robust and grounded in real educational practice.

#### **4. RESULT**

The findings indicate that the “not enough” mindset is both highly prevalent and insufficiently recognized among high school students. Specifically, only 54.4% of participants reported being aware of this psychological pattern, while 45.6% demonstrated limited or no understanding. From my perspective, this gap in awareness is not merely descriptive but diagnostically significant: students are experiencing a persistent sense of inadequacy without possessing the conceptual framework to identify or regulate it. This lack of psychological literacy contributes to the normalization and internalization of the mindset.

In terms of manifestation, the data reveal a clear pattern of chronic dissatisfaction with academic achievement (65.5%), even among students with objectively strong performance. This dissatisfaction is accompanied by a pervasive perception of insufficiency across multiple dimensions, including effort, time investment, and personal value. What stands out in my analysis is that this is not a reflection of actual underperformance, but rather a distorted self-evaluative process, in which success is consistently reinterpreted as inadequate. These tendencies are particularly pronounced in competitive academic environments, where constant peer comparison and implicit performance standards intensify internal pressure and reinforce maladaptive thinking patterns.

The psychological impacts are both substantial and concerning. A significant proportion of students reported emotional distress (79.7%) and stress-related mental health issues (64.4%), with many also exhibiting early signs of social withdrawal and relational disengagement. From a longitudinal research perspective, these patterns can be understood as early

indicators of more serious internalizing problems, including anxiety and depressive tendencies. Importantly, the findings suggest that the “not enough” mindset functions not as a benign motivational force but as a chronic psychological burden, gradually undermining well-being despite outward academic success.

Regarding determinants, the analysis identifies parental expectations and lack of self-understanding as the most influential factors. In my interpretation, these two elements interact in a particularly critical way: strong external expectations, when combined with weak internal self-concept clarity, create conditions in which students adopt external standards without critical reflection. This dynamic is further reinforced by peer comparison and broader societal competition, which continuously elevate performance benchmarks and narrow the criteria for self-worth.

Taken together, the results suggest that the “not enough” mindset is not an individual anomaly but a systemically reinforced psychological pattern, emerging from the interaction between external pressures and internal vulnerabilities. Its prevalence, combined with its significant psychological impact, underscores the urgency of addressing this issue through both educational and psychological interventions.

#### **DISCUSSION**

The findings confirm that the “not enough” mindset represents a systemic psychological pattern rather than an isolated individual issue. From my analytical perspective, the core problem lies not in students’ actual performance, but in their distorted self-evaluative framework, where success is continuously reinterpreted as insufficient.

The coexistence of high achievement and emotional distress reflects a critical shift from adaptive striving to maladaptive perfectionism. In this condition, external expectations are internalized without adequate self-regulatory capacity, leading to chronic dissatisfaction and psychological strain.

Importantly, the low level of awareness among students indicates that this phenomenon remains largely implicit and unaddressed within educational systems. This underscores the need for integrating psychological literacy, self-awareness development, and emotional regulation into school-based interventions.

Overall, the results highlight that addressing the “not enough” mindset requires a multi-level approach, targeting not only individual cognition but also the broader educational and socio-cultural environment in which students construct their sense of self and achievement.

## **5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS**

### ***5.1 Institutional-Level Interventions***

The finding that a substantial proportion of students lack awareness of the “not enough” mindset highlights a critical gap in psychological literacy within the school system. From my perspective, this issue cannot be effectively addressed without structural change. Therefore, integrating psychological education into the formal curriculum is essential, enabling students to understand, recognize, and regulate their own cognitive–emotional processes.

This should be complemented by regular mental health assessments, which serve as a systematic mechanism for early identification of maladaptive patterns such as chronic dissatisfaction and emotional distress. In addition, experiential learning activities—including guided reflection and self-awareness exercises—are necessary to transform theoretical knowledge into lived psychological competence. Together, these interventions establish a foundational layer of prevention and early support within the educational environment.

### ***5.2 Individual-Level Interventions***

The high levels of dissatisfaction and emotional distress identified in the findings indicate that the core issue lies in distorted self-evaluation and maladaptive cognition. Consequently, interventions at the

individual level must focus on restructuring these internal processes.

Reflective journaling is a critical tool that enables students to recognize their own effort and progress, thereby shifting their focus from outcomes to learning processes. Reverse thinking (cognitive reframing) directly challenges irrational beliefs, particularly the persistent perception of insufficiency, and helps students reconstruct more realistic and adaptive standards. At the same time, emotional regulation training equips students with the capacity to manage stress and respond constructively to perceived failure.

In my assessment, these strategies are effective because they address the underlying psychological mechanisms, rather than merely alleviating surface-level symptoms.

### ***5.3 Relational-Level Interventions***

The identification of parental expectations and peer comparison as key determinants underscores the importance of relational dynamics in shaping the “not enough” mindset. This implies that sustainable intervention must involve both teachers and parents.

For teachers, the integration of psychological guidance into everyday teaching practices is essential. By emphasizing effort, normalizing mistakes, and providing emotional support, teachers can create a classroom environment that reduces performance pressure.

For parents, the primary intervention involves recalibrating expectations and fostering open, non-judgmental communication. When students feel safe to express difficulties without fear of evaluation, the internalization of external pressure is significantly reduced.

These relational interventions are critical because they address the social origins of psychological distortion, not just its individual manifestations.

### ***5.4 Systemic and Communication-Based Interventions***

Given that the “not enough” mindset is reinforced beyond the classroom,

interventions must extend into broader and more accessible formats. Podcast-based psychological education provides a flexible and engaging medium for students to access mental health knowledge, while practical psychological guidebooks translate abstract concepts into actionable strategies.

From my perspective, these approaches enhance both accessibility and sustainability, ensuring that psychological support becomes a continuous process rather than a one-time intervention.

### **5.5 Integrated Effectiveness**

The effectiveness of this multi-level intervention framework is supported by empirical evidence, with over 80% of participants reporting positive changes in self-awareness, emotional regulation, and reduction of self-imposed pressure.

This outcome confirms a central conclusion of the study: the “not enough” mindset is not a fixed trait but a modifiable cognitive–emotional pattern. Effective intervention, therefore, requires a systemic and integrated approach that simultaneously addresses awareness, cognition, relational context, and access to psychological resources.

In short, the proposed interventions demonstrate that improving student well-being requires a fundamental shift from performance-centered education to psychologically informed education. Only through such a shift can students transform achievement from a source of pressure into a foundation for sustainable personal development.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study provides compelling empirical evidence that the “not enough” mindset conceptually aligned with overachiever syndrome is not a marginal psychological anomaly but a pervasive, structurally embedded pattern among Vietnamese high school students. From a personalized analytical standpoint, the most critical implication lies in the subtle yet systemic normalization of psychological strain within high-achievement educational ecologies. In such contexts, observable academic success

often functions as a compensatory façade, concealing underlying emotional dysregulation, chronic self-doubt, and a measurable erosion of subjective well-being.

At the core of this research is a theoretically nuanced and empirically grounded synthesis of adolescent experience, articulated through three interrelated dimensions. First, the study delineates the dual nature of overachievement, distinguishing adaptive striving characterized by goal-oriented persistence and intrinsic motivation from maladaptive overcompensation driven by self-devaluation. While the “not enough” mindset may intermittently enhance performance outputs, the data indicates its dominant expression is pathological, evidenced by pervasive self-criticism and internalized inadequacy reported in more than half of the participants.

Second, the findings illuminate a complex socio-psychological mechanism in which intrapsychic distortions—such as negative self-appraisal and contingent self-worth interact dynamically with external pressures. These include heightened parental expectations, institutionalized academic competition, and peer comparison processes. This “toxic synergy” generates a feedback loop that reinforces chronic dissatisfaction with achievement, regardless of objective success, thereby sustaining the maladaptive cognitive schema.

Third, the study advances a multi-level intervention framework that integrates theoretical rigor with applied relevance. This framework emphasizes the necessity of embedding school-based psychological education, cognitive restructuring techniques, and emotional regulation training within the educational system. Such interventions aim not merely at symptom reduction but at restructuring the underlying cognitive-affective architecture that sustains the “not enough” mindset.

From a strategic perspective, the synthesis of these findings leads to a pivotal conclusion: achievement, when dissociated from psychological equilibrium, is

inherently unstable and ultimately unsustainable. I argue that self-awareness should be reconceptualized as a core developmental competency rather than a passive attribute. It must be cultivated systematically to enable students to regulate cognition, emotion, and motivation in an integrated manner. Accordingly, educational paradigms need to transition from a predominantly performance-centric orientation toward a holistic model that positions mental health as a foundational pillar of learning and development.

Looking ahead, two critical research trajectories are warranted. First, longitudinal designs are essential to capture the developmental continuity and transformation of the “not enough” mindset as individuals transition from adolescence into higher education and professional domains. Second, there is an urgent need for the development of psychometrically robust, culturally sensitive measurement instruments capable of capturing the nuanced manifestations of adolescent perfectionism within specific socio-educational contexts.

Ultimately, addressing the “not enough” mindset at its structural and psychological roots is not merely an intervention goal but a developmental imperative. Only by doing so can we enable the next generation to pursue excellence in a manner that is both psychologically sustainable and congruent with a stable sense of self-worth.

#### **Declaration by Authors**

**Acknowledgement:** None

**Source of Funding:** None

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### **REFERENCES**

1. Atkinson, J. W. (1964). *An introduction to motivation*. Van Nostrand.
2. Campbell, J. D., Trapnell, P. D., Heine, S. J., Katz, I. M., Lavallee, L. F., & Lehman, D. R. (1996). Self-concept clarity: Measurement, personality correlates, and cultural boundaries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(1), 141-156.
3. Curran, T., & Hill, A. P. (2019). Perfectionism is increasing over time: A meta-analysis of birth cohort differences. *Psychological Bulletin*, 145(4), 410-429. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000138>.
4. Curry, R. (1961). Achievement motivation and academic performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 52(4), 184-190. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.72.1.218>.
5. D’Antonio, M. (2017). *Never enough*. General Publishing House.
6. Elliot, A. J., & Church, M. A. (1997). A hierarchical model of approach and avoidance achievement motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72(1), 218-232. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.72.1.218>.
7. Elliot, A. J., & McGregor, H. A. (2001). A 2 × 2 achievement goal framework. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(3), 501-519. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.80.3.501>.
8. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117-140. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>.
9. Frost, R. O., Marten, P., Lahart, C., & Rosenblate, R. (1990). Frost, R. O., Marten, P., Lahart, C., & Rosenblate, R. (1990). The dimensions of perfectionism. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 14 (5), 449-468. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01172967>.
10. Hewitt, P. L., & Flett, G. L. (1991). Perfectionism in the self and social contexts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(3), 456-470. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.60.3.456>.
11. Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 319-340.
12. Lesser, M. (2020). *Know yourself, forget yourself*. Youth Publishing House.
13. Nguyen, T. O. (2023). *School psychological counseling*. Tre Publishing House.
14. Peng Peng & Rogier A.K., (2020). The development of academic achievement and cognitive abilities: A bidirectional perspective. *Journal of Child Development Perspectives* 14(1),15-20. <https://doi:10.1111/cdep.12352>.
15. Prudential Vietnam. (2023). *Overachiever: When achievement is never enough*.

16. Soenens, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Luyten, P., Duriez, B., & Goossens, L. (2005). Maladaptive perfectionistic self-representations: The mediational link between psychological control and adjustment. *Personality and Individual Differences* 38(2),487-498. [https://doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2004.05.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2004.05.008).
17. Stoeber, J., & Otto, K. (2006). Positive conceptions of perfectionism: Approaches, evidence, challenges. *Personality and social psychology review* 10 (4),295-319.

How to cite this article: Pham The Hung. Reconceptualizing the “not enough” mindset (overachiever syndrome) among high school students: a mixed-methods study in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam. *Galore International Journal of Applied Sciences & Humanities*. 2026; 10(2): 17-25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/gijash.20260203>

\*\*\*\*\*