

Adolescent Developmental Stressors: Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator of Psychosocial Wellbeing

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Abstract: Adolescent stress is on the rise, affecting relationships (role stress), life purpose (existential stress), emotional intelligence, and wellbeing. Research on role stress and existential stress has largely focused on adults, with assumptions that they have wider social interactions and multiple role identities. This explanatory sequential mixed - methods research aims to fill this gap by exploring adolescents' experiences of role and existential stress, and how these stressors influence their emotional intelligence and wellbeing in educational settings. A total of 375 adolescents, aged between 13 - 19 years, from Year 8-12 participated in an online survey, which included four scales: the Role Stress Scale, Purpose in Life Test, Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale, and Perceived Wellness Survey. Out of 365 participants, 165 were males and 210 were females from local schools in Adelaide, South Australia. Semi - structured interviews were conducted with 9 adolescents (6 females and 3 males) who reported high or low role and existential stress. The findings revealed a bi - directional relationship between these constructs. Participants with low role and existential stress reported positive, supportive family relationships, which seemed to provide a foundation for other relationships, likely because social skills for building and maintaining relationships were modelled in the family context. This research contributes to the field by offering insights into the impact of stress on adolescents' emotional development and suggests implications for educational practice, policy, and future research across diverse international contexts.

Keywords: adolescence stress, role stress, existential crisis, emotional intelligence, student wellbeing, mixed - method research

1. Introduction

Despite global priorities to enhance adolescents' wellbeing, stress among some adolescents continues to escalate (Colizzi et al., 2020; Mission Australia, 2018; World Health Organization, 2020). This study aims to expand the existing body of knowledge by exploring adolescents' lived experiences with role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing, providing a deeper understanding of these interconnected factors. Although adults generally engage in broader social interactions, most research on role stress (Liu & Kaplan, 2004; Lou et al., 2007) and existential stress (Fry, 2001; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006) has focused on them, leaving a gap in the literature concerning adolescents. Recent empirical and theoretical work, however, suggests that adolescents, too, experience role stress (De Bruyn, 2005; Hazel et al., 2014) and existential stress (Fitzgerald, 2005; Roos et al., 2015; Shumaker, 2012), underscoring the need for further investigation into how these stressors impact emotional intelligence and wellbeing.

Two dominant paradigms frequently utilized in research are the positivist paradigm, which asserts a single objective truth (Ponterotto, 2005), and the constructivist paradigm, which rejects the existence of one universal truth (Silverstein et al., 2006). Although traditionally viewed as incompatible, Creswell & Creswell (2022) argue that both paradigms contribute unique perspectives, making the pragmatic paradigm a valuable framework for research that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods. As Bryman (2008) asserts, combining these methods allows for a deeper analysis of relationships while still providing objective measures and classifications. Given the complexity of adolescent stress, a

mixed - methods approach, grounded in pragmatism, was deemed appropriate for this study (Kaur, 2019).

This research sought to answer the following research question: "What are adolescents' experiences of role stress and existential stress, and how are these stressors related to their emotional intelligence and wellbeing?" To explore the individual and ecological influences on adolescent stress, the theoretical frameworks of Erikson's (1968) Psychosocial Development Theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory were applied. A total of 375 adolescents, aged 13–19 years, from Years 8–12 in South Australia, participated in this explanatory sequential mixed - methods design. Phase One involved a quantitative online survey, while Phase Two included multiple case studies with nine participants, who engaged in semi - structured interviews. Cross - case analysis revealed patterns, themes, similarities, and differences across cases. The findings demonstrated that participants' quantitative scores on role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing largely aligned with qualitative descriptions, although some discrepancies were noted. The qualitative analysis provided deeper insights into the lived experiences of adolescents, highlighting the complexity and interconnections between role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing, and showcasing the value of the explanatory sequential mixed - methods design in understanding these phenomena.

This study provides crucial insights into adolescent stress, an often - overlooked issue in educational and psychological research. Understanding the interplay between role and existential stress with emotional intelligence and wellbeing

can inform future educational policies and mental health interventions.

2. Methodology– Explanatory mixed method research design

This study utilised an explanatory mixed - methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches within a pragmatic research framework (Giddings & Grant, 2009). The quantitative phase involved the collection of adolescent survey responses, which were subsequently analysed to explore potential relationships between the variables under investigation. This phase also served as a means of identifying participants for the follow - up qualitative case studies. To deepen the understanding of the impact of stress on adolescents' social relationships (role stress), sense of purpose in life (existential stress), emotional regulation (emotional intelligence), and overall wellbeing, semi - structured qualitative interviews were conducted with selected participants.

2.1 Phase 1 - Quantitative study

Quantitative research aims to quantify behaviours, opinions, attitudes, and other variables, allowing generalizations from a larger population (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This method provides insight into the status of variables and facilitates the establishment of statistical relationships between them (Bryman, 2008; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Online surveys were employed as they are effective for understanding the distribution of characteristics within a large population (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2012). The quantitative phase involved a cross - sectional survey of adolescents from year level 8 - 12 in Australia, focusing on role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing.

Cross - sectional surveys differ from longitudinal surveys by collecting data from various age groups or year levels at a single point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This design is suited for obtaining a understanding of the relationships between variables across different demographic groups (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The sample was drawn from

a pre - determined population, allowing for a broad analysis of adolescent stress and wellbeing (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2012).

The primary objective of the quantitative phase was to identify potential relationships between the variables of interest. It also served as a recruitment tool for the qualitative phase, where participants were selected for semi - structured interviews based on their survey responses. Participants voluntarily completed an online survey (refer to Appendix I), which consisted of four established scales:

- Role Stress Scale (Liu & Kaplan, 2004)
- Purpose in Life Test (Short Form) (Schulenberg et al., 2011)
- Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (Davies et al., 2010)
- Perceived Wellness Survey Scale (Adams et al., 1997)

The survey provided data on role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing, and was used to identify correlations among these variables. Demographic data, including name, age, gender, year level, and contact details, were collected to facilitate the recruitment of participants for the qualitative interviews. All personal information was securely stored on a password - protected computer. The data were analyzed using SPSS, and the results informed the qualitative phase.

2.1.1 Recruitment of participants

Snowball sampling techniques were utilized to recruit participants from year levels 8 - 12 through various channels, including personal contacts, flyers, the University of South Australia's School of Education (now Education Futures), social networking platforms, the Gifted and Talented Students' Association (GTSA) website, and schools. Snowball sampling yields participants through referrals from those who share or know of others possessing relevant characteristics (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Participants accessed the online survey via a QR code, after agreeing to the informed consent process.

In total, 375 adolescents (165 males, 210 females) participated, representing a diverse demographic. Figure 1 provides the demographic distribution of the participants.

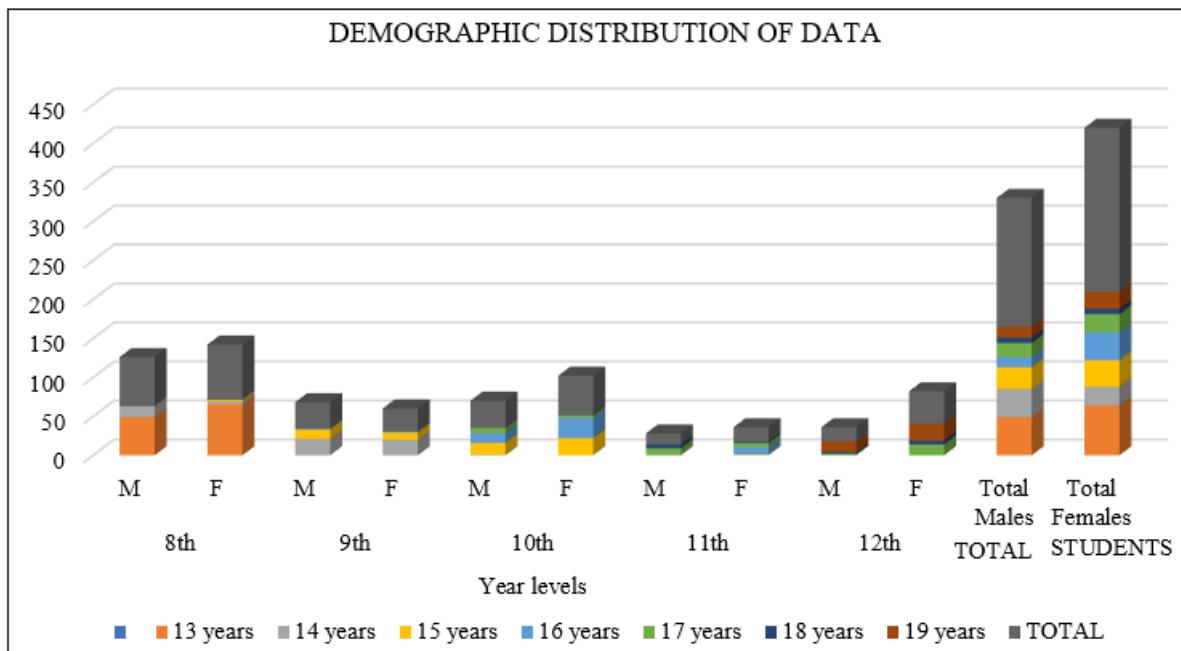


Figure 1: Demographic distribution of data for quantitative study

2.1.2 Quantitative data analysis

Data were collected using *Qualtrics* and exported to SPSS version 25, where personal identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms. To reduce potential data entry errors, the export process was carefully validated. The following statistical procedures were employed:

- Descriptive Analysis: Mean and standard deviations were calculated for the variables of role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing.
- Relational Analysis: Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to identify relationships between the variables.
- Inferential Analysis: t - tests and ANOVA were performed to assess group differences by gender and age.
- Effect Size: Effect size calculations were used to measure the magnitude of differences between groups and relationships between variables.

The results from the quantitative phase were used to inform the qualitative phase of the study, which is described below.

2.2 Phase 2 - Qualitative study

Qualitative research focuses on the processes and meanings behind human experiences, providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In this study, the qualitative phase was used to explore the lived experiences of adolescents who reported high or low role and existential stress, as identified in the quantitative survey. The in - depth interviews allowed for a more nuanced exploration of these experiences, complementing the statistical findings from the previous phase. A multiple case study approach was employed to explore variations between participants who reported high and low stress. This approach provides a detailed examination of each case, enhancing the understanding of the contextual factors influencing adolescents' stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Stake, 2006). By analyzing multiple cases, the study captured the diversity of adolescent experiences, providing insights into how role stress and existential stress impact emotional regulation and wellbeing.

2.2.1 Semi - structured interviews

Interviews offer a valuable method for gaining insights into elements that cannot be directly observed (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2012). As Fontana and Frey (2000) noted, interviews are a significant tool in comprehending human experiences, serving as one of the most effective methods for understanding participants' perspectives (p.645). In semi - structured interviews, researchers pose open - ended, broad questions to elicit participants' lived experiences (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2012). These interviews offer flexibility, making them particularly useful for research aimed at achieving a deep understanding of complex phenomena. Therefore, semi - structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method of data collection for Phase 2 of this study. The quantitative study results indicated the need for a closer exploration of adolescents who reported varying levels of role and existential stress. As such, semi - structured interviews were utilized in Phase 2 to explore these lived experiences in detail.

In this study, semi - structured interviews were conducted face - to - face in naturalistic settings with the aim to:

- Investigate comprehensive concepts, including role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing,
- Examine the relationship between adolescents' emotional intelligence, wellbeing, and stressors that may have emerged from interactions with their ecological environment,
- Explore adolescents' perceptions and experiences related to role and existential stress to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between these stressors and their emotional intelligence and wellbeing.

2.2.2 Using Semi - Structured Interviews to Empower Participants

While semi - structured interviews have many advantages, there are certain limitations that the researcher needed to address. One concern is the potential reluctance of participants to share sensitive information, such as issues involving family, school, or peer relationships, which could

hinder engagement. To address this, the researcher emphasized the confidentiality of responses and reminded participants that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Additionally, when participants were slow to respond or appeared shy, probing questions were employed along with ample time to encourage elaboration. Questions such as "Tell me more about that" or "Can you provide an example?" were used to create a more comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Patton, 1990). Silence was also allowed during the interviews to help participants feel at ease while reflecting on the topics at hand.

Another limitation was the potential lack of "active listening" during interviews, which involves listening with a purpose and can affect the quality of responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The researcher employed clarification and probing questions to ensure deeper engagement and accuracy (Louw et al., 2011). The active listening strategies used included:

- Paraphrasing: "So, you're saying. . . "
- Interpretation: "It seems like you are. . . "
- Probing: "And then what happened?"

Furthermore, the interviews were audio - recorded (with participants' consent) to ensure accurate interpretation and data analysis.

Controlling the interview process is another possible limitation of semi - structured interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Since the study involved sensitive topics, it was important to allow participants some control over the interview process. Tammivaara and Enright (1986) found that open - ended questions help participants engage more fully, especially in discussions about topics with which they are familiar. To foster a sense of control, the interview began with the open - ended question, "Tell me about yourself and your hobbies, " which encouraged participants to steer the conversation based on their interests and comfort levels. This approach allowed participants to disclose what they felt was important, fostering a more natural and insightful exchange.

Beyer (2019) noted that a supportive environment and sufficient time for reflection are crucial to obtaining meaningful responses. To address this, the researcher scheduled interviews at convenient times and locations for participants, such as in quiet areas of their homes or at a local library. Prior to each interview, the researcher ensured that participants had access to water and were comfortable. Participants were also reminded that they had the right to refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.

2.2.3 Recruitment of Participants

For Phase 2, participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique where individuals are chosen based on their knowledge and experience to provide rich, in - depth data (Patton, 1990). This technique is effective in selecting information - rich cases, allowing researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

At the conclusion of the quantitative online survey, participants were invited to volunteer for a follow - up semi - structured interview lasting approximately 10 - 15 minutes. Only those who had reported either high or low levels of role and existential stress and indicated willingness to participate were contacted.

Out of 375 participants, 20 provided contact details. Of these, 11 were selected for follow - up based on their survey results. Nine participants (aged 13 - 19) accepted the invitation, and with consent from their parents or caregivers, they participated in the semi - structured interviews. Two of these participants reported high stress levels, while seven reported low stress levels. This purposeful selection of adolescents at either end of the continuum allowed for a deeper understanding of their perceptions and experiences of role and existential stress, as well as the potential relationship between these stressors and emotional intelligence or wellbeing. Table 1 provides details of participants recruited for phase 2, qualitative semi - structured interviews.

Table 1: Distribution of participants: Phase two: qualitative semi - structured interview

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Year level
Joanne	13	Female	8
Kelly	13	Female	8
John	13	Male	8
Jess	13	Female	8
Lisa	15	Female	10
Daryl	14	Male	10
Mandy	19	Female	12
Sam	19	Male	12
Helen	19	Female	12

2.2.4 Semi - Structured Interview Schedule

The semi - structured interview schedule for this study was designed with the aim of reducing single - word responses and promoting open - ended discussions. This approach enabled the researcher to explore the factors contributing to adolescents' role and existential stress in depth. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and Erikson's (1968) Psychosocial Development Theory provided an appropriate framework for the interview schedule, which focused on four key areas: role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing.

2.2.5 Qualitative data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is a crucial process. For this study, cross - case analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes, and examine similarities and differences across participants (Richards, 2005; Stake, 2006). Interview recordings were transcribed, manually coded, and analyzed to capture the key themes and nuances within participants' experiences. The data was coded using three levels of coding: descriptive, topic, and analytical (Richards, 2005). This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of adolescents' experiences with role and existential stress, and the potential impact these stressors had on their emotional intelligence and wellbeing.

3. Ethical Considerations

The ethical conduct of this study was carefully considered in line with two primary themes: "the risks and benefits of

research" and "participants' consent, " as outlined in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, 2018, p.8).

3.1 Protection of Participants

Given the involvement of adolescents aged 13 - 19 years and the sensitive nature of the topics explored, such as role stress and existential stress, strict adherence to the ethical guidelines set forth by the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (ACRCR, 2018) and the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (UniSA HREC) was ensured. Written approval was sought from the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and, where applicable, from the Department for Education (formerly Department of Education and Children's Services), prior to participant engagement. The contact details for the researcher, supervisors, and relevant mental health organizations, such as Headspace and Beyond Blue, were provided on each page of the online survey (Kaur, 2019). Participants were reminded that they could discontinue or postpone their participation in the survey or interview at any time without penalty.

3.2 Confidentiality, Privacy, and Anonymity

Participants' confidentiality and privacy were rigorously maintained throughout the study. In the main phase of data collection, participants were asked for their name, age, year level, gender, and contact details solely for the purpose of inviting them to the semi - structured interviews. However, these personal identifiers were converted into pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and safeguard confidentiality. To facilitate easy access to the online survey, a web link and QR code were provided, allowing participants to reach the survey site directly by scanning the code (Kaur, 2019). The University of South Australia's data security guidelines were followed, ensuring that all data was securely stored. Electronic data was password - protected, and physical records were kept in locked filing cabinets in secure rooms. All electronic data will be stored securely for a period of seven years on a password - protected computer and on the University of South Australia's secure server. Data was shared only with the researcher's supervisors, and non - essential data was destroyed following the conclusion of the study.

3.3 Informed and Voluntary Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (Australian Research Council, 2018). Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and potential benefits. They were explicitly told that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants were also informed that they could choose to decline to answer any questions or to skip any topics they did not feel comfortable discussing. Detailed information on the timing and contact details for the researcher and her supervisors was made available to all participants (Kaur, 2019). For participants under 18 years of age, informed consent was obtained from both the participants and their parents/caregivers.

4. Discussion

In this study, the term 'validation' is used as an umbrella concept rather than 'rigour, ' as designing and conducting a mixed - methods study requires more than the simple application of rigorous scientific standards. Several additional techniques need to be specified to ensure the overall validity of the study.

4.1 An Explanatory Sequential Mixed - Method Approach: Developmental, Complementary, Triangulation, and Completeness Functions

The explanatory sequential mixed - method design strengthened the study by integrating developmental, complementary, and comprehensive validation methods (Bryman, 2008). Specifically, the quantitative phase (Phase 1) informed the categorization of participants and guided the selection of participants for the semi - structured interviews in Phase 2. The complementary function of the explanatory sequential mixed - method design aims to clarify and enrich findings obtained from one method with those from another (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The two phases of this study complemented each other, allowing for a deeper exploration of the same phenomenon (Bryman, 2008). The concept of completeness, or 'thick description, ' refers to capturing a complete picture of the phenomenon by employing both quantitative and qualitative methods (Bryman, 2008). Thus, in this study, data from the interviews helped explain the quantitative findings, providing greater insight into the phenomenon under investigation.

To ensure the rigour of the explanatory sequential mixed - method design, it was more appropriate to address the rigour of quantitative and qualitative studies separately (Giddings & Grant, 2009), as outlined below.

4.2 Rigour in Phase 1: Quantitative Study

Ensuring the reliability and validity of the quantitative research enabled the researcher to draw significant inferences from the results. This was achieved by ensuring that the scales adopted, adapted, or constructed for the study were both reliable and valid (Giddings & Grant, 2009). Thus, the rigour of Phase 1 was ensured by using valid and reliable pre - existing scales for measuring role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing. Additionally, the development, purpose, target populations, and administration of the scales were carefully considered.

The validation, internal consistency, and reliability of the quantitative data were addressed through statistical and analytical processes. Various checks were implemented to ensure the validity and reliability of the data, including Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to test the construct validity of the scales when used with adolescents aged 13 - 19 years in Australia. The decision on retaining the number of factors during factor analysis was based on the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalue greater than 1), the scree test, and the conceptual meaningfulness of items as per the original scales (Costello & Osbourne, 2005). Following the recommendations of Worthington and Whittaker (2006), the Kaiser - Meyer - Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling

adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were used to assess the suitability of the sample for PCA. Furthermore, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was calculated, with values above 0.60 for each scale, confirming the reliability of the scales for adolescents aged 13 - 19 years in Australia.

4.3 Rigour in Phase 2: Qualitative Study

To ensure the rigour of the qualitative study, it was crucial that both the information provided by participants and the researcher's interpretation of that information were valid and trustworthy (Giddings & Grant, 2009). Giddings and Grant (2009) suggest that employing strategies such as clear articulation of research questions, triangulation, auditability, expert critique, member checking, and negative case analysis can ensure the validity of qualitative research. The strategies used in this study to enhance validity are outlined below. One primary strategy to ensure validity in qualitative research is the clear articulation of research questions, as it guides both data collection and analysis (Giddings & Grant, 2009). In this study, the research questions were focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of role stress and existential stress in adolescents, in relation to their emotional intelligence and wellbeing.

To maximise the credibility of the findings, the breadth of understanding provided by the quantitative study ($n = 375$) complemented the depth of understanding from the qualitative study ($n = 9$), thereby increasing generalizability or transferability (external validity) while ensuring quality and trustworthiness (internal validity). This dual approach supported the integrity of the research.

Transferability is another important measure of rigour in qualitative research (Maher et al., 2018). In this study, a detailed description was provided regarding how the statistical quantitative analysis informed both the quantitative results and the selection of participants for qualitative interviews. The interview template, alongside participants' voices represented through quotations, allowed readers to determine whether the findings could be transferred to their context based on shared characteristics.

Applying cross - case analysis to the development of themes inherently validates the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Themes and categories were continuously revised through regular meetings with supervisors to discuss coding and interpretations. The independent coding process, followed by reflective analysis before supervisor meetings, allowed for refinement of codes and interpretations. This iterative process contributed to increased accuracy in identifying and representing data in the emerging and final themes.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on adolescent stress, emphasizing the significant impact of role and existential stress on young people's emotional and psychological well - being. This study underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and holistic support systems to mitigate adolescent stress, offering valuable implications for educational policymakers and mental health professionals.

The above discussion validates the rigour and suitability of the current study design. It has clearly justified the benefits of employing explanatory mixed - method approach, guided by a pragmatist orientation, thoroughly investigate the phenomenon under study, in particular, gaining insights into role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence and wellbeing in adolescents. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory together with Erikson's (1968) Psychosocial Development Theory provided a theoretical lens that underpinned the study. The quantitative online survey was employed to assess the level of role stress, existential stress, emotional intelligence and wellbeing in adolescents. It also aimed to measure any relationships between these key variables and to identify differences across gender and year levels. Qualitative semi - structured interviews were then used to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of adolescents who reported either high or low/no role and existential stress, offering a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Consequently, this research article detailed the study's methodology, research design, participant recruitment, research tools, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

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