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Social-emotional competence in early adolescence: the role of prosocial behaviour and peer acceptance

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ABSTRACT

In addition to academic achievement, social-emotional competence has been increasingly considered a fundamental predictor of success in various aspects of life, particularly in adolescents. However, social-emotional competence among adolescents is currently in declining trend. The current research aimed to investigate psychological factors influencing early adolescents' social-emotional competence. This research employed quantitative methods. After filling in informed consent, 380 junior high school students aged 12 and 14 years in Padang city, Indonesia was recruited through the cluster sampling technique. All participants completed three validated questionnaires, such as the Social and Emotional Competency Questionnaire, Prosocial Tendencies Measure, and Peer Acceptance Scale. Structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis showed that prosocial behaviour and peer acceptance had a significant influence on social-emotional competence among early adolescents. Further analysis also revealed that peer acceptance partially mediated the relationships between prosocial behaviour and social-emotional competence. Overall, this research model contributed 39.6% to explain the relationship between the studied variables. Therefore, these findings suggest that encouraging prosocial behaviours and being acknowledged by peers are established as two essential factors in promoting social-emotional competence among early adolescents.



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Introduction

Social-emotional competence has been increasingly considered a fundamental predictor of success in various aspects of life, particularly in adolescence (Guo et al., 2022; Soto et al., 2024). Characterised as a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, early adolescents are expected to achieve mental and emotional maturity to discover their roles and identities (a time of exploration), understand moral values, and develop good relationships with others (Papalia et al., 2009). However, the rapid development of technology and social media has a significant impact on the development of social-emotional competence of this age group (Dhingra & Parashar, 2022).

Moreover, there is also a declining trend in the social-emotional competence of early adolescents. The decreased social-emotional competence can be seen from the increased juvenile delinquency, such as bullying, school violence, brawl, and other negative behaviours (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2017; Rodríguez-álvarez et al., 2021). According to the data, in 2018, there were 3,145 adolescents aged ≤ 18 years who were identified as perpetrators of ill-treatment and criminal acts. Started from 2019 to 2020, there has been a significant increase

with a total of 4123 adolescents and experienced reincrease. In 2021, with 6325 cases of crime committed by adolescents (BPS, 2021). This situation can be attributed to adolescents vulnerability and susceptibility to provocation due to their poor ability to control emotions, which hindering to make rational decisions (Cardona-Isaza, et al., 2021)

In recent decades, educators, parents, and society have begun to realise a broader education perspective, focusing on increasing academic performance and improving social-emotional competence and engagement (Markow & Martin, 2005). Social-emotional competence is the ability to regulate emotions, achieve targeted goals, show empathy and respect for others, build positive relationships, and make wise decisions (Domitrovich et al., 2017). This multidimensional construct consists of affective (e.g. self-regulation), cognitive (e.g. problem-solving), behaviour (e.g. communication, prosocial behaviour, leadership), motivation, and self-expectation, such as moral development (Kim et al., 2015; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007).

Piaget's theories argue that education in middle schools should fit the physical and cognitive abilities of students while social and emotional needs are also given an important role in the education system (Slavin, 2018). Previous studies reported that emotional regulation is significantly associated with students' engagement in classes (Santos et al., 2021; Boekaerts & Pekrun, 2015). Students who can manage and regulate their emotions would be able to adapt effectively to the school's environment and have better academic performance (Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014). Thus, schools and teachers are expected to support the development of student's social and emotional skills as the central feature of schooling (Farrington, et al., 2018). For instance, educators can provide a safe and supportive environment for students. Some schools have also provided social and emotional interventions to improve students' learning experiences (Sklad, 2014).

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of having social-emotional competence for healthy development and later positive outcomes (Jone et al., 2017). Adolescents with high social-emotional competence would be more likely to have effective adjustment, good interpersonal relationships, and social acceptance (Losada et al., 2017). On the contrary, adolescents with low social-emotional competence are commonly linked to negative emotions, such as sadness, anxiety, and anger when encountering social environment (Alzahrani et al., 2019), difficulties in adapting to the school environment (Denham et al., 2012), and other problematic behaviours (Durlak et al., 2015).

Prosocial behaviour or actions that benefit others are vital in the social life of adolescents. It is reported that prosocial behaviour in adolescents promotes acceptance by same-aged friends, contributing to improvement and welfare (Dirks et al., 2018; Wentzel, 2017). Previous research found the importance of prosocial behaviour on emotional health and academic achievement in early adolescents (Oberle et al., 2023; Theokas et al., 2005). Teenagers who conduct more frequent prosocial behaviour at the start of the school year had higher peer acceptance, optimism, and better grades in the final year of school. In addition, prosocial behaviour is central to relationships in which healthy and well-maintained friendships are essential for adolescents (Padilla-Walker et al., 2015). In some circumstances, prosocial behaviour may be motivated by broader social objectives, such as gaining approval from others or achieving self-focused instrumental goals (Dirks et al., 2018).

Besides that, early adolescents tend to have an increasing moral value and desire to be accepted by others, which is related to prosocial behaviour (Carlo et al., 1992; Lerner & Sternberg, 2004). Prosocial behaviour is generally known as voluntary behaviour aimed to benefit others without expecting any reward (Rathus, 2017). This includes sharing, cooperation, donating, helping, honesty, generosity, and considering the rights and welfare of others (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989). Existing literature has stated that prosocial behaviour was associated with social-emotional competence (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Adolescents have a high social emotional competence. They tend to be easy to empathize with others. Consequently, this indirectly fosters the development of prosocial behavior in adolescents with high social emotions (Pung et al., 2021). It can be said that this prosocial behavior is an important element in developing good social relationships. Furthermore, adolescents have a need to gain recognition in a group and a more intimate relationship with peers so that the need for prosocial behaviour becomes something important that adolescents should have (Sawyer et al., 2018).

Another variable connected to social-emotional competence is peer acceptance (Losada et al., 2017). Peer acceptance refers to the ability needed by individuals to adjust to the social and cooperation (Rubin et al., 2015). Most adolescents spend a substantial portion of their time with same-aged individuals at school compared to their families, so peer acceptance is considered important, leading to frequent sharing of personal feelings and help (Papalia et al., 2009). Meanwhile, if adolescents are ostracised and belittled by their peer group, they feel isolated and would be more likely to engage in harmful behaviours (Rubin et al., 2015). Previous studies have reported a positive relationship between social-emotional competence and peer acceptance among early adolescents (Oberle, 2018; Wentzel, 2017). In other words, being socially accepted by same-aged friends would promote the social-emotional competence of the adolescents.

Pung et al. (2021) found that interpersonal relationships with peers mediate the effect of emotional competence on prosocial behaviour. In line with that, previous research reported that emotional competence positively affected prosocial behaviour among adolescents (Furrer et al., 2014). Thus, relationships with peers will affect the development of early teenagers' prosocial behaviour and social-emotional competence. As prosocial behaviour is linked to peer acceptance (Layous et al., 2012), while peer acceptance is associated with social-emotional competence (Oberle, 2013), the present study investigated the mediating role of peer acceptance in the relationship between prosocial behaviour and social-emotional competence.

Regarding the studied variables, existing literature reported the correlation of social-emotional competence with prosocial behaviour (Pung et al., 2021; Oberle et al., 2023) and peer-acceptance (Oberle, 2018; Prakoso & Farozin, 2020; APAYDIN DEMİRCİ et al., 2022). However, there are no previous studies found the investigation related to the correlation between prosocial behaviour, peer acceptance, and social-emotional competence, especially among early adolescents. In a study conducted by Pung et al. (2021), there was a significant positive correlation between emotional competence, interpersonal relationships with peers, and prosocial behavior in schooling teenagers in Malaysia. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the influence of prosocial behaviour and peer acceptance on social-emotional competence among early adolescents.

The present study

To our knowledge, several past studies have attempted to investigate the predictors of social-emotional competence in educational settings. However, studies that explored the indirect relationships between the three variables, particularly early adolescents, are scarce. Therefore, the current study investigated the association between prosocial behaviour, peer acceptance, and social-emotional competence among early adolescents. The research model is shown in Figure 1.

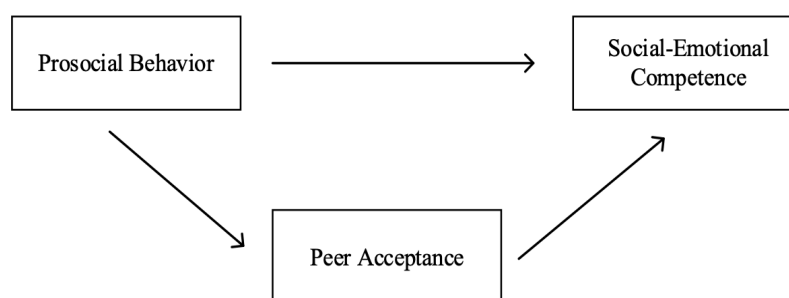


Figure 1. Research Model

The proposed hypotheses in this research were as follows:

- H1:** prosocial behaviour had a significant effect on peer acceptance.
- H2:** peer acceptance had a significant effect on social-emotional competence.
- H3:** prosocial behaviour had a significant effect on social-emotional competence.
- H4:** peer acceptance mediated the relationship between prosocial behaviour and social-emotional competence.

Method

This research used a quantitative approach, namely cross-sectional study is a research method aimed at studying the correlation between independent and dependents variables with once and at the same time measurements (Notoatmodjo, 2005). Research data were collected by using three validated questionnaires, both online and offline.

Participants

Characteristics of the participants were adolescents between the ages of 12 and 14 who were studying in junior high school in Padang City. Based on the Kritjje-Morgan Formula (Bukhari, 2021), the minimum sample was 380 subjects. All participants (59% women) were recruited through random cluster sampling. Cluster sampling is a technique that offers equal opportunities for each individual in the population to be chosen as a subject which is conducted based on clusters (areas) with specific characteristics (Gravetter & Forzano, 2012).

The clusters (areas) in this research were based on 11 sub-districts in Padang City. After randomisation, two sub-districts were selected as the sample areas: the Nanggalo sub-district and the Pauh sub-district. Early adolescents from around 12 schools in the two sub-districts participated in the study. All participants were required to complete an informed consent before participating in the study.

Instruments

This research used three questionnaires measuring each variable. All instruments were in the form of Likert scales in which responses ranged from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Instruments of social-emotional competence and peer acceptance were constructed by researchers, while prosocial behaviour measure was adapted from the original scale.

The instrument development consisted of identifying the construct and objective based on the grand theory, operationalising aspects into behavioural indicators, defining the response format, writing and reviewing the items, expert judgment, revising the items, reliability testing, and finalising the instrument for data collection (Davis, 1996; Periantalo, 2015). Meanwhile, the process of instrument adaptation referred to Beaton et al. (2000), which consisted of translation by two translators from English to Bahasa, synthesis, back translation, expert committee review, and pretesting.

Social-Emotional Competence

Social-emotional competence was measured based on aspects from Coelho et al. (2015), which has been constructed by researchers. This scale consisted of 35 items measuring five aspects: social awareness, social isolation, self-control, social anxiety, and relationship skills. The instrument had a Cronbach Alpha of 0.935. Two sample items were "I am often chosen as the leader in a group" and "I am able to calm myself when a friend is bothering me".

Prosocial Behaviour

Prosocial behaviour was assessed using the Prosocial Tendencies Measure Revise (PTMR) adapted from Carlo et al. (2003). The scale consisted of 28 items measuring different types of prosocial behaviour: public, anonymous, dire, emotional, compliant, and altruism. The scale had a reliability of 0.766, with 19 items having a good item-total correlation for the research. Some examples of the items were "It makes me feel good when I can comfort someone who is very upset" and "I think that helping others without them knowing is the best type of situation".

Peer Acceptance

Peer acceptance was measured by an instrument developed by researchers based on the theory of Parker and Asher (1993) with 36 items. The scale assessed six aspects of peer acceptance: validation and caring, conflict and betrayal, companionship and recreation, help and guidance, intimate exchange, and conflict resolution. The instrument had a Cronbach Alpha of 0.940. Examples were "My friends and I often spend time together during school breaks" and "I always try to be open about my problems to my friends".

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this research used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is used to test the measurement and structural models in the research (Hair J et al., 2014). PLS analysis was conducted by evaluating the outer model first to assess the construct measurement before analysing the structural (inner) model. All data were analysed by using statistical software.

Results and Discussions

Measurement Model Testing (Outer Model)

Based on the results, all aspects had a high construct validity based on the loading factor, which was higher than the cross-loading values. In addition, reliability testing showed that all variables had a Cronbach Alpha of more than 0.60, a composite reliability coefficient of more than 0.70, an Average Variance Extract (AVE), and a communality of more than 0.50. Therefore, it can be concluded that the measurement model had high reliability.

Table 1. Convergent Validity

Construct	Alpha Cronbach	Composite Reliability	AVE	Communality
Peer Acceptance	0.820	0.868	0.530	0.530
Prosocial Behaviour				
▪ Public	0.713	0.874	0.776	0.776
▪ Anonymous	0.751	0.843	0.572	0.572
▪ Dire	0.600	0.789	0.556	0.556
▪ Emotional	0.759	0.839	0.512	0.512
▪ Compliant	0.706	0.836	0.630	0.630
▪ Altruism	0.712	0.873	0.774	0.774

Construct	Alpha Cronbach	Composite Reliability	AVE	Communality
Social-Emotional Competence				
▪ Social Awareness	0.699	0.815	0.525	0.525
▪ Social Isolation	0.802	0.857	0.501	0.501
▪ Self-Control	0.619	0.797	0.568	0.568
▪ Social Anxiety	0.755	0.835	0.505	0.505
▪ Relationship Skills	0.756	0.837	0.509	0.509

In addition to convergent validity, a measurement model should fulfill the discriminant validity. The results showed that the square root of the AVE of a variable was higher than the correlation values between variables. Thus, the measurement model has fulfilled the discriminant validity.

As shown in Table 2, the three variables had positive and significant correlation coefficients in the range of 0.400 and 0.466. The correlation coefficient between prosocial behaviour and social-emotional competence was 0.400 which explained that higher social-emotional competence was associated with stronger prosocial behaviour.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix Between Variables

	Prosocial Behaviour	Peer Acceptance	Social-Emotional Competence
Prosocial Behaviour	1.000	0.466	0.400
Peer Acceptance	0.466	1.000	0.417
Social-Emotional Competence	0.400	0.417	1.000

Structural Model Testing (Inner Model)

Hypothesis testing was conducted by using PLS-SEM analysis. Peer acceptance as a mediator provided an additional contribution to explaining social-emotional competence. The determination coefficient of social-emotional competence was 22.8%. The results can be seen in Figure 2.

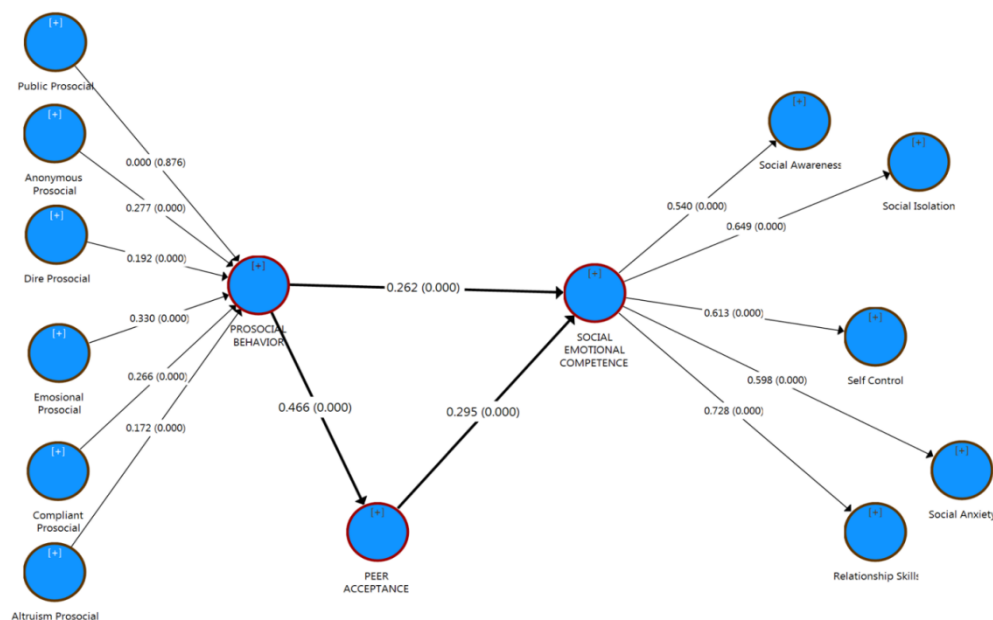


Figure 2. PLS-SEM: Path Analysis Results

Table 3. Direct, Indirect, Total Effect and Mediation

Hypothesis	Relationship	Direct	Indirect	Total	t-value	VAF	p
H1	Prosocial behaviour → peer acceptance	0.466	-	0.466	11.565	-	0.000
H2	Peer acceptance → social-emotional competence	0.295	-	0.295	5.466	-	0.000
H3	Prosocial behaviour → social-emotional competence	0.262	-	-	-	-	-
H4	Through peer acceptance	-	0.137	0.399	5.062	0.343	0.000

The effect of prosocial behaviour on peer acceptance (Hypothesis 1)

As shown in Table 3, prosocial behaviour had a significant influence on peer acceptance with a path coefficient of 0.466 (**H1 was supported**). Adolescents who committed kind actions experienced greater peer acceptance and popularity at school (Layous et al., 2012; Niu et al., 2016). It indicates that prosocial behaviour is crucial for peer acceptance because the reputation of early adolescents is formed based on evaluations of their peers towards social behaviours (Wang et al., 2019). Peer acceptance in youths can be improved through simple prosocial activities which include offering help with school work and assignments, providing timely assistance to peers, and being cooperative with others (Layous et al., 2012; Niu et al., 2016).

Academic achievement is significantly related to prosocial behaviour, and prosocial behaviour is significantly associated with the tendency to be liked by peers in all classes (Lu et al., 2018). In addition, children with high prosocial status are more socially accepted by their peers. When they are involved in conflicts, prosocial children are more likely to deal with them in a productive way and spend lesser time so they can maintain good relationships with their peers (Carlo et al., 2012; Q. Guo et al., 2018).

The effect of peer acceptance on social-emotional competence (Hypothesis 2)

In addition, peer acceptance was also reported to be a significant predictor of social-emotional competence with a path coefficient of 0.295 (**H2 was supported**). In other words, being socially accepted by peers will influence the social-emotional abilities of early adolescents. Previous studies have reported evidence that there was a positive relationship between peer acceptance and social-emotional competence among adolescents (Fink et al., 2015; Oberle, 2018; Slaughter et al., 2015). Furthermore, Nakamichi et al. (2021) showed that the social-emotional competence of pre-schoolers predicts the quality of friendships in addition to academic achievement. Therefore, social competence is considered an important factor in early adolescents, influenced by positive social environments where they are socially accepted by their peers (Luna et al., 2020).

The effect of prosocial behaviour on social-emotional competence (Hypothesis 3)

Prosocial behaviour also had a significant effect on social-emotional competence with a path coefficient of 0.262 (H3 was supported). Adolescents with higher levels of prosocial behaviour can interact well, regulate emotions, and solve problems effectively. Past research stated that the desire to provide help to others voluntarily would develop more trustworthy social relationships through the ability to interpret social cues positively (Rabaglietti & Vacirca, 2013).

Meanwhile, another study has shown that emotional competence significantly correlates with prosocial behaviour through social awareness and skills, adaptability, and empathy (Afolabi, 2013). Adolescents with higher emotional intelligence are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviour than adolescents with lower emotional intelligence (Carlo et al., 2012; Mandal & Mehera, 2017). In addition, prosocial behaviour is reported to reduce negative behaviours, such as antisocial behaviour. Adolescents generally develop more antisocial behaviour over time, and prosocial behaviour decreases the likelihood of exhibiting antisocial behaviour (Hofmann & Müller, 2018).

The mediating role of peer acceptance in the relationship of prosocial behaviour and social-emotional competence (Hypothesis 4)

The indirect effect of prosocial behaviour on social-emotional competence through peer acceptance had a positive coefficient ($0.466 \times 0.295 = 0.137$). This value means that peer acceptance mediated the effect of prosocial behaviour on social-emotional competence (**H4 was supported**). Peer acceptance acted as a partial mediator because the Variance Account For (VAF) was 0.343 or 34.3%.

In line with previous studies (e.g. Layous et al., 2012) engaging in kind acts intended to help others would increase adolescents' acceptance and popularity among same-aged friends, which will improve their social-emotional competence. Thus, encouraging prosocial behaviour and peer acceptance among adolescents would

significantly promote social-emotional competence, which is critical for various positive outcomes in current and future life.

Model Fit

Model fit can be assessed by several indicators, including coefficient of determination (R_m^2), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), and f-squared (f^2). The coefficient of determination can be measured by using all coefficients of determination (R^2) in the model. The R^2 value for peer acceptance was 0.217, whereas the R^2 for social-emotional competence was 0.228.

$$\begin{aligned} R_m^2 &= 1 - (1 - R_1^2)(1 - R_2^2) \\ R_m^2 &= 1 - (1 - 0.217)(1 - 0.228) \\ R_m^2 &= 1 - 0.604 \\ R_m^2 &= 0.396 \end{aligned}$$

Based on the calculation, the R_m^2 value of the inner model was 0.396 which indicated that the research had a fairly high model fit. The model contributed 39.6% to explain the relationship between the three variables in the study, whereas the remaining percentage was explained by other variables outside the model.

In addition, model fit can also be determined by using the Goodness of Fit (GFI) index which shows the prediction strength of the overall model ranging from 0 to 1. Based on Table 4, the Goodness of Fit (GFI) index of this model was 0.359 which means that this structural model had good predictive power which contributed 35.9% to explaining the relationship among variables.

Table 4. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)

Variable	Communality	R^2
Peer Acceptance	0.530	0.217
Prosocial Behaviour		
▪ Public	0.776	
▪ Anonymous	0.572	
▪ Dire	0.556	
▪ Emotional	0.512	
▪ Compliant	0.630	
▪ Altruism	0.774	
Social-Emotional Competence		0.228
▪ Social Awareness	0.525	
▪ Social Isolation	0.501	
▪ Self-Control	0.568	
▪ Social Anxiety	0.505	
▪ Relationship Skills	0.509	
Total	6.958	0.445
Average	0.580	0.223
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0.359	

Besides, model fit can also be analysed by calculating the f^2 values. According to the results, all f^2 values in the three paths were more than 0.02, which indicated that no paths were omitted, and the hypothetical model had a good level of model fit.

Based on the above explanation, internal factors such as prosocial behaviour and external factors such as peer acceptance promote social-emotional competence. Thus, the present study has shown that adolescents with higher prosocial behaviour and being well-liked by their peers will influence their social-emotional competence. In a study conducted by Pung et al. (2021) there was a significant positive correlation between emotional competence, interpersonal relationships with peers, and prosocial behavior in schooling teenagers in Malaysia.

Despite the findings, the present study has some limitations that can be considered in future studies. Firstly, the cross-sectional research design was used in the study, so it is recommended for future studies to apply other research designs such as experimental research or longitudinal research to be able to have further and more comprehensive analysis. Secondly, as the present study only collected data from subjects in Padang city, future research should consider employing subjects from a wider population so that the findings can produce a

broader generalization. Finally, although this research has focused on internal factor (i.e., prosocial behaviour) and external factor (i.e., peer-acceptance) of social-emotional competence, future researchers may consider investigating the effect of other variables on social-emotional competence, such as the role of social identity, which is crucial in adolescence and the influence of teacher-student interaction.

The current findings would provide insights for related parties such as educational institutions, teachers, parents, relatives, and practitioners to focus more on peer acceptance and prosocial behaviour as an effort to develop adolescents' social-emotional competence, which is proven to be beneficial for various aspects in life (Denham et al., 2012; Wentzel et al., 2021). A variety of ways provided to adolescents to enhance social emotional competence, such as group work in school activities, they will learn to be responsible for the actions they do, such as leadership and also responsibility for the ownership of duty. When the adolescents encounter difficulties, providing them with the space to set their emotions and also think about ways related to solving strategies, such problems rather than blaming them for the mistakes they make, can directly contribute to the cultivation of their social-emotional competencies. Once they have that ability, they will tend to have a good relationship with peers and they will develop adolescent prosocial behavior (Pung et al., 2021). Therefore, it is advised for the parties concerned to provide psychoeducation on how to develop social-emotional competence in adolescents so that it is expected to be beneficial to encourage adolescents in prosocial activities and have good relationships with their peers. Schools can also involve teenagers by organizing extracurricular activities as well as curriculum activities in schools by involving them to help school work program, such as gotong royong, repainting school walls, and various other activities.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the current study reported that prosocial behaviour and peer acceptance significantly promoted social-emotional competence in early adolescents. In addition, peer acceptance acted as a partial mediator in the effect of prosocial behaviour on social-emotional competence. These findings indicate that helping behaviour and being socially acknowledged by peers will promote social-emotional competence in adolescents. It can also be concluded that the research model had a fairly high fit to explain the relationships among variables in the study.

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