The relationship between self-esteem, and problem behaviour, social and academic competence

Introduction.
The data that are presented in this paper is a part of an extensive survey to 2164 students in 11 lower secondary schools in Norway. The survey mapped a wide range of themes and teachers, parents and students filled in questionnaires. In this paper a selection of data connected to self-esteem, behaviour problems, social and academic competence will be presented. The schools are situated in rural areas, villages and in country districts. The presentation will investigate the relationship between self-esteem and problem behaviour, social and academic competence.

Theoretical framework.
The present study is based on two main perspectives. The understanding of self-esteem is based on Harter’s self-perception scale (Harter 1988, 1999). The theoretical perspectives on problem behaviour, social competence and academic competence are based on Gresham and Elliott’s (1990) “Social Skills Rating System”.

Harter (1999) regards development of self-esteem both as a cognitive and social construction. The self is a cognitive construction as an individual cognitive process related to personal characteristics and experiences that leads to how you evaluate yourself as a person and how you adapt to the environment. The self is on the other hand constructed by social factors and cultural values. Harter present a multidimensional model of self esteem (Harter use the concept "models of self-evaluation” (ibid:117)). Self-esteem can’t be understood or investigated by using only one factor. How you percept yourself depends not only on factors from different environment but also as a result of your own development.

Harter presents 6 self-perception scales from early childhood to late adulthood. My study is based on the self -perception scale for adolescence. Each scale is based on different domains of self-esteem and one general factor called “Global self-worth”. Global self-worth is not a sum of the factors of domain specific like a hierarchical model. It is a general self-perception of your self-esteem.
Harter’s asserts that self-esteem is closely connected to your competence in different domains (such as scholastic competence or athletic competence). The focus on competence gives relevant links to Gresham and Elliott’s (1990) social skills system. Gresham & Elliott discuss social competence as a result of the students competence in how he cooperate, can control them selves etc. Gresham and Elliott postulates that social and academic competence and problem behaviour are learned. A consequence of this is that social competence is reflected and can be assessed through social skills like the ability to cooperate, have certain self-control, shows responsibility for others, be emphatic and can take care of your own needs and interests in groups (ibid). The connections between social competence, behaviour problems and Academic competence are well documented (e.g. Gresham & Elliott (ibid.))

**Method**

Harter’s (1988) scale for self-esteem for adolescence is used to map the students’ self-esteem. This is self-reported data from the students. The scale consists of one “Global self-worth”, and 8 domain specific subscales. The domain specific subscales are “Close friendship”, “Romantic appeal”, “Scholastic Competence”, “Athletic Competence”, “Peer Likeability”, “Physical Appearance”, “Behaviour Conduct” and “Job Competence”. The “Job Competence” subscale where left out of the mapping, because it is not usual for students in Norway in lower secondary school have significant experience with work. Due to lack of experience it would be complicated for students to report on their own self-perception of job competence.

Behaviour problems, social and academic competence are tapped by using Gresham and Elliott (1990) “Social Skills Rating System”. Each student is assessed by the teacher that has the major responsibility for the class and the student. Behaviour problems are measured as either externalised or internalized problems. In addition to these subscales Gresham and Elliott (ibid.) has developed a subscale for assessing hyperactivity. The intention of this study was to investigate high frequent behaviour problems and their relationship to other variables (such as self-esteem). Due to this the hyperactivity scale was found irrelevant for the study and was left out. Social skills were tapped as the students ability to cooperate (“Cooperation subscale), their assertion among peers (“Assertion” subscale) and how the control themselves (“Self-control subscale”).
The analyses consist of two parts. First a confirmation factor analyses was executed to investigate whether the Norwegian material gave the same factor solution as for US. The factor analyses were supplied with reliability analyses by using Cronbach’s Alpha.

Secondly a simple bivariate correlation analyses was computed between all the subscales concerning self-perception and social competence, problem behaviour and academic competence.

Harter’s self-perception scale was translated into Norwegian. The scale is not standardised in Norway or any other Scandinavian countries. The lack of standardisation could represent a critical factor for two reasons. (1) The cultural diversities between school culture in Norway and US and other countries could influence on the results. One example of this is the “Job-competence” scale mentioned in the introduction. Another example could be how students behave in schools and classrooms (“Behaviour Conduct” scale). Norway and US will probably have different norms and rules for behaviour. (2) A second critical factor is related to the translation into Norwegian. This can cause difficulties related to different understanding of words and concepts.

Despite the possible objections that can be put forward due to cultural differences and translation problems the factor analyses gives the same factor structure that is documented from Harter (ibid.). ’s Alpha for the subscales varies between .69 and .84, and the Alpha for Global Self-worth is .85.

As for the Harter scale the instruments developed from Gresham and Elliott (1990) were all translated into Norwegian and the same objection connected to the translation can be advocated concerning the use of these scales. But again the analyses give the same factor structure as from the original version. Cronbach’s Alpha for the different subscales varies from .86 to .95

**Results**

The results of the correlation analyses shows that self as a global concept has no relevant correlations to either problem behaviour, social skills and academic competence. This indicates that the factors has limited influence on how adolescence generally view themselves, and vice versa. This study shows that the connections between self-esteem and problem
behaviour, social skills and academic competence are linked to more specific parts of self-perception – the domain specific parts of self-esteem (tab. 1). The analyses shows that 3 of the 7 domain specific self-esteem areas that were used (“Job Competence” was left out in the mapping) were linked to problem behaviour, social skills or academic competence. These were “Scholastic Competence”, “Peer Likeability” and “Behaviour Conduct”. There are no noteworthy correlations to “Close friendship”, “Romantic appeal”, “Athletic Competence” and “Physical Appearance”.

Tab. 1. Correlations between self-esteem and problem behaviour, social skills and academic competence among students in lower secondary school in Norway (r>.25, p<.001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Problem behaviour</th>
<th>Social Skills</th>
<th>Ac. Comp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Externalised</td>
<td>Internalised</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour Conduct</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td></td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Likeability</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholastic Competence</td>
<td></td>
<td>.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The strongest correlation is between how adolescence percept themselves in their scholastic competence and how the teachers actually evaluate their competence (.49). This reveals two things. First it shows that there are a to a sizeable extent corresponding view on how the teachers and students evaluate their competence in the academic field. Secondly this indicates that there is a quite strong connection between concrete academic performance and the students self esteem concerning scholastic competence. Students that has a high self-esteem concerning school work actually perform well in school Scholastic competence is also moderately associated to social skills concerning the ability to cooperate with other students (.33).

The students’ self-evaluation of their school behaviour (“Behaviour Conduct”) has relevant correlations both to problem behaviour, social skills and academic competence and gives by this the broadest contribution to the analyses – even though “Scholastic competence” has the strongest correlation to academic competence). Students positive self-evaluation of own behaviour in schools is negative correlated to externalized behaviour problems (-.30). A reasonable conclusion can be that external behaviour problems to a certain extent are connected to low self-esteem concerning how students regard their school behaviour.
Self-esteem connected to how students estimate their behaviour is significantly related to social skills. There is a moderate correlation between the “Behaviour conduct” scale and cooperation (.37), and a significant but less correlation to self control (.28). It is also a low but significant correlation between behaviour conduct and academic competence (.29).

If self-esteem is linked to a positive evaluation of how students are liked by peers in school (“Peer Likeability”), we find a significant, but low correlation to internalized problems (-.27). This could either mean that some students with internalized problems (e.g. depressions and anxiety), have problems with being preferred among classmates, or that problems with building up constructive relations to peers can result in internalized behaviour problems.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Research on the relationship between self-esteem and high frequent problem behaviour in schools in Norway is limited. My study offers data that can contribute to a better understanding of a growing concern about the increase of problem behaviour in school - particularly in the lower secondary school. How can we in a better way explain the behaviour problems? The study presents evidence to the correspondence between self-esteem and different intrapersonal problems and difficulties in the social life in school. Further it presents evidence to the ongoing research in Norway that self-esteem can be linked both to academic outcome and to behaviour problems among students (Sørlie 2000, Ogden 2001, Sørlie and Nordahl 1998, Nordahl et al. 2005).

It’s plausible that the relationship between self-esteem and school problems has been paid more attention in US (Harter 1999, Meggert 2004) than in Norway. The results from research in Norwegian schools can indicate that the relationship between problem behaviour and self esteem are more multifaceted than what’s indicated in American studies can indicate (Sørlie 2000).

Harter (1999) and Meggert (2004) gives strong evidence for a link between depressive reactions and low self-esteem. In my study students with depressive reactions will most likely be found in the group of students with internalized problem behaviour. The only self-esteem measure that gives some indication to internalized problem behaviour is “Peer Likeability”.

In Norway Sørlie and Nordal (1999) found that teachers scored social isolation as the most significant characteristic for students with low self esteem.
Self-evaluation connected to behaviour (“Behaviour Conduct”) has a moderate relationship to external behaviour problems and social skills concerning cooperation. The “Behaviour Conduct” scale has significant though low correlations to self control and academic competence. The relationship between self-esteem and behaviour problems is documented by several studies outside Norway (e.g. Kaplan 1975, Davis 1993, Meggert 2004, Steffenberg & Burns 1987, Patterson et al. 1992, McCready 1997). The connection between self-esteem and problem behaviour is also a conclusion in the present study. But due to studies outside Norway – and in particular in US – it could be expected that the relationship between low self-esteem and problem behaviour should be even stronger.

The connection between low self-esteem and academic performance and competence is well documented (e.g. Broookover, Thomas and Patterson 1985, Wylie 1979, Holly 1987, Covington 1989, Walz & Bleuer 1992). The present study supports these findings. The strongest correlation in my study is between self-esteem connected to scholastic competence and the assessment from the teachers concerning academic competence.

The present study gives evidence to knowledge of a relationship between self-esteem and problem behaviour, social and academic competence. The main conclusion is that the situation in Norwegian schools corresponds to the exciting research and knowledge. There seems however to be some interesting differences between Norway and other countries – US in particular. There are no significant correlations between “Global Self-esteem” and problem behaviour, social skills or academic competence. This gives support to Sørlie’s (2000) conclusion that the situation in Norway are more complex and maybe slightly different from what we know from American studies. There is reason to believe that the connection between self-esteem and problem behaviour is weaker in the present study than in US. This is also the conclusion for the relationship between self-esteem and social competence. The study shows strong connection between self-esteem and academic competence.
References

Ogden, T. (2001) Sosial kompetanse og problematferd i skolen Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk