

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Depression and Learning Disabilities:  
A comparison of the  
emotional status of normal achieving  
and learning disabled fifth formers.

A thesis presented  
in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy at  
Massey University

Lois Wilkinson

1992

## Abstract

This study was part of a follow-up project on a cohort of school students. Achievement data had been collected since 1982 and measures on affective variables had been made in 1982 and 1983. Part of the sample had been identified in 1982 as having learning disabilities in one or more academic areas. The students who were defined as learning disabled (LD) were displaying persisting negative responses on an academic self-concept scale in 1982 and 83. The present study was designed to compare the emotional status of these students in 1986, when they were now in their third year of secondary schooling and were faced with the first national examination, with a group of students who were defined as normally achieving (NA). General self-concept, academic self-concept and depression were assessed. Students were also questioned about the amount and type of remediation they had received. Although it was hypothesised that more LD students than NA would be depressed because of their history of school failure, this was not the case. Fourteen out of 104 students were identified as having been depressed with the number of LD and NA students being nearly equal. The reasons given for their depression related more to family and social problems than to school performance. Depressed students had lower self-concept scores as predicted, but academic self-concept was not significantly associated with depression. The relationship between depression and School Certificate marks was non-significant. With this sample the type of remediation did not seem to have a measured effect on self-concept, or academic self-concept. Very few of the depressed students had received remediation

and the interaction was not able to be clarified. The results of the study show that depressed students do exist in our secondary schools and it may be necessary for teachers to learn to recognise the symptoms so that intervention is arranged. The generalisability of the information gained here on the precipitating reasons and the effects of depression is decreased by the small number of depressed students. While there is no reason to presume that these students differ from other students of a similar age, further research is necessary to confirm these findings.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisor Dr. James Chapman for his on-going assistance in the preparation for this research and its presentation as a thesis. Because of two major family crises I would not have completed this masterate without his quiet, patient support.

I would also like to thank Dr. Bob Lambourne for help he gave with the statistical analyses, and my colleagues Bill Anderson and Ken Ryba for assistance I received from them in the early stages of data analysis.

I am very grateful to Peter Millward for teaching me to use a MAC and to Nicki Harding and her team for their time in formatting this thesis.

Lastly, I must thank my partner, Allan, for all the support he has given me at home. He has helped at home with the family and more importantly, continued to insist that this thesis should be completed. His confidence in me is much appreciated.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. <b>Introduction and Overview</b>	1
2. <b>Review of the Literature</b>	6
Learning disabilities	6
Depression	18
Self concept, identity and adolescence	29
Summary	37
Hypotheses	38
3. <b>Methodology</b>	39
Sample selection	39
Sample size and attrition	42
Sample characteristics	43
Instrumentation	44
Procedure	47
4. <b>Results</b>	50
Analysis of emotional status	50
Characteristics of depressed students	53
Depression and socio-economic background	59
Depression and general self-concept	61
Depression and academic self-concept	64
Depression and identity	65

Depression and achievement	67
Remediation and its effects	69
Remediation and students with learning difficulties	69
Remediation and depression in students	73
5. Discussion	75
References	88
APPENDIX I	99

## List of Tables

Table	Page
1. Sample composition showing the attrition from the earlier study	42
2. Summary of characteristics of depressed students	52
3. Primary reasons for unhappiness given by depressed fifth formers	54
4. Secondary reasons for dysphoric mood given by depressed fifth formers	55
5. Background characteristics of depressed students	58
6. Occupational status of fathers of depressed students	60
7. Occupational status of mothers of depressed students	60
8. t-test analysis for all subscales of the Tennessee self-concept scale	62
9. Mean Tennessee total scores	63
10. Mean Brookover total scores	64
11. Identity status of form five students	66
12. Mean average School Certificate marks	68
13. Summary of the types of remediation received by students both in 1986 and in the years between 1982 and 1985	70
14. Summary of the subjects in which remediation was received by students both in 1986 and in the years between 1982 and 1985	72