Help-seeking behaviour for emotional or behavioural problems among Australian adolescents: the role of socio-demographic characteristics and mental health problems

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Table of Contents

DECLARATION ..... **X**

ABSTRACT ..... **XI**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... **XIII**

LIST OF APPENDICES ..... **XV**

LIST OF TABLES ..... **XV**

LIST OF FIGURES ..... **XXI**

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION **1**

Overview *1*

Definition of help-seeking terminology *3*

Chapter structure *8*

Adolescent mental health problems *18*

Service attendance for mental health problems *22*

Conceptualisations of adolescent help-seeking and approaches to assessment *23*

Assessing adolescent help-seeking *25*

Adolescent help-seeking assessed as intention or willingness to seek help 26

Assessment of adolescent help seeking as a one-step process 28

Adolescent help-seeking as stages of behaviour 29

Part I: Broad patterns of help-seeking behaviour *37*

Rates of help-seeking behaviour 37

Adolescents‟ preference for specific sources of help 42

Severity of problems and help-seeking 44

Barriers to and facilitators of adolescent help-seeking 46

Part II: Factors associated with adolescent help-seeking *50*

Gender 51

Age 57

Economic factors 59

Ethnicity and culture 61
Parental and family characteristics 66
Adolescents‟ mental health problems 71
Psychosocial factors 80
Summary of factors 84
The Present Study *85*
Conceptualisation of help-seeking from professional sources 85
Overall study aims and research questions 89
Associations investigated in this study 90
Chapter structure for the remainder of this thesis 98
CHAPTER 2: METHOD 99
Ethics *99*
Sample selection *99*
Informants *102*
Response rates, parental and student consent *103*
Procedure *103*
Measures *104*
Help-seeking behaviour 104
Socio-demographic characteristics 106
Measures of mental health problems 108
Measures of psychosocial functioning 112
Approach to statistical analyses *115*
Statistical analyses 116
CHAPTER 3: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS, PRELIMINARY ANALYSES AND HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR 118
Chapter structure *118*
Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample *119*
Adolescents' levels of mental health problems *121*

Levels of total difficulties (SDQ) 121

Levels of depressive symptoms (CESD score) 123

Levels of anxiety 124

Psychosocial functioning *124*

Inter-correlations of continuous variables 126

Adolescents' SDQ total difficulties score, CESD score and Anxiety score as a function of socio-demographic characteristics *128*

Summary of sample characteristics 131

Adolescent help-seeking behaviour *132*

Summary of help-seeking behaviour 137

Chapter structure for the remainder of the thesis 139

CHAPTER 4: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADOLESCENTS' MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND PROBLEM RECOGNITION 140

Introduction *140*

Defining problem recognition for analysis purposes 140

Hypotheses 142

Chapter structure 143

Results of One-way ANOVA *144*

SDQ total difficulties scale and subscales, CESD scale and Anxiety scale 144

Constructive Problem Solving scale, Interpersonal Skills subscales and Social Support subscales 150

Logistic regression analyses *153*

Predictors of perceiving emotional or behavioural problems 153

Predictors of adolescents" perceptions they had more emotional or behavioural problems than their peers 163

Discussion *173*

Mental health problems 173

Psychosocial factors 177

CHAPTER 5: THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND PROBLEM RECOGNITION AND SUBSIDIARY ANALYSES OF ALL PREDICTORS OF PROBLEM RECOGNITION 180

Introduction 180

Definition of problem recognition groups 181

Hypotheses 181

Chapter structure 184

Socio-demographic differences in the proportions (%) of adolescents in each problem recognition group 184

Logistic regression analyses 188

Socio-demographic predictors of adolescents‟ self-perceived emotional or behavioural problems 188

Socio-demographic predictors of perceiving more problems than peers 197

Discussion 205

Gender 205

Language spoken at home 207

Parental paid employment 210

Summary 212

Subsidiary Analyses 214

Perceiving emotional or behavioural problems 214

Perceiving more problems than peers 218

Overall summary of the factors associated with problem recognition 220

CHAPTER 6: THE RELATONSHIP BETWEEN ADOLESCENTS' LEVELS OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND PERCEIVING A NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP 222

Introduction 222

Hypotheses 223

The proportion of adolescents who perceived a need for professional help 224

Chapter structure 225

Results of independent samples t-tests 226

SDQ total difficulties scale and subscales, CESD scale and Anxiety scale 226

Constructive Problem Solving scale, Interpersonal Skills subscales and Social Support subscales 234

Logistic regression analyses *238*

Logistic regression analyses among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group 239

Logistic regression analyses among adolescents in the More Problems group 248

Discussion *257*

Mental health problems 257

Psychosocial factors 260

Summary 262

CHAPTER 7: THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND PERCEIVING A NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP AND SUBSIDIARY ANALYSES OF ALL PREDICTORS OF PERCEIVING A NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP 263

Introduction *263*

Hypotheses 263

Chapter structure 266

The proportions of adolescents who perceived a need for professional help according to categories of socio-demographic characteristics *267*

Logistic regression analyses *270*

Relationships between socio-demographic characteristics and perceiving a need for professional help among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group 270

Relationships between socio-demographic characteristics and perceiving a need for professional help among adolescents in the More Problems group 277

Discussion *283*

Gender 284

Language spoken at home 284

Parental status 285

Parental paid employment 286

Summary 286

Subsidiary analyses *287*

Results of stepwise analyses among the Comparable Problems group 287

Results of stepwise analyses among the More Problems group 289

Overall summary of the factors associated with perceiving a need for professional help *292*

CHAPTER 8: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADOLESCENTS' LEVELS OF MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS AND THEIR REPORTS THEY RECEIVED THE HELP THEY NEEDED 294

Introduction *294*

Proportion of adolescents who reported they received the help they needed 297

Hypotheses 297

Chapter structure 299

Results of independent samples t-tests *300*

SDQ total difficulties scale and subscales, CESD scale and Anxiety scale 300

Constructive Problem Solving ability, Interpersonal Skills and Social Support 305

Logistic regression analyses *307*

Discussion *315*

Mental health problems 316

Psychosocial functioning 321

Summary 323

CHAPTER 9: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND ADOLESCENTS' REPORTS THEY RECEIVED THE HELP THEY NEEDED AND SUBSIDIARY ANALYSES OF ALL PREDICTORS OF ADOLESCENTS' REPORTS THEY RECEIVED THE HELP THEY NEEDED 324

Introduction *324*

Hypotheses 324

Chapter structure 327

Socio-demographic differences in the proportions of adolescents who reported they had received the help they needed *328*

Logistic Regression Analyses *330*

Discussion *332*

Gender 332

Language spoken at home 333

Parental status 334

Parental paid employment 335

Forwards and backwards logistic regression analyses with all variables as predictors of the outcome variable among both subgroups of adolescents *336*

Overall summary of predictors of receiving the help that was needed *340*

CHAPTER 10: SUBSIDIARY ANALYSES AMONG ADOLESCENTS WHO DID NOT PERCEIVE A NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP 342

Levels of mental health symptoms *343*

Results of independent samples t-tests 343

Level of psychosocial functioning *345*

Results of independent samples t-tests 345

Socio-demographic characteristics *347*

Forwards and backwards logistic regression analyses *350*

Discussion *353*

CHAPTER 11: DISCUSSION 355

Study limitations *357*

Strengths of the study *361*

Summary of results *362*

Problem recognition 363

Perceiving a need for professional help 364

Receiving the help that was needed (when a need for professional help was identified) 364

Results of subsidiary analyses: Receiving the help that was needed (when a need for professional help was not identified) 365

Implications and recommendations *366*

The disparity between perceiving a need for professional help and reported rates of receiving help 366

Mental health problems 367
Constructive problem solving and coping skills 371
Social support 372
Gender 374
Parental Status 375
Ethnicity 377
Parental paid employment 379
Directions for future research *380*
Final conclusion *381*

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I give my consent to this copy of my thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

Signed,

Kerry A. Ettridge

Date:

ABSTRACT

This thesis describes the relationship between the socio-demographic characteristics and level of mental health problems experienced by young adolescents and three different stages of help-seeking through which adolescents may progress when seeking professional help for self-perceived emotional or behavioural problems: (i) Problem recognition; (ii) Perception of a need for professional help for problems; (iii) Having received the help they needed for these problems. The thesis provides new information about help-seeking by separately examining the relationship between the key predictor variables and each of these different stages of help-seeking.

Participants were 5,634 adolescents recruited for the *beyondblue* Schools Research Initiative. Adolescents completed measures of help-seeking behaviour, several measures of mental health problems (emotional and behavioural difficulties, depression and anxiety) and several measures of psychosocial functioning (interpersonal skills, constructive problem solving and perceived levels of social support).

Forty percent of all adolescents perceived that they had experienced emotional or behavioural problems in the previous six months and 18% perceived they had more of these problems than their peers. Eight percent of all adolescents perceived a need for professional help with their problems. Only 3% of all adolescents reported receiving the help they needed for their problems, despite perceiving a need for professional help.

Adolescents with higher levels of mental health problems were more likely to perceive they had emotional or behavioural problems, more problems than their peers and a need for professional help with these problems beyond that explained by their levels of psychosocial functioning. Perceiving emotional or behavioural problems was more common among

females compared to males, adolescents from a non-English speaking background compared to those from an English speaking background, and among adolescents from families where parents did not live together compared to those from families with parents living together. Adolescents from families with separated or divorced parents were more likely to perceive they had more problems than their peers and a need for professional help with their problems compared to those from families with parents living together. These associations were maintained after adjusting for adolescents‟ levels of mental health problems.

Socio-demographic characteristics and level of mental health problems explained little variability in the extent to which adolescents reported that they received the help they needed. However, results of subsidiary analyses revealed that adolescents with higher levels of constructive problem solving skills and perceived levels of family support were more likely to report they had received help.

These results highlight a need for intervention programs aimed at increasing adolescents‟ ability to recognise when they have emotional or behavioural problems and the point at which these problems require professional help, for example, by increasing levels of emotional competence and mental health literacy. These programs should also equip adolescents with resources to assist them in seeking professional help (e.g. problem solving skills and interpersonal skills) for their emotional or behavioural problems.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: *beyondblue* student survey 402

APPENDIX B: Additional results 419

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 *Definitions of help-seeking terminology used in this thesis* 7

Table 1.2 *Structure of the introduction and literature review* 9

Table 1.3 *Key studies of help-seeking* 10

Table 1.4 *The help-seeking behaviour of adolescents aged 13 to 18 years* 38

Table 1.5 *The help-seeking behaviour of adolescents aged 12 to 18 years* 39

Table 1.6 *The help-seeking behaviour of adolescents aged 11 to 18 years* 40

Table 3.1 *Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample* 120

Table 3.2 *Mean (SD) scores for the SDQ total difficulties scale and the SDQ subscales* 122

Table 3.3 *Percentage of adolescents in each depression category for the present study, the Australian National Mental Health Survey and the Oregon Adolescent Depression study* 123

Table 3.4 *Mean (SD) scores for the MSPSS subscales* 124

Table 3.5 *Mean (SD) scores for Constructive Problem Solving scale and Interpersonal Skills subscales* 125

Table 3.6 *Inter-correlations (r) between continuous measures* 127

Table 3.7 *Mean (SD) scores of the SDQ total difficulties scale, the CESD scale and the Anxiety scale for female and male adolescents* 128

Table 3.8 *Mean (SD) scores of the SDQ total difficulties scale, the CESD scale and the Anxiety as compared by categories of socio-demographic characteristics* 130

Table 4.1 *Mean (SD) scores of adolescents in each problem recognition group for the CESD scale, Anxiety scale, SDQ total difficulties scale and SDQ subscales* 145

Table 4.2	*Mean (SD) scores on the Constructive Problem Solving scale, Interpersonal skills subscales and Social Support subscales for adolescents from each problem recognition group*	151
Table 4.3	*Results of univariate and multivariable (adjusting for scores on psychosocial scales and subscales) logistic regression analyses of the outcome variable "perceiving emotional or behavioural problems"*	155
Table 4.4	*Results of multivariable logistic regression analyses of "perceiving emotional or behavioural problems" adjusting for scores on each measure of mental health problems and psychosocial scales and subscales*	159
Table 4.5	*Results of univariate and multivariable logistic regression analyses of the outcome variable "perceiving emotional or behavioural problems"*	161
Table 4.6	*Univariate and multivariable logistic regression analyses, with the SDQ total difficulties score, CESD score and Anxiety score as predictors of the outcome variable "perceiving more problems than peers"*	166
Table 4.7	*Results of multivariate logistic regression analyses of "perceiving more problems than peers", adjusting for scores on measures of mental health problems and psychosocial scales and subscales*	169
Table 4.8	*Results of univariate and multivariable logistic regression analyses of the outcome variable "perceiving more problems than their peers"*	172
Table 5.1	*Adolescents' self-perceived problem recognition (%) according to categories of socio-demographic characteristics*	186
Table 5.2	*Results of univariate (unadjusted) logistic regression analyses with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors of perceiving emotional or behavioural problems*	189
Table 5.3	*Results of the multivariable logistic regression analysis of perceiving emotional or behavioural problems with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors*	192
Table 5.4	*Results for multivariable logistic regression analysis of perceiving emotional or behavioural problems adjusting for adolescents' level of mental health symptoms (SDQ total difficulties score, CESD score and Anxiety score) and all socio-demographic characteristics*	195
Table 5.5	*Results of univariate (unadjusted) logistic regression analyses of perceiving more problems than peers, with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors*	198

Table 5.6	*Multivariable logistic regression analysis of "perceiving more problems than peers" with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors*	200
Table 5.7	*Results for logistic regression analyses of perceiving more problems than peers with socio-demographic characteristics as predictor (controlled for all socio-demographics and mental health symptoms)*	202
Table 5.8	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (forwards selection) of the outcome variable "perceiving emotional or behavioural problems"*	215
Table 5.9	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (backwards selection) of the outcome variable "perceiving emotional or behavioural problems"*	216
Table 5.10	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (forwards selection) of the outcome variable "perceiving more emotional or behavioural problems than peers"*	218
Table 5.11	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (backwards selection) of the outcome variable, perceiving more emotional or behavioural problems than peers*	219
Table 6.1	*The percentage of adolescents who perceived a need for professional help for their emotional or behavioural problems*	224
Table 6.2	*Mean (SD) scores of adolescents who did and did not perceive a need for professional help for the CESD scale, Anxiety scale, SDQ total difficulties scale and SDQ subscales, among those in the Comparable Problems group*[a]	227
Table 6.3	*Mean (SD) scores of adolescents who did and did not perceive a need for professional help for the CESD scale, Anxiety scale, SDQ total difficulties scale and SDQ subscales, among those in the More Problems group*[a]	229
Table 6.4	*Mean (SD) scores on the Constructive Problem Solving scale, Interpersonal skills subscales and Social Support subscales of adolescents who did and did not perceive a need for professional help, among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[a]	235
Table 6.5	*Mean (SD) scores on the Constructive Problem Solving scale, Interpersonal skills subscales and Social Support subscales of adolescents who did and did not perceive a need for professional help, among adolescents in the More Problems group* [a]	237
Table 6.6	*Results of univariate and multivariable logistic regression analyses (adjusting for covariates) of perceiving a need for professional help, among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[a]	240

Table 6.7	*Results of the multivariate logistic regression analyses of perceiving a need for help (adjusting for other mental health problems and covariates) among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[a]	243
Table 6.8	*Results of univariate and multivariable (adjusting for all other SDQ subscales) logistic regression analyses of perceiving a need for professional help, among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[a]	247
Table 6.9	*Results of univariate and multivariable (adjusting for covariates) logistic regression analyses of perceiving a need for professional help, among adolescents in the More Problems group*[a]	250
Table 6.10	*Results of multivariate logistic regression analyses of perceiving a need for professional help (adjusting for scores on other mental health measures and covariates), among adolescents in the More Problems group*[a]	252
Table 6.11	*Results for simple and multivariable (adjusting for all other SDQ subscale scores) logistic regressions analyses of the outcome variable "perceiving a need for professional help", among adolescents who in the More Problems group*[a]	255
Table 7.1	*Adolescents who perceived a need for professional help (%) for each category of the socio-demographic characteristics, among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[a] *and the More Problems group*[b]	269
Table 7.2	*Results of univariate (unadjusted) logistic regression analyses with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors of perceiving a need for professional help among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[a]	271
Table 7.3	*Results of the multivariable logistic regression analysis with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors of perceiving a need for professional help among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[a]	273
Table 7.4	*Results for multivariable logistic regression analysis of perceiving a need for professional help adjusting for levels of mental health problems*[a] *among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[b]	276
Table 7.5	*Results of univariate (unadjusted) logistic regression analyses with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors of perceiving a need for professional help among adolescents in the More Problems group*[a]	278
Table 7.6	*Results of the multivariable logistic regression analysis with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors of perceiving a need for professional help among adolescents in the More Problems group*[a]	280

Table 7.7	*Results for multivariable logistic regression analysis with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors of perceiving a need for professional help, adjusting for covariates (levels of mental health symptoms[a]) among adolescents in the More Problems group[b]*	282
Table 7.8	*Results of stepwise logistic regression analyses (forwards and backwards selection) of the outcome variable " perceiving a need for professional help" among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group[a]*	288
Table 7.9	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (forwards selection) of the outcome variable "perceiving a need for professional help" among adolescents in the More Problems group[a]*	289
Table 7.10	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (backwards selection) of the outcome variable "perceiving a need for professional help" among adolescents in the More Problems group[a]*	291
Table 8.1	*Mean (SD) scores of adolescents who did and did not receive the help they needed, for the CESD scale, Anxiety scale, SDQ total difficulties scale and SDQ subscales among adolescents who perceived a need for professional help*	301
Table 8.2	*Mean (SD) scores of adolescents who did and did not report they received the help they needed for the Constructive Problem Solving scale, Social Support subscales and the Interpersonal Skills subscales among adolescents who perceived a need for professional help*	306
Table 8.3	*Results of univariate and multivariable logistic regression analyses (adjusting for scores on psychosocial scales and subscales) of the outcome variable "receiving the help that was needed" among those who perceived a need for professional help*	309
Table 8.4	*Results of the multivariate logistic regression analyses of the outcome variable " receiving the help that was needed" among adolescents who perceived a need for professional help, adjusting for the scores on other measures of mental health problems and psychosocial scales and subscales*	311
Table 8.5	*Results of univariate and multivariable (for all other SDQ subscales) logistic regression analyses of the outcome variable "receiving the help that was needed" among adolescents who perceived a need for professional help*	314
Table 9.1	*Adolescents who reported they received the help they needed (%) by socio-demographic characteristics among those who perceived a need for professional help*	329

Table 9.2	*Results of univariate logistic regression analyses with socio-demographic characteristics as predictors of the outcome variable "receiving the help that was needed" among adolescents who perceived a need for professional help*	331
Table 9.3	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (forwards selection) of the outcome variable "receiving the help that was needed" among adolescents who perceived a need for professional help*	337
Table 9.4	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (backwards selection) of the outcome variable "receiving the help that was needed" among adolescents who perceived a need for professional help*	338
Table 10.1	*Mean (SD) scores of adolescents who did and did not receive help the help they needed, for the CESD scale, Anxiety scale, SDQ total difficulties scale and SDQ subscales among adolescents who did not perceive a need for professional help*	344
Table 10.2	*Mean (SD) scores of adolescents who did and did not report they received the help they needed for the Constructive Problem Solving scale, Social Support subscales and the Interpersonal Skills subscales among adolescents who did not perceive a need for professional help*	346
Table 10.3	*Adolescents who reported they received the help they needed (%) according to socio-demographic characteristics among those who did not perceive a need for professional help*	348
Table 10.4	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (forwards selection) of the outcome variable " receiving the help that was needed" among adolescents who did not perceive a need for professional help*	351
Table 10.5	*Stepwise logistic regression analyses (backwards selection) of the outcome variable "receiving the help that was needed" among adolescents who did not perceive a need for professional help*	352
Table B1	*Results of multivariable logistic regression analyses with the SDQ total difficulties score, the CESD score and the Anxiety score as predictors of the outcome variable "perceiving emotional or behavioural problems" individually adjusting for psychosocial variables*	420
Table B2	*Results of multivariable logistic regression analyses with the SDQ total difficulties score, the CESD score and the Anxiety score as predictors of the outcome variable "perceiving more problems than peers" individually adjusting for psychosocial variables*	421
Table B3	*Results for multivariable logistic regression analyses of "perceiving emotional and behavioural problems", individually and simultaneously adjusting for SDQ, CESD and Anxiety scores*	422

Table B4	*Mean (SD) scores of the SDQ total difficulties scale, the CESD scale and the Anxiety scale for each language category, among adolescents in the Emotional or Behavioural Problems group*[a]	423
Table B5	*Results for multivariable logistic regression analyses of the outcome variable "perceiving more problems than peers", adjusting individually and simultaneously for adolescents' SDQ, CESD and Anxiety scores*	424
Table B6	*Results of multivariable logistic regression analyses with the SDQ total difficulties score, the CES-D score and the Anxiety score as predictors of the outcome variable "perceiving a need for professional help" among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[a] *individually adjusting for psychosocial variables*	425
Table B7	*Results of multivariable logistic regression analyses with the SDQ total difficulties score, the CES-D score and the Anxiety score as predictors of the outcome variable "perceiving a need for professional help" among adolescents in the More Problems group*[a] *individually adjusting for psychosocial variables*	426
Table B8	*Results for multivariable logistic regression analyses of "perceiving a need for professional" help among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group*[a] *adjusting individually and simultaneously for SDQ, CESD and Anxiety scores*	427
Table B9	*Results for multivariable logistic regression analyses of "perceiving a need for professional help" among adolescents in the More Problems group*[a] *adjusting individually and simultaneously for SDQ, CESD and Anxiety scores*	428
Table B10	*Results of multivariable logistic regression analyses with the SDQ total difficulties score, the CES-D score and the Anxiety score as predictors of the outcome variable "receiving the help that was needed" among those who perceived a need for professional help adjusting individually for psychosocial factors*	429

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1.	*The fundamental stages of adolescent help-seeking employed by this study*	5
Figure 3.1.	*Percentage of adolescents at each stage of the help-seeking pathway in the current study*	134

Figure 4.1.	*The percentage of adolescents who perceived they had emotional or behavioural problems for each standardised score on the SDQ total difficulties scale, the CESD scale and the Anxiety scale*	148
Figure 4.2.	*The percentage of adolescents who perceived they had emotional or behavioural problems for each standardised score on the SDQ subscales.*	148
Figure 4.3.	*The percentage of adolescents who perceived they had more emotional or behavioural problems than their peers for each standardised score the SDQ total difficulties score, the CESD score and the Anxiety score.*	149
Figure 4.4.	*The percentage of adolescents who perceived they had more emotional or behavioural problems than their peers for each standardised score on the SDQ subscales.*	149
Figure 6.1.	*The percentage of adolescents who perceived a need for professional help for each standardised score on the CESD, SDQ and Anxiety scales, among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group.*	232
Figure 6.2.	*The percentage of adolescents who perceived a need for professional help for each standardised score on the SDQ subscale scores, among adolescents in the Comparable Problems group.*	232
Figure 6.3.	*The percentage of adolescents who perceived a need for professional help for each standardised score on the CESD, SDQ and Anxiety scales, among adolescents in the More Problems group.*	233
Figure 6.4.	*The percentage of adolescents who perceived a need for professional help for each standardised score on the SDQ subscales, among adolescents in the More Problems group.*	233
Figure 8.1.	*The percentage of adolescents who reported they had received the help they needed for each standardised score on the CESD, SDQ and Anxiety scales among adolescents who perceived a need for professional help.*	304
Figure 8.2.	*The percentage of adolescents who reported they had received the help the needed for each standardised score on the SDQ subscales among adolescents who perceived a need for professional help.*	304