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**A New Model of Students' Perceptions of the Primary  
School Classroom Emotional Environment**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
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New Zealand

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## ***Abstract***

As part of a larger project that sought to define the primary school classroom's emotional environment, this research accessed students' perceptions of the emotional environment and developed a model of these perceptions. Study 1 trialled a new method for doing focus groups with children and modified a judgement procedure so that 8 – 12 year old children could indicate their level of agreement successfully. Study 2 used 21 focus groups with 79 8-12 year old primary school students from the Lower Central North Island. From these focus groups a list of 94 items was developed that encapsulate what children notice in their classrooms as affecting the emotional environment and the language they use to describe it. Study 3 had 63 adults use a modified decision task to sort the 94 items into groups of their selection of similarity and dissimilarity. The analysis of these data revealed 11 clusters of items and 3 underlying dimensions - Teacher Affect, Teacher Expectations and Style, and Classroom Dynamics. Each dimension has two opposing ends, and each of the 94 items can be viewed on a three dimensional map showing their relationship to each of the other 93 items along these 3 underlying dimensions. The visual graphic makes these dimensions easy to interpret for those who are likely to be organising classroom environments. This research shows that when given a chance to talk about their experiences in classrooms, students can explain what they value in a classroom, what they will remember about school, and what influences them and their learning.

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Too many to mention, but to omit a few  
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I send this out hoping that it leads to a new conceptualisation  
Of the way we teach our children, the next generation.

*These projects have been peer reviewed. In addition, Study 2 has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 07/14.*

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## Foreword

My path to this thesis began when I was 13 years old. My parents were both teachers and when I started high school I had longer holidays than they did, so Dad would take me to school with him. Up until then, I had not really considered how different experiences can shape a person. My upbringing was very white upper-middle class. I lived with my parents, who are still married, and my brother in a house my parents owned, on a street where all the children were in the same situation – parents married, employed and owned their own home. None of us needed anything. My primary school was just around the corner and many, if not all, of my friends in my class were in the same situation.

The children in my Dad's class lived a very different experience. I did not fully realise this for years, but one incident in particular started me on this journey I am on today. When I was at school with Dad and had nothing better to do I would sit in the library corner of his classroom and read to anyone who would listen – which I now realise must have been quite rare for some of the children, to have someone read to them. One 8-year-old boy took a particular shine to me that year and on the way home from school one day my father and I were talking about him and how sweet he was. Then my Dad said something I will never forget “Yeah – it's a shame that he'll be dead or in jail by the age of 20.” This completely shattered the naive illusion I had of childhood. I do not believe that my Dad was a pessimist; I think he was a realist. He worked at that same school for decades, often teaching all the siblings from a family and, sometimes, the children of former students. The unfairness of these children's realities still makes me feel sick to my stomach, and what is worse, these children are not alone.

When I started studying, I started teacher aiding to help pay bills. I enjoyed working with troubled and difficult children one-on-one and developed skills and a niche working with the children, who, as one principal stated, “no one else here likes anymore”. I came to realise that these children, while often very dysfunctional in school settings, were living in a context I was still struggling to understand, and their “problem behaviour” in school served good purpose in every other context in which

they had to survive. My passion for trying to improve the reality for children was permanently ingrained.

Knowing that getting access into the home contexts for these children would be next to impossible, meant that for me the best course of action was to try and work with these children while at school. That meant trying to affect the way teachers think about, manage and interact with children. Resiliency literature tells us that often for children at risk it just takes one adult to show care and concern above and beyond the call of duty to make a meaningful difference in their lives (Webster-Stratton, 1999); a teacher is perfectly placed to be this person. Anecdotally, many adults can speak vividly about a teacher who had a huge impact on their self-concepts – either positively or negatively.

Teacher aiding allowed me to see how children reacted to different teachers. Some classrooms were very relaxed, happy working places, while others seemed to constantly be in conflict. Originally I believed this had much to do with the students in the class, but after a time I came to see the differences within a class were due to the leadership of different teachers – in some cases even the proximity of different teachers (Andersen, 2003). I was able to watch the internal dynamics of a class change over the course of the year as teachers and students became more familiar with each other. But the thing that was most obvious to me was how, regardless of the wider school climate (although this certainly had some effect), some teachers could settle their classes to a happy working buzz while other classes were miserable places to be, to the point that I felt quite sorry for the children stuck there for six hours a day, five days a week, forty weeks of the year.

Trying to capture details of the effect the teachers have, so that we can all learn how to be better caregivers and teachers, can be attempted many ways. For me though, hearing from the children directly was the most appealing and proved to be very telling. The hope is that the information gathered from the children can, when added to other sources of information, begin to challenge the way adults think and are taught about children and adults' roles in their lives.