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# Creating a Positive Emotional Climate in an Elementary School Classroom

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Nicole Good

*Dominican University of California*

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Title Page

Creating a Positive Emotional Climate in an Elementary School Classroom

Nicole Good

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

School of Education and Counseling Psychology

Dominican University of California

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Signature Sheet

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Nicole Good  
Candidate

May 1, 2015  
Date

Madalienne F. Peters, Ed.D.  
Thesis Advisor

May 1, 2015  
Date

Elizabeth Truesdell, Ph.D.  
Program Chair

May 1, 2015  
Date

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Table of Contents

TITLE PAGE..... 1

SIGNATURE SHEET ..... 2

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. .... 3

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... 4

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..... 5

ABSTRACT ..... 7

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION..... 8

    STATEMENT OF PROBLEM ..... 8

    PURPOSE STATEMENT ..... 9

    RESEARCH QUESTION ..... 9

        DEFINITION OF TERMS ..... 9

    THEORETICAL RATIONALE..... 9

    ASSUMPTIONS ..... 10

    BACKGROUND AND NEED ..... 10

    SUMMARY ..... 11

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ..... 12

    INTRODUCTION ..... 12

    TEACHER INFLUENCE IN MANAGEMENT PRACTICES ..... 12

    CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES ..... 15

RELATED RESEARCH.....	17
SUMMARY .....	20
CHAPTER 3 METHOD.....	21
ETHICAL STANDARDS .....	22
ACCESS AND PERMISSIONS .....	22
DATA GATHERING STRATEGIES .....	22
DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH.....	22
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS.....	23
POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT AND DISCIPLINE.....	23
CLASS MEETINGS AND OPEN DIALOGUE.....	24
BRAIN BREAKS FOR STUDENTS .....	24
DAVE NETTELL STRATEGIES.....	25
RELATED QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS.....	26
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION /ANALYSIS.....	27
SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS.....	27
COMPARISON OF FINDINGS TO THE LITERATURE.....	27
LIMITATIONS/GAPS IN THE RESEARCH.....	28
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	28
OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY .....	28
ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....	29
REFERENCES .....	30

Abstract

All teachers create an environment in their classrooms that sets an emotional tone for students. Teachers may find it hard to choose the right classroom management strategies to create a positive classroom climate for their students. As a result, teachers have expressed an interest in this topic for over 40 years. The purpose of this research is to identify aspects of successful classroom management systems in order to assist teachers in creating a successful learning environment and a positive emotional climate for learning. The research literature revealed that classroom management is instrumental in establishing a climate for learning that is positive for children. A negative learning environment is detrimental to students learning needs in the classroom. The present study is qualitative in design using interview protocol. Participants include elementary teachers at a school in the greater San Francisco Bay area. They form a sample of convenience. Results identified common strategies teachers could use to create a positive climate in their classroom.



## Chapter 1 Introduction

Throughout my years of attending school, many of my friends and I had classes that we would like to go to and other that we did not. Many years later as we reflect it is important to ask ourselves what made the classes we loved going to so welcoming? How do teachers create a place where students look forward to coming each day? Students want to come into a class where they feel comfortable and welcomed. When students are in classes where they feel comfortable, they have the ability to learn more in the class because they can raise their hand without getting laughed at and ask the teacher questions without getting yelled at. Many times, aspects of a class that people remember and love are aspects that created a positive classroom climate.

### Statement of Problem

An important part of any classroom is a positive classroom climate. Each teacher has a different management system, where the classroom climate can vary drastically. Some classrooms are run well and it is apparent that the teacher and the students are happy and thriving in their environment. Other classrooms seem different where students do not have the same comfort level as other classrooms, seemingly more negative. With many different management processes, it is important to understand what are effective classroom management strategies in the 21st century? An effective classroom for learning has a positive classroom climate, which in the 21st century is more important than classroom management itself.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify effective classroom management strategies for teachers to create a positive classroom climate. Teachers can learn use a specified management practice to provide an effective learning environment for their students.

## Research Question

This study addressed the following research question:

What are effective elementary teacher's strategies for creating a positive emotional climate in the classroom?

## *Definition of Terms*

**Positive Classroom Climate-** A classroom climate is positive where students thrive in an environment that supports their learning and mood in a positive way. Students in the class feel safe and welcomed by their teacher and supported by their classmates. This setting creates a rich educational experience.

**Effective-** The result of doing an action in a meaningful manner that provides positive results.

**Strategies-** Various methods to obtain a specific result that is intended to support a goal or lesson.

## Theoretical Rationale

Students who experience a positive classroom climate are influenced in a way that has an effect on their learning year. It allows students to gain the ability to feel comfortable and have a positive outlook on learning. Once students feel comfortable, they do not have to worry about

feeling uneasy asking questions or asking for help. Students who feel they are part of a positive classroom community become increasingly involved and engaged in the various activities. These positive attitudes and environment begin with the teacher's ability to model positivity in order for students to do the same. Baer and Bandura (1963) identified Social Learning Theory, where people learn behaviors through the observation of other people, and in turn imitate behaviors they see modeled by others (Baer and Bandura, 1963). In this case, if teachers portray a positive climate within their classroom, students tend to respond to this positivity and react to it in the same manner, Social Learning Theory of Bandura, supports a learning environment where everyone feels safe. Some teachers have successfully chosen strategies in their classroom that create a positive climate in the classroom for students. Some teachers though, may find it hard to choose the right classroom management strategies to create a positive classroom climate.

### Assumptions

The researcher identifies several assumptions and beliefs on the importance the impact of classroom environment has on student learning. The climate of an elementary classroom greatly affects a student's overall attitude. More specifically, it affects a student's attitude towards other students in the class, the teacher and the activities they do. A positive classroom climate will reduce the student anxiety, while a negative classroom climate has the opposite effect, increasing student anxiety.

### Background and Need

All teachers create an environment in their classrooms that sets a tone for the learning environment for students. The topic of classroom climate has been an important aspect for

teachers for nearly 40 years. An article by the American Psychological Association, indicated that when teachers create a positive relationship with students in their class there are changes in the student including, a contribution “to their social skills, promote academic performance, and foster students’ resiliency in academic performance”.

### Summary

A positive emotional classroom climate is important to a 21<sup>st</sup> century learner for success in their learning environment. They will feel increasingly comfortable, become involved and engaged in learning. Baer and Bandura (1963) Social Learning theory supports this by stating that teachers who create a positive emotional climate will receive the same behavior from their students in return. There are various strategies that teachers use in order to develop this climate. The purpose of this study is to examine effective classroom management strategies for teachers to create a positive emotional classroom climate. The focus of this study is on identifying effective strategies for creating a positive climate in the classroom. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all teachers have different management styles. It is important for teachers to find success in creating a positive classroom climate. Classroom climate is important in creating a supportive environment for students to learn.

## Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

### Introduction

The purpose of this research is to identify the aspects of successful classroom management systems in order to create a successful learning environment and a positive climate for learning. Information was gathered from academic library searches using online resources. The Review of the Literature is organized into three sections: Teacher Influence in Management Practices, Classroom Management Strategies, and Related Research.

### Teacher Influence in Management Practices

In the following six studies, a teacher's influence on students and the climate of a classroom is examined. Each study revealed ways that a teacher can influence the climate of a classroom. The last study suggests that with all of these strategies, it is important that teachers have training to implement them successfully.

Baer and Bandura (1963) Social Learning theory suggests that people modify their behavior based on the observation and modeling of other people's behaviors. The results of this study expressed that a child's behaviors can be influenced by an adults pattern of behavior through imitation. A child with reinforcement of such behavior can maintain this behavior. This suggests that teachers who possess a positive attitude and models a safe climate, influences their students to do the same, creating a positive climate in the classroom.

Johnson (2009) focuses on connected classroom approach. This approach relates to an environment that invites communication and support. The author then investigates this construct and its relationship to classroom climate. The results of this study suggested that a teacher cannot control the behavior of a student, but rather can support positive interaction between students. A strategy for this would be to provide interaction in the classroom on a regular basis. It is important for the student interaction to be positive in order to create positive collaboration with others that is ongoing throughout the year.

Gillen, Wright and Spink (2011) examined the student, rather than the teacher, in their study to identify what they believed were important factors in a positive climate through the elements of a classroom. They obtained this information through responses from focus groups and questionnaires. They first compare the classroom to the whole schools climate, saying that the two environments have a relationship and, indeed, influence each other. The authors also discuss a multi dimensional classroom where there are three main influences to examine: relationships, systems maintenance and change, and goal-orientation. Lastly, this study shares its results with practical strategies that the authors believe can be used right away, such as sharing lesson objectives with students, displaying work, making the most of the lesson/ being prepared, and so on.

Swafford, Bailey and Beasley (2014) reveal six components of a positive learning environment that include security, shelter, social contact, symbolic identification, task instrumentality, pleasure. The author explains that why it may be hard for teachers, both new and seasoned, may have trouble incorporating all of these into their classroom. All students have different learning styles and various needs that may make it difficult to give students the individual attention, while

creating an all-around positive climate in the classroom. Furthermore, the article breaks down how teachers can incorporate the six components in each grade. Students in grade levels demonstrate different developmental abilities based on age. This can change the approach each grade may incorporate the six components of a positive classroom climate.

Bilač (2012) is an elementary school teacher from Croatia whose main focus is the importance of supporting students in the classroom. She states that successful guidance from the teacher will lead to conditions that foster a positive climate in the classroom. The influence may also have an effect on the school as a whole. She shares a story of her experience in her classroom. She implemented teamwork into many activities for students. Her efforts led to improved results in classroom climate where each student was responsible for working collaboratively within the group. Another aspect included applying what they were learning to something in their personal life. This allowed students to understand the concept. While many of these articles support various management strategies, Hoffman, Hutchinson and Reiss (2009) found that training to support such strategies is important.

Hoffman, Hutchinson and Reiss (2009) collected data from a survey on the importance of teacher knowledge in creating a positive classroom climate. This author of this study urges teachers to advocate for training in behavior management, especially focused on motivating students in improving their behavior, linking it to continued learning. Data indicated that there is a link between positive classroom climate and teacher background knowledge and training in the areas of classroom management and strategies to promote a positive climate.

## Classroom Management Strategies

In the following five studies teachers' influence in their management practices is studied. Each study included reveals specific strategies that teacher use in order to create an emotionally positive climate inside the classroom.

Committee for Children (2014) focused on key factors for creating a positive climate in the classroom. The authors provided three aspects of creating a positive climate, displayed in a pie chart. The three aspects include, developing and reinforcing classroom rules and norms, promoting positive peer relationships, and nurturing positive relationships with all students. Lastly, the authors bring up a point of evaluation within a year for teachers. They suggest scheduling individual personal interviews with students or collecting data through questionnaires, focusing on students' feelings and teacher performance.

Harris and Lowery (2002) discuss data collected from a survey of 123 teachers who were enrolled in a principal preparation program. This survey was conducted to seek insight into behaviors participants thought were the most valuable behaviors for a principal to encourage teacher to use in creating a positive school climate. Three themes were identified as follows: respecting students, communicating with students, and supporting students.

MacSuga-Gage, Simonsen and Briere (2012) focus on clear and specific strategies to establish a positive classroom environment. The authors' main focus on three areas: explicit and engaging academic instruction, implementation of classroom management strategies, and the ability to build relationships with families of students. An important point that the authors make is that



teachers have different situation with their students. The strategies described in the article support teachers, however it is up to them to interpret the strategies in a useful way.

Sterrett (2012) asks the question: What can school leaders do to support teachers in building stronger relationships with students? When strong relationships are built, students feel that they are part of a comfortable learning community in the classroom. This is one aspect of a positive classroom climate. The author suggests the following: to promote a positive vision, like maintaining positive energy, provide extra support both in good and bad times, create classroom communities, and to build consistent relationships.

Weinstein, Curran and Tomlinson-Clarke (2003) focus on Culturally Responsive Classroom Management (CRCM) to better understand diverse student populations in each classroom. The purpose of this article is to help teachers strengthen their ability to manage a diverse classroom and teach specific strategies for creating culturally responsive classroom management. They offer six strategies which include: creating a physical setting that supports academic and social goals, establishing expectations for behavior, communicating with students in culturally consistent ways, developing a caring classroom environment, working with families, and using appropriate interventions to assist students with behavior problems. The authors conclude that becoming a CRCM teacher means that one is able to manage a diverse classroom and consider specific strategies for enacting culturally responsive classroom management. This includes having a certain state of mind as well as knowing how to put ideas into practice. Teachers should be aware of their values and biases and how they reflect on their ability as a culturally responsive in the classroom. CRCM teachers strive to become knowledgeable about community culture and

where their students live. They also understand the ultimate goal is to provide students with an equal opportunity to learn.

### Related Research

The following eight studies contain various aspects of related research related to creating a positive emotional climate in an elementary classroom.

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) focused on a model that includes the importance of teachers' social and emotional competence (SEC), student and teacher relationships, effective classroom management, and program implementation. The authors explained that the components of this model contribute to creating a positive classroom climate. The authors then discuss research they conducted on the relationship between SEC and teacher burnout. This includes developing stress reduction to support teachers.

Kearney and Peters (2013) collected data through a survey of students and teachers on attitude about classroom. The authors suggested that it is important for teachers to think about the students and their attitudes in the class. The research showed that students adapt to a positive classroom climate when they have a good relationship with the teacher and other students in class. Furthermore, competition between students stood in the way of a positive climate and created unnecessary friction between students. This research looked through the lens of the students instead of the teacher.

Kipps-Vaughan, Ponsart and Gilligan (2012) consider human factors in teachers, by looking at their needs and focusing on stress and its effect on learning environments. When people in a school experience a great deal, it is important for school leaders to establish stress management

opportunities for teachers and students. The program contains four to five 60-minute sessions where the staff meets and participates in specific activities to alleviate stress. The article does not go into great detail about all of the activities. There is also time spent talking about stress management practices and a plan to help the stress from continuing or coming back.

Leflot, van Lier, Onghena and Colpin (2010) focused on preventative measures in behavior management. The purpose of this study was to see how teachers in elementary school classrooms use behavior management to address reducing disruptive, by using a universal classroom preventative intervention. The study focuses on students with developing signs of oppositional and hyperactive behavior, which are linked to other problems such as social or learning problems. In the future these behaviors may lead to drug use, academic problems or social problems. There are two main issues that Leflot, et al (2010) investigate. First, they wanted to know if the Good Behavior Game (GBG) had a positive effect on a teacher's behavior management and a child's classroom behavior, specifically, does GBC reduce a child's chance of producing hyperactive and oppositional behavior. If GBC is successful, then the second issue was to determine if improvements in teacher behavior management skills, contributed to a reduction of oppositional and hyperactive behavior. The authors investigated the effects of GBG as a classroom preventative intervention that helps teachers in elementary school with tools to reduce disruptive behavior in the classroom.

Pianta, Belsky, Houts and Morrison (2007) measured opportunities to learn in a classroom, looking at the quantity and quality of classroom instruction. Results were gathered by visiting and observing 2500 classrooms throughout 10 cities. The results of this study revealed that even though the climate may seem positive in a classroom, there was not consistent instructional

support. The researchers discussed the need to design a plan to observe teacher instructional skills, and also provide teacher-training interventions.

Rubin (2004) explains the vast amount of research that has been done about positive climates in the classroom and provides a rubric to evaluate important factors that safe and effective schools embody. The rubric contains 2 sections. These sections include; school quality standard, and school and classroom management strategies. Within these sections, there are subcategories that explain what should be in place for each school to create a safe place for students. When students feel safe, they increase their positive experiences.

Self- Brown and Mathews (2003) found evaluation approaches to assess student achievement, goal orientation and how they influence classroom structure, specifically in mathematics. The results indicated that specific types of classroom evaluation structure influences student achievement goals. Students under the contingency contract condition set significantly more learning goals compared to students without contingency contracts. Students under token economy conditions set more performance goals than learning goals. The authors conclude that in the classroom, a structure that emphasizes the importance of individual goals and efforts show that learning goals become more important to students. The results can lead to many positive effects such as ability, self-competence and motivation to stay on task.

Tetler and Baltzer (2011) examined inclusion classroom setting for students with disabilities and their attitude towards such a learning environment. The author looked at various degrees of classroom environment including attitudes of other students. Although this study is specific towards inclusion, the author does provide various charts in his study that provide insight into the different aspects of what a positive classroom climate should possess.

## Summary

Evidence supported teacher use of various kinds strategies in order to create a positive emotional classroom climate. The first six articles study a teacher's influence on students and the climate of a classroom. The following five articles examine a teacher's influence in their management practices. The last eight studies contain various related research that is relevant to the research. All of the studies identify aspects of successful classroom management systems in order to create a successful learning environment and a positive climate for learning.

## Chapter 3 Method

This research follows qualitative design using a questionnaire. The primary focus of the research question is as follows: What are effective elementary teacher's strategies for creating a positive climate in the classroom? The research question served as a focus in the development of a questionnaire. The researcher observed that some styles of classroom and behavior management were more effective than others. In order to find successful strategies the researcher gave a questionnaire to eight elementary school teachers.

Seven teachers were given the questionnaire during this study. The teachers signed a consent form stating they were willing to serve as participants in this study. The sample was selected from one K-5 elementary school in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. All teachers interviewed are white, middle-class females. Participants formed a sample of convenience. The researcher had a relationship with these teachers prior to the study. The researcher chose these teachers because they have successfully created a positive climate in their classroom through classroom management practices. A questionnaire was developed that included five questions:

1. What are specific strategies that you use in your classroom to create a positive emotional climate for students?
2. In what ways are students affected emotionally when learning in a positive environment?
3. How do you ensure your classroom maintains a positive emotional climate throughout the whole school year?
4. On a scale from 1-5, how important is an emotionally positive climate to the success a student has academically?
5. On a scale from 1-5, how important is a positive emotional climate in your classroom?

### Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to the ethical standards for protection of human subjects of the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally a research proposal was submitted and reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved and assigned number 10350

### Access and Permissions

Participants were informed of the purpose of this study and willingly agreed to complete the questionnaire by signing a consent form. They were informed that their insight and answers would be completely confidential and the researcher would use pseudonyms to ensure that their responses would be used in summary form only.

### Data Gathering Strategies

There were two data gathering strategies that lead the research in this study. First, the researcher reviewed existing literature on the topic and gathered knowledge from questionnaires given to elementary school teachers.

### Data Analysis Approach

The data were collected through questionnaires that were given to consenting elementary school teachers. Data were gathered and analyzed. The results are discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4 Findings

Seven public school teachers from one K-5 elementary school in the greater San Francisco Bay Area provided data for this study. These teachers grade level experience include 1, 2, 3 and 4th. Teachers with varying teaching experiences helped to answer the researcher's question, reflecting on their many years of watching and interacting with students' development. Due to the various grade levels, one strategy might be less effective in one grade, but very effective in another grade. The researcher looked for strategies that were common in many grade levels. After the researcher examined the questionnaires, four common strategies emerged across the grade levels. Strategies are discussed below.

## Positive Reinforcement and Discipline

One common strategy that every teacher discussed in the questionnaire suggests that in order to create an emotional positive climate, teachers should focus on positive reinforcement and discipline. Beyond this, each teacher suggested different ways that this strategy could be implemented into the classroom. Teachers #1 and #6 both noted that they use positive reinforcement both as a class and with individual students frequently. Other teachers suggested specific ways that positive reinforcement and discipline can be used. Teacher #2 and #5 use peer scouts in their classroom so that students recognize peers that are making good choices in the class. Likewise, teacher #6 also mentioned using a marble jar as a positive reinforcement tool. If students are making good choices, the teacher places marbles in a jar, positively rewarding them. Once the jar is full they receive a party or another type of reward. Teacher #2 discussed using a school-wide positive reward system where students receive Golden Eagle tickets from adults on



campus that are put into a box. At assemblies names are selected and students receive extra recess as a reward for their positive behavior.

### Class Meetings and Open Dialogue

Teachers discussed having class meetings and creating an open dialogue with students. Teachers #1, 3, and 6 all specifically state that they have class meetings every week. Teachers 4 and 7 state that they like to create an open dialogue for students where students feel comfortable to come to the teacher to talk, whether it is about everyday topics or issues they might have.

Teacher #7 expanded on this to say that they create an environment where students feel safe. This means they feel safe to talk to the teacher, participate in the class without negative criticism from their peers, and feel safe taking risks in their learning. Teacher #7 also explained that they have their students use problem solving strategies to solve a problem either in the classroom or with a peer.

### Brain Breaks for Students

The third common strategy teachers reported was to create time for brain breaks. Teachers #2, 4, and 6 mentioned using brain break strategies in their classroom. Teacher #2 explained the use of age appropriate humor. Students are able to take a break using humor and laughter. Teachers #4 and 6 both mentioned brain breaks specifically as a strategy. This includes GoNoodle.com, a quick game, or moving students' bodies. Teacher #2 went on to mention that a walk or cool off time is an important strategy. This is a type of brain break where students can take a walk around the quad of the school quietly in order to get their blood flowing and bring oxygen to their brains. Also this teacher mentioned that they use meditation frequently as a brain break. Teacher #6

stated that play time was important once a day. During playtime, students have a set of time where they can choose various activities to play cooperatively with other students. Some examples of what teacher might have in their classroom include play kitchens, Legos, puppets, puzzles, cars, and so on.

### Dave Nettel Strategies

The fourth common strategy that many teachers discussed in their questionnaire was to use Dave Nettel Strategies. Teachers #1, 3, 4, 5 all stated that they use strategies learned from the author in order to create a positive emotional climate. “Dave Nettel’s Cooperative Adventures are a series of increasingly complex physical and mental challenges, not games or activities, designed and presented so that groups can practice “in real life”, as opposed to “role playing” and “pretend”, the skills of trust-building, healthy risk-taking, and cooperation so that they can be kind, safe, and productive”(Chapman, 2014, para.5).

Dave Nettel is a former teacher who is now a consultant for various schools. Dave uses small posters that have meaningful sayings on them. The purpose is to portray various strategies that students can use in the classroom in order to be productive students and positive members of the class. Another special way he encourages a positive climate in any classroom is by teaching them a handshake (Chapman, 2014). This is one of the first challenges he does with a class. It is a friendly way for students to work together. Dave Nettel trainings are scheduled yearly where he teaches.

Although Dave Nettel only comes a few times in a school year, he leaves strategies that the teacher can use throughout the school year. For example, he has a poster that says,

“Productive...getting stuff done” (Dave Nettel’s Parenting Blog, 2014). Posters like this that are displayed in the classroom remind students of strategies that will support them.

#### Related Questionnaire Findings

Participants were asked how their students’ emotions were affected by a positive emotional climate. Four teachers said the students felt safe and comfortable. This allowed them to feel that they can take risks. They are not afraid of getting in trouble or made fun of if they get an answer wrong or make a mistake. Also, the participants mentioned that their students would feel comfortable to come to them if any problems arise.

Participants were also asked how they ensure maintaining a positive climate in their classroom the whole school year. Three teachers mentioned that they review the rules constantly with students, making sure the rules and consequences were clear. They also initiate team-building activities throughout the year to maintain a positive climate. Lastly, when participants were asked on a scale of 1-5 how important a positive emotional climate is in their classroom, all participants chose 5, meaning of the highest importance, the foundation for all other aspects of a classroom.

## Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

### Summary of Major Findings

Strategies that create a positive emotional climate in the classroom may work better, or may be more appropriate depending on the teacher and the class. Some teachers may use different strategies than other teachers. The most important thing is that teachers are able to create a positive emotional climate in their classroom using strategies that work for them. Beyond this, each year teachers meet new students who may have different needs compared to students the year before. The teacher may choose different strategies than other years to meet the differing needs of children.

### Comparison of Findings to the Literature

Research articles in the Review of the Literature focused on specific strategies that would be useful for teachers in helping them create a positive classroom environment. As indicated previously, the literature overall indicated that teachers might use different strategies. The research showed that indeed the teachers did use some of the same strategies, but many of the strategies that they included on the questionnaire were specific to their classroom settings. They could be divided into four specific categories, which are explained in the findings. In concert with the literature, teachers interviewed believed that it is important to focus on positivity in their classroom with their students on daily basis.

### Limitations/Gaps in the Research

First, the research was limited to only one school where the participants agreed to serve as volunteers. This limits the research to a specific demographic and location. The small sample size created a limited scope of strategies that teachers used, and mentioned strategies that were specific to the school district and general area. Also, the research only looked at strategies and did not look at other factors such as environment, socioeconomic status, and teacher background.

### Implications for Future Research

Future research can continue to examine what works for teachers and students, not just through teacher responses on a questionnaire, but actually going into classrooms and seeing what works in practice and why these strategies work. Also, future research can examine other factors that influence positive environment. This could include more comprehensive research in a study that tracks student progress over a long period of time.

### Overall Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to help both students and teachers at school and in their particular classrooms. Through this research teachers can make sure that students feel comfortable and they are having a positive experience at school. Also, this research helps teachers who are struggling with this in order to give them give them strategies to guide them through creating a positive emotional climate in their classroom.

## About the Author

The researcher is currently attending Dominican University of California in order to obtain a Master of Science degree in Education in May of 2015, while also working at a local elementary school as a long-term sub in fifth grade. In May of 2014 the researcher graduated from the Multiple Subject Teacher Credential Program at Dominican University of California. Living in the Bay Area her whole life, the researcher hopes to become a teacher at an elementary school in the local area and implement the research in this paper as well as other colleagues' research to enhance teaching practices.

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