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**Ability, Effort and Control:
Can Attribution Theory Be Valid in the New Zealand Classroom?**

**A thesis submitted to
the Education Department
Massey University
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Philosophy (Education)**

Sue Anne Watson

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**For my daughters,
Elizabeth, Joanna and Fleur**

Abstract

The validity of basic assumptions of attribution theory, that ability is conceptualised as an internal, stable and uncontrollable cause of success and failure in achievement situations, and effort is an internal, unstable and controllable cause, was investigated in relation to New Zealand school students. Two groups of students, Form One (11 years) and Form Four (14 years) responded within the classroom on three occasions in different school subjects to questionnaires about their ability and effort in regard to the tasks they had just been engaged in. Their achievement, ability and effort levels were rated by their teachers. A subset of students was also interviewed.

Both age groups perceive ability (intelligence) as unstable, capable of being increased by schoolwork, yet rated their ability the same in the three different subject areas. In both age groups most students rated their specific and general effort as stable within subject areas but as unstable over three subject areas. Their general effort ratings correlated significantly with the teachers' ratings for effort. So, students perceive their effort as unstable but their relative effort level was stable.

The controllability dimension was measured by the number of cognitive strategies given to improve ability and to demonstrate effort. The "controllability of ability" variable was a significant contributor for achievement for Form One students and the "controllability of effort" to achievement for the older students. The lowest achievement group had significantly fewer metacognitive statements than the other two groups which suggests that for them effort is not controllable.

The findings suggest that some key principles of attribution theory may not be appropriate for New Zealand school children because their conceptualisations of ability and effort do not fit the constructs of attribution theory.

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