

Title

From Regulation to Connection: Classroom Gestures as a Pathway to Social-Emotional Learning in Singapore Primary Schools

Research Overview

This study examines Singapore primary school students' perceptions and emotional responses to teachers' classroom management gestures. As the second phase of a broader research programme, it explores how gestures function as relational and social-emotional cues, contributing to understanding culturally responsive Social-Emotional Learning practices in Asian educational contexts.

Purpose of Study

Building on Phase 1, which examined teachers' perspectives on classroom management gestures, this study investigated how Singapore primary school students interpret teachers' classroom management gestures, the factors shaping these interpretations, and students' emotional and behavioural responses to such gestures. The study aimed to foreground students' voices in understanding the relational and emotional meanings embedded in everyday classroom practices.

Research Methods

Twenty-one students from different primary levels were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Participants viewed a one-minute video featuring five common classroom management gestures and completed a worksheet. Quantitative data were analysed using Fisher's Exact Test to examine associations between gesture types and students' emotional responses. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to explore students' interpretations, feelings, and behavioural responses.

Results and Discussion

Findings indicated that students primarily recognised classroom management gestures as regulatory tools used to gain attention, promote silence, or redirect behaviour. A significant association was found between gesture type and students' emotional responses ($p = 0.004$). Familiar gestures such as Silent Clap and Eyes on Me were commonly associated with calm or neutral emotions, whereas less familiar or more complex gestures, including Complete the Rhythmic Clap and Stop Sign, sometimes caused confusion or mixed feelings.

Qualitative findings further revealed that students' responses were shaped by gesture clarity, familiarity, perceived fun, and the quality of the teacher-student relationship. While most students complied with the gestures, a small number expressed hesitation, defiance, or uncertainty, particularly when gestures were unclear or inconsistently used. These findings suggest that classroom gestures are not experienced merely as behavioural signals but are interpreted as relational cues that carry emotional meaning.

Situated within the broader discourse on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and relational pedagogy, the findings highlight the importance of non-verbal communication in fostering emotional safety and engagement in classrooms. The study suggests that teacher professional development may benefit from moving beyond behaviour management techniques to include greater awareness of classroom gestures and non-verbal relational communication within a broader SEL approach. By attending to how gestures are perceived by students, teachers may be better positioned to communicate care while maintaining authority.

More broadly, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on culturally responsive SEL in Asian educational contexts. It demonstrates that even routine classroom practices can play a meaningful role in shaping students' emotional experiences and sense of connection in school. By foregrounding students' perspectives, the study underscores that relational sensitivity is not peripheral but central to effective pedagogy.

Keywords

- Social-emotional learning
- Relational pedagogy
- Teacher gestures
- Classroom management
- Primary education