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## Leading with Heart and Mind: A case study on How Emotional Intelligence Shapes Leadership Styles and Executive Functioning in Catholic Higher Secondary School Principals in Kerala

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### Abstract

This study explores the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in shaping leadership styles and executive functioning among Catholic higher secondary school principals in Kerala through a qualitative case study approach. Amid growing complexities in educational leadership, principals are expected to demonstrate not only managerial competence but also emotional and cognitive clarity. The study focuses on three principals selected from reputed Catholic institutions known for value-driven leadership and high community engagement. Using semi-structured interviews, institutional documents, and classroom observation reports, data were collected over a three-month period and analysed thematically. Findings revealed that high emotional intelligence facilitated adaptive leadership behaviours-ranging from transformational to servant leadership styles-which, in turn, enhanced the principals' executive functioning capabilities such as decision-making, planning, stress management, and moral reasoning. The study affirms that EI operates as a foundational element influencing how leadership is enacted in emotionally complex and ethically charged school settings. The paper concludes with theoretical implications for educational leadership models and practical recommendations for leadership development in faith-based schools. By emphasising the interdependence of emotion, cognition, and action, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on holistic school leadership.

**Keywords:** Emotional intelligence, executive functioning, leadership styles, catholic schools, Kerala, qualitative research, case study, educational leadership

### Introduction

In recent years, leadership in education has undergone a profound transformation, with growing attention to the emotional and psychological dimensions of school administration. Principals are no longer perceived solely as administrative heads; they are mentors, visionaries, community anchors, and moral guides. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala, where educational leadership is inextricably linked to values of service, compassion, and social justice (Cook & Simonds, 2011) [8].

In such settings, school principals are tasked with navigating the delicate balance between educational outcomes and ethical responsibilities. This dual burden necessitates a high level of executive functioning-a set of cognitive processes

that includes planning, problem-solving, working memory, and emotional regulation (Miyake et al., 2000; Diamond, 2013) [19, 10]. However, what often determines a leader's ability to execute these functions effectively is their emotional intelligence (EI)-the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically (Goleman, 1995) [13].

Existing research has extensively documented the impact of EI on leadership effectiveness (Bar-On, 2006; Wong & Law, 2002) [2, 28], but few studies have explored how EI *shapes* leadership style and *enhances* executive function in value-oriented educational contexts. In Kerala, Catholic schools represent a unique cultural and institutional landscape where academic excellence is pursued alongside

moral and spiritual development. Yet, there is a dearth of qualitative research focusing on how school principals in such environments embody emotionally intelligent leadership.

This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the lived experiences of three principals in Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala. Using a multiple-case study design, it investigates how EI informs their leadership behaviours and cognitive decision-making processes.

### Objectives of the study

- To understand how emotional intelligence manifests in the day-to-day leadership of Catholic school principals.
- To examine how emotional intelligence influences the leadership style adopted by these principals.
- To explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and executive function in faith-based school leadership.

### Research Questions

1. How do emotionally intelligent principals navigate leadership challenges in Catholic schools?
2. In what ways does emotional intelligence influence their leadership style and interactions?
3. How does EI contribute to executive functioning in terms of planning, stress regulation, and decision-making?

### Significance of the Study

By focusing on the qualitative dimensions of leadership, this research provides a nuanced understanding of how emotional intelligence operates in practice. It offers critical insights for leadership training programmes in religious and value-oriented institutions. Moreover, it contributes to the growing field of emotionally intelligent leadership theory, expanding it beyond Western corporate contexts into Indian educational and religious spheres.

### Review of Literature

This section examines the theoretical and empirical foundations of the three interrelated constructs central to the study: emotional intelligence, leadership styles in educational contexts, and executive functioning. It also highlights existing research gaps in the context of Catholic school leadership in India, justifying the relevance of a qualitative case study.

### Emotional Intelligence: Concepts and Educational Applications

The term *emotional intelligence* (EI), first formally introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990) [23], refers to the ability to perceive, assimilate, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others. Goleman (1995) [13] expanded this concept and popularised a model containing five domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These emotional capacities form the psychological bedrock upon which effective leadership is built, particularly in emotionally demanding environments like schools.

In the educational leadership context, EI has been linked with higher job satisfaction among staff (Brinia et al., 2014) [5], improved student outcomes (Day & Leithwood, 2007) [9],

and more inclusive institutional cultures (Fullan, 2001) [11]. Teachers are more likely to trust and follow leaders who demonstrate emotional stability, empathy, and transparency (Wong & Law, 2002) [28]. EI is especially crucial in Indian school leadership, where social-emotional challenges often intersect with cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity (Singh, 2004) [24].

However, EI is not merely a soft skill-it plays a direct role in problem-solving and cognitive efficiency. Leaders high in EI are able to process emotional information more effectively, make balanced decisions under pressure, and recover more quickly from setbacks (Mayer et al., 2008) [18].

### Leadership Styles in Value-Oriented Schools

Leadership in faith-based schools like Catholic institutions is shaped not only by educational objectives but also by spiritual and ethical commitments. The two most relevant leadership styles in such contexts are transformational leadership and servant leadership.

Transformational leaders, as described by Bass and Avolio (1995) [3], are visionaries who inspire their followers through idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. These traits closely align with EI components such as motivation, empathy, and social skills. Studies by Belmonte and Cranston (2009) [4] show that Catholic school principals who exhibit transformational behaviours are more effective in building community engagement and promoting staff development.

Servant leadership, developed by Greenleaf (1977) [14], places the emphasis on serving others as the primary goal of leadership. In schools, this translates to prioritising the growth of teachers and students over bureaucratic efficiency. Such a leadership style requires high emotional sensitivity and moral commitment-traits consistent with emotional intelligence (O'Hara, 2006) [20].

Both these leadership styles contrast sharply with authoritarian models still found in parts of the Indian educational system. Principals who lead with empathy and purpose are more likely to foster a school culture grounded in trust, collaboration, and resilience (Cook & Simonds, 2011) [8].

### Executive Function and School Leadership

Executive function (EF) refers to high-level cognitive processes that regulate thoughts and behaviours, including planning, working memory, task switching, and emotional regulation (Miyake et al., 2000; Diamond, 2013) [19, 10]. Although EF is traditionally studied in neuropsychological and child development contexts, its relevance to leadership performance is now being recognised.

In schools, principals must make numerous decisions daily-ranging from managing teacher conflicts to responding to unexpected administrative crises. Effective executive function enables them to prioritise tasks, delay immediate gratification for long-term goals, and act ethically even under pressure (Anderson, 2002) [1]. Research by Grissom and Loeb (2011) [15] indicates that school leaders with high EF are more effective instructional supervisors and policy implementers.

While EI and EF are distinct constructs, they are deeply interconnected. Emotional self-awareness and regulation-core components of EI-enable leaders to manage stress and

cognitive overload, which in turn strengthens executive functioning (Bar-On, 2006) [2].

### Emotional Intelligence as a Foundation for Leadership Practice

The relationship between EI and leadership style has been well established. Carmeli (2003) [7] found that leaders with high emotional intelligence are more likely to adopt transformational behaviours. Similarly, Harms and Credé's (2010) [16] meta-analysis confirmed that emotionally intelligent leaders were consistently more effective across various organisational settings.

In educational institutions, EI influences the way principals respond to interpersonal conflicts, make ethical decisions, and support emotional well-being in their schools (Brinia et al., 2014) [5]. Emotional intelligence does not simply *enhance* leadership-it actively shapes it. This influence is magnified in faith-based institutions, where leaders are also moral exemplars.

Yet, the nuanced relationship between EI, leadership style, and cognitive functioning (executive function) has received limited attention in Indian educational research. Most studies have either focused solely on teacher performance or used quantitative metrics, overlooking the lived, experiential aspects of leadership.

### Research Gaps

Despite extensive international literature on emotional intelligence and leadership, the following gaps are evident:

- A lack of qualitative, context-specific case studies exploring how EI shapes leadership in Indian Catholic schools.
- Insufficient exploration of executive function as an outcome influenced by emotional intelligence and leadership style.
- Minimal research combining emotional, moral, and cognitive dimensions of leadership in a single framework.

This study addresses these gaps by using a qualitative, multiple-case design to understand how emotional intelligence manifests in leadership practice and enhances executive functioning in Catholic higher secondary school principals in Kerala.

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### Research Methodology

This section outlines the qualitative research approach adopted for the study, including research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations. Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research questions, a multiple-case study methodology was chosen.

### Research Design

The study employed a qualitative, multiple-case study design, which is particularly suited to exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2014). This approach allows for in-depth examination of the lived experiences, behaviours, and perceptions of school principals, offering a nuanced understanding of how emotional intelligence manifests in leadership and executive functioning.

The case study design was informed by an interpretivist paradigm, recognising that leadership practices are socially constructed and context-dependent. Each case-the individual principal-was treated as a bounded system within a unique school environment.

### Participant Selection and Sampling

The study purposively selected three principals from Catholic higher secondary schools in three different districts of Kerala: Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Thiruvananthapuram. Selection criteria included:

- At least five years of experience as principal in a Catholic higher secondary school.
- Recognition by the Diocese or school board for leadership effectiveness.
- Willingness to participate in multiple rounds of interviews and provide access to relevant documents.

This purposive sampling approach ensured that participants had rich, relevant experience in faith-based educational leadership (Patton, 2002) <sup>[21]</sup>.

**Table 1:** Participant Profile

Participant Code	Gender	School Type	Years as Principal	Leadership Training Received
P1	Male	Diocesan-run Co-ed School	12 years	Yes (IGNOU + diocesan seminar)
P2	Female	Congregation-run Girls' School	9 years	Yes (CBSE + in-service)
P3	Male	Urban Jesuit Institution	15 years	Yes (international seminar)

### Data Collection Methods

Three sources of data were collected over a period of three months:

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Each principal participated in two rounds of 60–90-minute interviews. The interview protocol focused on three themes:
  - Experiences and practices of emotional intelligence
  - Leadership behaviours and decision-making
  - Cognitive challenges and executive functioning in practice

2. **Institutional Documents:** Minutes of staff meetings, school newsletters, and leadership communications were reviewed to triangulate self-reported behaviours with documented evidence of leadership actions.
3. **Observation Notes:** While full classroom or administrative observation was not permitted due to policy constraints, principals allowed access to selected recorded school events (assemblies, orientation meetings), which were analysed for non-verbal cues, emotional tone, and interaction styles.



### Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006)<sup>[6]</sup>. The process involved:

- **Familiarisation:** Repeated reading of transcripts and notes.
- **Coding:** Manual line-by-line coding of interview transcripts.
- **Theme Development:** Grouping codes into higher-order themes relating to EI, leadership styles, and executive functioning.
- **Triangulation:** Comparing interview data with documents and observations for consistency.

The coding framework was both deductive (based on theoretical concepts such as Goleman's EI model and Bass's leadership styles) and inductive (emerging from participants' narratives).

NVivo 12 software was used to manage and organise the qualitative data.

### Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure the rigour of qualitative findings, the study employed the following strategies:

- **Member Checking:** Interview summaries were shared with participants for validation.
- **Peer Debriefing:** Coding and theme development were discussed with two senior researchers in education.
- **Thick Description:** Contextual details were preserved to enable transferability.
- **Triangulation:** Data from interviews, documents, and observations were cross-verified to reduce subjectivity.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee. Each participant signed an informed consent form and was assured of:

- **Confidentiality:** Names and institutions were anonymised.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Participants could withdraw at any point.
- **Non-maleficence:** Care was taken to avoid any harm, stress, or reputational risk.

All audio recordings were securely stored and deleted after transcription.

### Case Presentation and Thematic Analysis

This section presents a detailed account of the three selected cases, followed by a cross-case thematic analysis. The goal is to explore how emotional intelligence shapes each principal's leadership style and supports their executive functioning within the context of Catholic higher secondary schools.

#### Case 1: P1 – “The Compassionate Strategist”

P1 leads a diocesan-run co-educational school located in central Kerala. With over 12 years of leadership experience, P1 describes his role as "a blend of emotional listening and strategic foresight." The principal regularly engages in emotional check-ins with both staff and students and is known for his participatory management style.

### Key Observations

- **Emotional Intelligence:** P1 demonstrates strong self-awareness and empathy. He frequently refers to his emotional state in decision-making: "I wait until my mind settles before I talk to a teacher who has erred."
- **Leadership Style:** Transformational leadership is evident through his vision-building with staff and encouragement of innovation: "I allow teachers to propose new teaching models; I never impose."
- **Executive Function:** P1 showed excellent planning and inhibitory control. For example, he delayed a major infrastructure decision due to emotional tensions among staff, opting for consensus before action.

**Supporting Document:** A school newsletter showed a quote from P1: "Leadership is first about listening, second about guiding." This aligns with EI-influenced decision-making.

#### Case 2: P2 – “The Servant Reformer”

P2, a female principal in a congregation-run girls' school, exemplifies servant leadership rooted in spiritual commitment. She described her leadership as "motherly, firm, and prayerful." Despite operating in a highly traditional environment, she implemented several progressive reforms-like menstrual health sessions and leadership circles for students.

### Key Observations

- **Emotional Intelligence:** P2 displays high levels of empathy and emotional regulation. She stated: "When teachers raise their voice, I lower mine. Emotional balance is non-negotiable."
- **Leadership Style:** Clearly servant-leadership-oriented. Her motto, often repeated in meetings, is: "To lead is to serve."
- **Executive Function:** Demonstrates strong working memory and task monitoring. She remembered parent grievances from over a year ago and addressed them without prompting.

**Supporting Document:** Minutes from a PTA meeting show P2 resolving a conflict over student discipline using non-punitive dialogue and active listening strategies.

#### Case 3: P3 – “The Reflective Visionary”

P3 heads an urban Jesuit institution with over 15 years of experience. Known for being philosophical and introspective, he refers to leadership as "a spiritual responsibility as much as a social one." His school consistently ranks among the best in the district, despite serving underprivileged communities.

### Key Observations

- **Emotional Intelligence:** P3 exhibits deep emotional processing. He said: "Before I act, I reflect: What impact will this have on the human spirit?"
- **Leadership Style:** He blends transformational and distributed leadership. He trusts his staff fully and focuses on long-term institutional goals.
- **Executive Function:** P3's planning, mental flexibility, and prioritisation stood out. During COVID-19, he

created a hybrid teaching plan in 72 hours, incorporating both emotional support and academic continuity.

**Supporting Document:** Internal emails showed motivational messages to staff like: “Do not lead with fear. Lead with purpose and presence.”

### Thematic Analysis: Cross-Case Themes

After coding the data, several themes emerged across all three cases:

#### Theme 1: Emotional Regulation as a Leadership Anchor

All principals demonstrated high emotional regulation. They paused before reacting, maintained composure during conflict, and used self-reflection as a tool for decision-making. This aligns with Goleman’s (1995)<sup>[13]</sup> assertion that self-regulation is central to leadership maturity.

“I always give myself time before I speak. It saves me and the other person.” – P1

#### Theme 2: Empathy Enables Participative Leadership

Empathy featured strongly in each case. Principals used emotional insights to guide interactions and policy choices. Staff feedback mechanisms, open-door policies, and conflict resolution strategies were grounded in relational sensitivity.

“If a student is acting out, we must ask: What is her home like?” – P2

#### Theme 3: Leadership Styles Reflect Emotional Strengths

Each principal’s leadership style was shaped by dominant emotional traits:

- P1’s transformational leadership was supported by confidence and motivation.
- P2’s servant leadership stemmed from compassion and interpersonal awareness.
- P3’s distributed and reflective leadership was linked to his internalisation of values and foresight.

#### Theme 4: Executive Function is Emotionally Anchored

Planning, flexibility, and moral judgment-key dimensions of executive function-were observed in relation to EI competencies. Leaders used emotional awareness to improve their working memory (remembering people’s needs), inhibitory control (managing impulses), and mental flexibility (adapting strategies).

“Planning is not just about timelines. It’s about emotional timing.” – P3

### Discussion of Findings

This section interprets the cross-case themes presented in the previous section in light of existing theories and literature. It demonstrates how emotional intelligence (EI) contributes to shaping leadership behaviours and supporting executive function among principals in Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala.

### Emotional Intelligence as the Bedrock of Effective School Leadership

The findings support Goleman’s (1995)<sup>[13]</sup> foundational claim that emotional intelligence is the single most important determinant of leadership success. Across all

three cases, principals consistently applied self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation in their leadership approaches. These were not occasional traits but consistent leadership practices embedded in their daily interactions and decision-making.

This aligns with Bar-On’s (2006)<sup>[2]</sup> assertion that EI equips leaders to manage interpersonal challenges effectively while maintaining organisational harmony. P1’s emotional self-awareness enabled him to delay decisions until tensions subsided, illustrating strong inhibitory control-a key executive function.

Furthermore, the principals’ use of empathy to address staff and student needs echoes findings by Wong and Law (2002)<sup>[28]</sup>, who argued that emotionally intelligent leaders foster psychologically safe and collaborative work environments. This is particularly vital in Catholic schools, where leadership is expected to model both professional and moral excellence.

### Emotionally Intelligent Leadership Styles

The leadership styles adopted by the three principals were distinctly influenced by their dominant emotional traits, confirming the argument made by Carmeli (2003)<sup>[7]</sup> that EI shapes leadership enactment.

- P1’s transformational leadership was grounded in emotional motivation and self-confidence. He encouraged innovation and allowed teachers autonomy-traits supported by emotional stability and high self-efficacy.
- P2’s servant leadership emanated from deep empathy and a moral framework rooted in faith. She used emotionally intelligent dialogue to resolve conflicts, consistent with Greenleaf’s (1977)<sup>[14]</sup> servant leadership ideals.
- P3 demonstrated distributed and reflective leadership, characterised by emotional wisdom, ethical clarity, and cognitive flexibility.

This alignment between emotional capacity and leadership style mirrors the conclusions of Harms and Credé (2010)<sup>[16]</sup>, who found that transformational and servant leadership correlate strongly with higher emotional intelligence scores.

### Executive Function as Emotionally Driven Cognition

The data showed that executive functioning-often viewed as a purely cognitive ability-was in fact deeply influenced by emotional processes. This supports emerging perspectives in neuropsychology that suggest executive functions are not separate from emotion but are intricately linked (Diamond, 2013)<sup>[10]</sup>.

### All three principals exhibited high performance in key executive functions such as

- **Working memory:** Remembering individual student or parent concerns (P2).
- **Planning and organisation:** Rapid implementation of hybrid learning (P3).
- **Mental flexibility:** Adapting leadership style based on staff needs (P1).

These abilities were consistently underpinned by EI competencies like empathy, emotional regulation, and

perspective-taking. This confirms the proposition by Mayer et al. (2008) <sup>[18]</sup> that EI enhances leaders' cognitive adaptability and moral reasoning.

### The Influence of Faith and Institutional Values

An important contextual factor in this study was the Catholic ethos of the schools, which appeared to reinforce emotionally intelligent leadership. All principals interpreted their roles not just as administrators but as *moral stewards* of the school community.

This dimension is less commonly addressed in mainstream leadership literature, but it was central to the participants' narratives. As Cook and Simonds (2011) <sup>[8]</sup> argue, Catholic school leaders must integrate academic goals with gospel values—a task that requires not only ethical clarity but emotional intelligence.

P3's statement—“Leadership is spiritual before it is strategic”—summarises this view, where emotional insight supports cognitive reasoning, and both are informed by moral conscience. This triadic relationship between emotion, cognition, and ethics is especially relevant in value-based institutions.

### Implications for Theory and Practice

#### For Leadership Theory

- The study demonstrates that emotional intelligence is not merely a modifier of leadership but a core determinant of how leadership is enacted.
- It expands the notion of executive function by integrating emotional processing as a facilitator of cognitive planning, decision-making, and behavioural regulation.
- The findings support a more holistic model of educational leadership that includes emotional, cognitive, and ethical competencies—particularly in faith-based or mission-driven contexts.

#### For Educational Practice

- Leadership development programmes should embed emotional intelligence as a key module, particularly for principals in religious or value-oriented institutions.
- Recruitment and evaluation processes could incorporate EI assessments to better identify leaders capable of emotional regulation and strategic planning.
- Mentoring systems that promote reflective practice and empathy-based training can support ongoing leadership development.

#### Limitations of the Study

- **Small sample size:** With only three cases, the study cannot claim broad generalisability.
- **Context-specificity:** The findings are specific to Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala and may not apply to other educational or religious settings.
- **Data collection constraints:** The absence of real-time classroom or administrative observations due to policy limitations may have restricted behavioural data collection.

#### Directions for Future Research

- Comparative case studies involving principals from secular, Hindu, Muslim, or non-denominational schools

in India could identify how EI and executive function manifest across faith traditions.

- Longitudinal research could explore how emotional intelligence in school leaders evolves over time and how it impacts institutional change.
- Mixed-method studies combining survey data with qualitative interviews could validate the thematic findings presented here and offer more generalisable conclusions.

### Conclusion and Implications

This study sought to explore how emotional intelligence shapes leadership styles and enhances executive functioning among principals of Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala through a qualitative case study approach. Drawing upon rich narratives, institutional artefacts, and thematic analysis, the research revealed that emotional intelligence is not a peripheral skill but a central force in the enactment of ethical, effective, and cognitively sharp school leadership.

The principals studied exhibited a combination of emotional awareness, empathy, and self-regulation that directly influenced their leadership behaviours. Whether it was P1's transformational visioning, P2's nurturing servant leadership, or P3's reflective and adaptive approach, each case demonstrated that leadership styles were closely tied to emotional competencies. Importantly, these emotionally driven styles translated into enhanced executive functioning, enabling the principals to plan effectively, adapt under stress, and make value-aligned decisions.

The findings reinforce the argument that in faith-based institutions like Catholic schools, leadership must be understood as a triadic relationship between emotional intelligence, cognitive function, and ethical responsibility. School principals do not merely implement policies or enforce rules; they shape community morale, uphold institutional integrity, and guide young minds through complex social realities. Such responsibilities demand a leadership model that is emotionally attuned, ethically grounded, and cognitively agile.

From a practical standpoint, the study highlights the need for leadership development programmes that go beyond administrative training to include emotional intelligence modules, ethical decision-making workshops, and reflective practice sessions. Diocesan education boards and teacher training institutes should prioritise emotionally intelligent leadership development to meet the growing demands of educational leadership in value-driven contexts.

While limited in scale, this research offers a nuanced perspective on how emotional intelligence can serve as a foundational asset for school leaders, particularly in culturally and morally complex environments like Catholic schools in Kerala. It is hoped that this study contributes to the evolving discourse on emotionally intelligent leadership and inspires further qualitative inquiries into how school leaders navigate the emotional and ethical dimensions of their work.

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