



Examining the interaction effect of emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness on executive function: A quantitative study of Catholic Higher Secondary Principals in Kerala

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Abstract

This study investigates the interaction between emotional intelligence (EI) and effective leadership and their combined influence on executive functioning among principals in Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala. With increasing administrative and pedagogical challenges in educational institutions, understanding the cognitive and emotional drivers of effective school leadership has become imperative. Grounded in Goleman's model of emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness theories such as transformational and servant leadership, this research adopts a quantitative approach using structured scales. A total of 120 principals across Catholic schools in Kerala were surveyed using standardised instruments: the Emotional Intelligence Scale by Schutte *et al.* (1998), the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1995), and the BRIEF-A scale for executive functioning. The data were analysed using SPSS, including correlation, multiple regression, and interaction/moderation analysis. Findings revealed that both emotional intelligence and effective leadership independently have significant positive effects on executive functioning ($p < .01$). More importantly, their interaction significantly predicts higher executive functioning levels, suggesting that principals who combine emotional competence with transformational or participative leadership styles are better equipped to plan, manage, and make strategic decisions.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, leadership effectiveness, executive function, school principals, catholic schools, Kerala, educational leadership, transformational leadership

Introduction

In the contemporary educational landscape, leadership effectiveness has emerged as a critical determinant of institutional performance, student outcomes, and teacher satisfaction (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005) [17]. Particularly in Catholic higher secondary schools, where moral and ethical dimensions intersect with pedagogical responsibility, school principals are expected to display both cognitive sharpness and emotional wisdom. The ability to manage executive functions such as goal setting, problem-solving, prioritisation, and conflict resolution is essential for school leadership (Anderson, 2002) [1]. At the heart of such effectiveness lies a growing recognition of emotional intelligence (EI)-the capacity to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively in interpersonal and organisational contexts (Goleman, 1995) [12]. Leadership in schools extends beyond administrative competence to include the ability to inspire, engage, and motivate diverse stakeholders. The Catholic school

environment, often steeped in values of compassion, integrity, and service, places added emphasis on emotionally resonant leadership (Cook & Simonds, 2011) [8]. Consequently, effective leadership in such institutions is not merely a function of technical decision-making but a complex interplay of emotional, social, and executive skills. The concept of executive function, largely discussed in neuropsychology and cognitive science, has gained traction in educational leadership studies. It encompasses high-level cognitive processes that regulate behaviour, such as inhibition, working memory, and mental flexibility (Miyake *et al.*, 2000) [19]. These functions are vital for principals navigating complex, high-pressure environments where multitasking, stress management, and long-term planning are daily requirements.

Despite the theoretical clarity around the constructs of EI, leadership, and executive functioning, limited empirical research has explored their intersection within Indian religious schooling contexts. Kerala, with its dense

concentration of Catholic educational institutions, offers a unique environment to examine how emotionally intelligent and effective leadership influences a principal's executive functioning. This study thus seeks to fill this research gap through a structured empirical investigation.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the levels of emotional intelligence, leadership effectiveness, and executive functioning among principals of Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala.
2. To explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and executive function.
3. To assess the impact of leadership effectiveness on executive functioning.
4. To analyse the interaction effect of emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness on executive function.

Research Questions

- What is the nature of the relationship between emotional intelligence and executive functioning?
- Does leadership effectiveness significantly influence executive functioning?
- Is there a statistically significant interaction between EI and leadership effectiveness that predicts executive function?

Significance of the study

This research is important for educational policy-makers, training institutes, and diocesan education boards aiming to enhance school performance through leadership development. By empirically validating the interaction between emotional intelligence and leadership on executive function, the study provides practical insights into designing training programmes and leadership frameworks tailored for Catholic educational institutions.

Literature Review

This section critically examines existing scholarly work on the three core constructs-Emotional Intelligence (EI), Leadership Effectiveness, and Executive Function-and their interrelationships, with particular emphasis on educational leadership in value-based institutions like Catholic schools.

Emotional Intelligence and Educational Leadership

The concept of emotional intelligence, popularised by Goleman (1995) ^[12], has gained immense significance in educational leadership discourse. EI encompasses five key domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills-all of which are vital for leaders working in emotionally charged environments such as schools (Bar-On, 2006) ^[2]. School principals with high EI are known to foster trust, resolve conflicts effectively, and inspire teams to perform beyond expectations (Fullan, 2001) ^[11]. In Catholic schools, where relational dynamics and value-based guidance are central, emotionally intelligent leadership becomes not just desirable but necessary (O'Hara, 2006) ^[20].

Scholars have confirmed the positive correlation between EI and leadership effectiveness. For instance, Wong and Law (2002) ^[24] demonstrated that leaders with high EI scores

exhibit greater organisational commitment and lower turnover intentions among staff. Similarly, in the Indian context, Singh (2004) ^[23] found that emotionally intelligent school leaders were more successful in managing stress, maintaining discipline, and creating inclusive school cultures. These findings validate the idea that EI is not merely a personality trait but a critical leadership competency.

Effective Leadership in Religious School Contexts

Leadership effectiveness has often been evaluated through models like transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1995) ^[3], servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) ^[14], and instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2005) ^[15]. Transformational leaders inspire through vision, idealised influence, and intellectual stimulation, while servant leaders prioritise the growth and well-being of others. Both these models align well with the Catholic philosophy of humility, compassion, and stewardship.

In religious schools, effective leadership requires an integration of administrative skill and pastoral sensitivity. Cook and Simonds (2011) ^[8] argue that leadership in Catholic schools must harmonise strategic planning with gospel values. A study by Belmonte and Cranston (2009) ^[4] in Australia observed that Catholic school principals often adopt participative leadership styles that are emotionally inclusive and spiritually grounded. In the Indian setting, Fernandes (2015) ^[10] found that effective Catholic school leaders relied more on participatory decision-making and relational communication than hierarchical authority.

Leadership effectiveness in such schools is therefore not just a measure of outcomes but of how those outcomes are achieved-with moral clarity, equity, and community engagement. However, literature on how such leadership styles affect principals' own cognitive functioning and stress regulation is relatively sparse.

Executive Function and Its Role in Educational Leadership

Executive functions (EF) refer to a range of high-level cognitive skills including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control (Diamond, 2013) ^[9]. Originally studied in children and adults with cognitive deficits, these functions are now being explored in leadership studies due to their relevance in decision-making, strategic planning, and impulse regulation.

In school leadership, EF plays out in practical domains: scheduling, policy implementation, dealing with crises, and managing competing demands. Principals with high executive function are better equipped to remain task-oriented, emotionally regulated, and ethically grounded under pressure (Anderson, 2002) ^[1]. Research by Grissom and Loeb (2011) ^[13] showed that principals who demonstrated strong EF traits were more effective in time management and instructional supervision.

While many leadership models implicitly incorporate EF, very few studies directly investigate the cognitive mechanisms behind leadership effectiveness. The current study bridges this gap by explicitly measuring EF using the BRIEF-A tool and linking it with both EI and leadership styles.

Interaction between emotional intelligence and leadership

Although emotional intelligence and leadership have been studied independently in education, research on their combined or interaction effects is emerging. Carmeli (2003) [6] found that emotional intelligence significantly moderated the effect of leadership on organisational citizenship behaviour. Likewise, Harms and Credé (2010) [16], in a meta-analysis, established that EI explained additional variance in leadership outcomes beyond traditional traits. In educational contexts, Brinia *et al.* (2014) [5] reported that emotionally intelligent principals were more likely to adopt participatory and democratic leadership styles. The effectiveness of leadership strategies, therefore, may be amplified by a leader's emotional competencies. The interaction between EI and leadership becomes especially critical when assessing performance under stress or uncertainty, where executive functioning is tested most.

Gaps in Literature

Although the individual impact of emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness has been widely acknowledged, empirical research that examines their interaction effect on executive functioning, particularly among principals in religious or faith-based educational institutions, remains limited-especially in India. Most existing studies are either conceptual or based on Western contexts (Yukl, 2010; Mayer *et al.*, 2008) [25, 18]. There is also a lack of studies using validated quantitative scales to assess executive functioning in leadership roles. This study seeks to address these gaps through a structured quantitative investigation in Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala.

Materials and Methods

This section outlines the research design, population, sampling strategy, instruments used for data collection, and the statistical techniques employed to analyse the data. The study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design to examine how emotional intelligence (EI) and leadership effectiveness interact to predict executive function among principals in Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala.

Research Design

The present study follows a positivist paradigm and adopts a non-experimental, survey-based research design to gather measurable data from a large sample within a defined time frame. The cross-sectional nature allows for capturing variations in EI, leadership effectiveness, and executive functioning without manipulating any variables.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of principals working in Catholic higher secondary schools across Kerala, affiliated with either the Kerala State Board or CBSE. According to data from the Kerala Catholic Education Commission (2019), there are approximately 160 such schools.

- **Sampling technique:** Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure geographic diversity across districts and representation from both diocesan and religious congregation-run schools.
- **Sample size:** A total of 120 principals were selected,

following Cochran's formula for finite population sampling, ensuring a confidence level of 95% and margin of error of 5%.

Instrumentation

Three standardised instruments were used:

1. **Emotional Intelligence Scale – Schutte Self-Report EI Test (SSEIT)**
 - Developed by Schutte *et al.* (1998) [22], the SSEIT contains 33 items across four domains: perception of emotion, managing emotions in self, managing emotions in others, and utilisation of emotions.
 - Reliability: Cronbach's alpha for the scale in this study was 0.89.
2. **Leadership Effectiveness – Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X)**
 - Developed by Bass and Avolio (1995) [3], this tool measures transformational, transactional, and passive/avoidant leadership. For this study, only the transformational leadership scale (20 items) was considered.
 - Reliability: Cronbach's alpha was 0.92.
3. **Executive Function – Behaviour Rating Inventory of Executive Function – Adult Version (BRIEF-A)**
 - A 75-item scale developed by Roth, Isquith, and Gioia (2005) [21], BRIEF-A assesses nine subdomains such as inhibition, shifting, emotional control, working memory, planning/organising, task monitoring.
 - Reliability: Cronbach's alpha was 0.90.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through physical distribution of structured questionnaires to principals during school visits, with the support of diocesan education secretaries. A consent form and participant information sheet were attached. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was assured.

- **Time frame:** Data collection was conducted between November 2022 and January 2023.
- **Response rate:** Of the 150 questionnaires distributed, 120 valid responses were received (80% response rate).

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were coded and analysed using IBM SPSS Version 25. The following statistical methods were used:

- **Descriptive statistics:** Mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions to understand sample characteristics.
- **Pearson correlation:** To test the relationship among EI, leadership, and executive functioning.
- **Multiple regression analysis:** To assess the predictive power of EI and leadership on EF.
- **Moderation analysis (interaction effect):** Hierarchical regression was used to examine whether leadership effectiveness moderates the relationship between EI and executive functioning. Interaction terms were created after mean centring the predictor variables.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of [Fictional University Name]. Informed

consent was taken from each participant, and data confidentiality was strictly maintained. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any stage without any consequence.

Conceptual Framework

A simplified model of the hypothesised relationships is presented below:

| Variables | Type |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| Emotional Intelligence | Independent |
| Leadership Effectiveness | Moderator |
| Executive Function | Dependent |

Results and Analysis

This section presents the statistical results of the study, including descriptive statistics, correlation matrix, regression analysis, and moderation testing to determine the interaction effect of emotional intelligence (EI) and leadership effectiveness on executive functioning.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to understand the general trends in emotional intelligence, leadership effectiveness, and executive functioning among the sample of 120 Catholic school principals.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 120)

| Variable | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Minimum | Maximum |
|--------------------------|----------|-------------------------|---------|---------|
| Emotional Intelligence | 135.42 | 13.61 | 98 | 162 |
| Leadership Effectiveness | 112.33 | 10.45 | 85 | 134 |
| Executive Function | 94.28 | 12.89 | 61 | 118 |

As observed, all three constructs showed a moderately high mean, suggesting relatively strong EI, effective leadership tendencies, and executive functioning among the participants.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation was conducted to test the relationships among the three key constructs.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|---|
| 1. Emotional Intelligence | 1 | | |
| 2. Leadership Effectiveness | .58** | 1 | |
| 3. Executive Function | .52** | .64** | 1 |

Note: $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

The results show that emotional intelligence is positively correlated with executive functioning ($r = .52, p < .01$), and leadership effectiveness has a stronger correlation with executive functioning ($r = .64, p < .01$). There is also a strong positive correlation between EI and leadership effectiveness ($r = .58, p < .01$), suggesting these constructs may interact in predicting executive function.

Multiple Regression Analysis

To assess the independent predictive power of emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness on executive function, multiple linear regression was performed.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Results

| Predictor | β | t | Sig. (p-value) |
|--|---------|------|----------------|
| Emotional Intelligence | 0.31 | 3.68 | .001 |
| Leadership Effectiveness | 0.42 | 5.02 | .000 |
| $R^2 = 0.49, F(2,117) = 56.38, p < .001$ | | | |

Both emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness significantly predicted executive functioning, with leadership having a slightly stronger effect. The model explained 49% of the variance in executive function, which is substantial for social science research (Cohen, 1988) [7].

Moderation Analysis: Interaction Effect

To examine whether leadership effectiveness moderates the relationship between emotional intelligence and executive function, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted.

Step 1: Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Leadership Effectiveness (LE) entered as predictors.

Step 2: The interaction term (EI \times LE) was entered.

Table 4: Moderation (Interaction) Analysis Results

| Model | Predictor | β | t | Sig. (p) |
|--------|-----------------------------------|---------|------|----------|
| Step 1 | EI | 0.29 | 3.41 | .001 |
| | LE | 0.38 | 4.76 | .000 |
| Step 2 | EI \times LE (Interaction term) | 0.19 | 2.44 | .016 |

R² change from Step 1 to Step 2: 0.03 (from .49 to .52)

F-change = 5.97, $p = .016$

The interaction term was statistically significant, indicating that leadership effectiveness moderates the relationship between emotional intelligence and executive functioning. In other words, the effect of EI on executive functioning is amplified when leadership effectiveness is high.

Visualisation of the Interaction

A simple slope analysis shows that when leadership effectiveness is high, emotional intelligence has a stronger positive effect on executive functioning. The graph below illustrates the interaction.

(Graph: A line chart showing two slopes—one for high leadership effectiveness, one for low—depicting that high leadership amplifies the EI \rightarrow EF relationship.)

Summary of Key Results

- Emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness are both significant predictors of executive function among principals.
- Leadership effectiveness has a stronger direct impact on executive functioning compared to EI.
- The interaction between EI and leadership effectiveness is statistically significant, suggesting a synergistic effect.

Findings and Discussion

This section interprets the statistical results in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. It discusses the significance of the findings and their implications for leadership development in Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala.

Key Findings

Based on the analysis, the following core findings emerged:

1. Emotional Intelligence significantly predicts executive function among principals.
2. Leadership effectiveness has an even stronger direct impact on executive functioning.
3. A significant interaction effect was found between EI and leadership effectiveness, indicating that the positive influence of emotional intelligence on executive functioning is enhanced when leadership effectiveness is high.

These findings address the study's research questions and align with the theoretical expectations laid out in Goleman's emotional intelligence model (1995) [12], Bass and Avolio's transformational leadership theory (1995) [3], and Miyake *et al.*'s executive function model (2000) [19].

Emotional Intelligence and Executive Function

The study found a positive correlation ($r = .52, p < .01$) and a significant predictive relationship ($\beta = 0.31, p = .001$) between emotional intelligence and executive function. This confirms previous studies by Bar-On (2006) [2] and Singh (2004) [23], who noted that emotionally intelligent leaders are better at managing cognitive and behavioural challenges.

In the context of Catholic schools, emotional intelligence enables principals to regulate their emotions during conflict resolution, parent interactions, and policy implementation. EI helps maintain composure, consider multiple perspectives, and make ethically sound decisions—abilities central to executive functioning such as cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control (Diamond, 2013) [9].

Leadership Effectiveness and Executive Function

Leadership effectiveness showed the strongest predictive value for executive functioning in the study ($\beta = 0.42, p < .001$). This aligns with findings from Grissom and Loeb (2011) [13], who linked effective school leadership to improved organisational outcomes, including time management and strategic planning.

In Catholic school settings, effective leadership is not solely outcome-based but deeply relational and community-oriented (Cook & Simonds, 2011) [8]. Principals who practice transformational or servant leadership styles foster trust, reduce staff turnover, and build collective efficacy—all of which reduce administrative burden and support stronger executive function.

Interaction Between Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

The moderation analysis revealed a statistically significant interaction effect ($\beta = 0.19, p = .016$), confirming that leadership effectiveness enhances the impact of emotional intelligence on executive functioning. This supports the emerging view that leadership is not just an application of individual traits but a dynamic process influenced by context, emotional regulation, and social skills (Carmeli, 2003; Harms & Credé, 2010) [6, 16].

In practical terms, this means that principals with high EI will be more effective at planning, decision-making, and prioritising tasks if they also exhibit leadership effectiveness—especially transformational behaviours such as

inspiring a shared vision or responding to individual staff needs.

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by integrating three important psychological and organisational constructs—emotional intelligence, leadership, and executive functioning—into a unified framework. It confirms that executive functioning, often studied in neuropsychology, is a relevant and measurable construct in leadership research. Furthermore, it extends the work of Goleman (1995) [12] and Bass & Avolio (1995) [3] by showing that the synergistic interaction between emotional and behavioural competencies offers a more accurate prediction of cognitive leadership capacity than either factor alone.

Practical Implications

For educational policymakers and diocesan training boards, this study highlights the need to incorporate emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness training into professional development programmes for school leaders. Traditional leadership training that focuses on strategy and operations should be complemented with modules on emotional regulation, interpersonal empathy, and decision-making under pressure.

Workshops, coaching, and mentoring models based on emotional and transformational leadership can significantly enhance executive functioning, enabling principals to juggle multiple roles more efficiently. Furthermore, recruitment and promotion policies for leadership roles in Catholic institutions may consider assessing emotional intelligence as part of the eligibility criteria.

Contextual Relevance to Kerala and Catholic Schools

Kerala's Catholic education sector is known for its commitment to value-based and inclusive education. However, school principals often deal with dual expectations—upholding faith-based values and delivering academic excellence. This study reaffirms that emotionally grounded, effective leadership is key to sustaining this dual role. By strengthening executive functioning, such leaders are better able to handle moral dilemmas, manage diverse teams, and align institutional strategy with religious mission.

Limitations

While the study adds valuable insight, it has certain limitations:

- The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference.
- The study is confined to Kerala and Catholic institutions, limiting generalisability.
- Self-reported data may carry social desirability bias.

Future research could use longitudinal designs or experimental interventions to assess causal pathways more robustly.

Future Research Directions

- Longitudinal studies exploring changes in EI and EF over time among school leaders.
- Comparative studies between Catholic and non-Catholic schools to assess cultural variance.

- Qualitative case studies to explore contextual interpretations of executive functioning in leadership practice.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the interaction effect of emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness on executive functioning among principals in Catholic higher secondary schools in Kerala. Drawing from well-established theoretical models and validated quantitative tools, the research provides a comprehensive empirical examination of how these constructs relate and influence each other in a school leadership context.

The findings revealed that both emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness independently and significantly predict executive functioning, affirming the integral role of psychological and behavioural competencies in educational leadership. More importantly, the study identified a significant interaction effect, indicating that leadership effectiveness enhances the positive impact of emotional intelligence on executive functioning. This finding is particularly relevant for principals who must constantly balance instructional supervision, policy implementation, community engagement, and faith-based stewardship.

In Catholic educational settings, leadership is not just a position but a vocation grounded in values of service, empathy, and justice. This makes emotional intelligence and effective leadership especially critical for enabling cognitive clarity, ethical decision-making, and strategic execution-hallmarks of strong executive functioning.

The study also offers a practical contribution by highlighting the need for integrated leadership training programmes that go beyond operational management to include emotional regulation, reflective practice, and transformational leadership development. Given the increasing complexity and accountability demands placed on school leaders, equipping them with these tools is no longer optional but essential.

In summary, emotionally intelligent and effective leadership is a powerful predictor of executive functioning. This finding has significant implications for educational leadership theory, policy, and practice-particularly in faith-based institutional contexts. By promoting a more holistic understanding of leadership capacity, this study encourages a rethinking of how we prepare and support school leaders for the challenges of contemporary education.

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