The Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Preferred Leadership Styles

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Abstract
This study investigated the relationship between Emotional Intelligence (EI) and preferred leadership styles— authoritative, democratic, and laisser-faire —among high school teachers in Coimbatore Corporation Limits, Tamil Nadu, India. Leadership style plays a critical role in shaping classroom culture, influencing student engagement, and guiding professional interaction. Emotional Intelligence, defined as the capacity to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others, is increasingly being recognised as a key attribute of effective educational leadership. A normative survey design with proportionate stratified random sampling was employed to collect data from 475 high school teachers. Validated instruments were used to assess EI and leadership style preferences with high reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.914 for EI and 0.937 for leadership styles). The findings reveal that teachers with higher EI predominantly favour a democratic leadership style, characterised by collaboration, empathy, and participatory decision-making. Conversely, laisser-faire leadership showed a significant negative correlation with Emotional Intelligence, indicating that teachers with low EI may prefer this less engaged style. Demographic variables, such as teaching experience and type of school, significantly influenced the relationship between EI and leadership style, whereas factors such as gender, age, and marital status showed no significant impact. This study highlights the importance of incorporating Emotional Intelligence development into teacher training and leadership programs to foster adaptive, responsive, and student-centred leadership in schools. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method designs to examine causal pathways. Additionally, studies across diverse regions and school levels are recommended to enhance the generalis ability of the findings regarding the impact of Emotional Intelligence on preferred leadership styles.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Authoritative Leadership, Democratic Leadership, Laissez-faire Leadership, High School Teachers

Introduction

In schools, teachers play an important leadership role, which affects the classroom environment, student learning, and school culture. Their leadership style—whether authoritative, democratic, or laisser-faire can shape how students behave, engage, and grow. Today's classrooms are diverse and fast-changing; therefore, teachers need leadership that combines a clear direction with emotional understanding.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions and those of others. Research by Goleman (1995), Mayer et al. (2016), and Boyatzis et al. (2017) shows that emotionally intelligent teachers are better at handling classroom challenges, building relationships, and leading effectively.

Although EI and leadership have been widely studied in other countries,little research has been conducted in the Indian context, especially among high school teachers. This study focuses on teachers in Tamil Nadu and explores how their level of Emotional Intelligence affects their preferred leadership

styles. It also examines whether factors such as teaching experience, school type, age, and gender play a role. The goal was to understand how Emotional Intelligence can help teachers choose better leadership styles and improve school leadership in India.

Review of Literature

Emotional intelligence (EI) plays a major role in preferred leadership style and helps leaders understand how to effectively manage and adapt to different work environments. Research shows that leaders with higher emotional intelligence prefer transformational leadership styles (i.e., they engage in intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration) (Barling et al., 2000; Rinfret et al., 2018). EI helps leaders to create closer relationships with their team members and it therefore helps to maintain a supportive organisational climate, which in turn helps to retain talent and to achieve higher team performance levels (Maamari & Majdalani, 2017).

It is important to note that the connection between EI and leadership styles is not limited to transformational leadership. A study conducted with senior level managers indicates that EI is highly related to transformational leadership and its components, which makes emotional intelligence a predictor of leadership success through effective management styles (Gardner & Stough, 2002). Furthermore, high-EI managers integrate task-oriented and social leadership behaviors successfully, which reflects a strategic integration of leadership styles based on situational demands (Li et al., 2016).

Contrary to the largely existing view that emotional intelligence is necessarily associated with effective leadership, results from an exploratory study indicate that not all branches of EI are associated with perceived leadership effectiveness (Weinberger, 2009). This highlights the multifaceted nature of leadership interactions, where variables like follower attitudes and organizational context are likely to moderate the impact of a leader's EI (Gorgens-Ekermans & Roux, 2021).

Need and Significance of the Study

The growing emphasis on teacher leadership, emotional literacy, and holistic education in contemporary pedagogy has highlighted the need to understand how Emotional Intelligence influences educational leadership. Leithwood et al. (2004) noted that leadership is the second most significant factor affecting student achievement after classroom instruction. As India implements the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which encourages empathy-driven student-centred learning, the demand for emotionally intelligent leadership in schools has become even more pressing.

While teacher training has traditionally emphasised content knowledge and instructional strategies, there is an urgent need to integrate socio-emotional competencies into professional development. Emotional Intelligence enables teachers to manage classroom stress, build trusting relationships, and foster resilience in students, qualities especially relevant in high-pressure academic environments.

This study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of how emotional intelligence influences the preferred leadership styles of high school teachers. It explored how components such as emotional awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills contribute to the development and practice of specific leadership approaches in educational settings. These findings will help teachers assess their emotional intelligence and understand how they shape their leadership preferences, enabling them to refine their interpersonal and leadership skills for more effective classroom and school leadership.

Additionally, this study offers valuable insights for policymakers, school leaders, and curriculum developers. It supports the design of targeted leadership development programs that incorporate emotional intelligence training, promoting leadership models that are both emotionally attuned and contextually relevant. By integrating emotional intelligence into teacher development frameworks, institutions can cultivate healthier teacher-student relationships, a more collaborative school culture, and impactful leadership practices. Ultimately, the research empowers educators to adopt leadership styles that are empathetic, adaptive, and student-centred.

Operational Definitions of the Terms Used

Leadership Styles: The manner in which a teacher leads, influences, and interacts with students, characterised as authoritative, democratic, or laisser-faire.

Authoritative Leadership: Leadership is characterised by structure, rules, and clear expectations. It maintains order but may limit autonomy.

Democratic Leadership: A participative style that promotes shared decision making, collaboration, and empathy.

Laissez-faire Leadership: A hands-off approach with minimal teacher control, providing students high levels of autonomy.

Emotional Intelligence: The ability of a teacher to perceive, understand, regulate, and respond to emotions in oneself and others.

High School Teachers: Teachers instructing students in Classes IX and X under the Tamil Nadu State Board syllabus.

Variables of the Study: Independent Variables: Emotional Intelligence, Demographic Factors. Dependent Variable: Leadership Style.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess EI levels of Emotional Intelligence across different leadership styles.
- To examine the influence of demographic variables on Emotional Intelligence and leadership style preferences.
- To identify correlations between Emotional Intelligence and leadership styles.

Research Hypotheses

- $\mathbf{H_1}$: There is a significant mean difference in the Emotional Intelligence of high school teachers with respect to various Leadership Styles based on gender.
- $\mathbf{H_2}$: There is a significant difference in Emotional Intelligence of high school teachers based on leadership styles and teaching experience.
- $\mathbf{H_3}$: There is a significant mean difference in the Emotional Intelligence of High School Teachers with respect to various Leadership Styles based on school type.
- $\mathbf{H_4}$: There is a significant correlation between leadership style and emotional intelligence of high school teachers.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a normative survey design, which is appropriate for identifying the relationships between psychological constructs (Emotional Intelligence) and behavioural preferences (leadership styles) across a large sample of teachers. The design enabled the collection of quantitative data and the testing of the hypotheses through statistical analysis.

Population and Sample

The population comprised high school teachers working in the Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu, India. From this population, 475 teachers teaching Grades IX and X were selected. Proportionate stratified random sampling was used to ensure adequate representation. The strata were based on the type of school (Government, Government-aided, Corporation, and Private) so that teachers from each category were proportionately included. This method minimises sampling bias and enhances the general is ability of the findings across different school contexts within the district.

Tools Used

- Leadership Styles Scale (LSS): Constructed and validated by Benjamin and Arulsamy, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.937$, measuring teachers' preference for Authoritative, Democratic, and Laissez-faire leadership styles.
- Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS): Developed by Anukool Hyde, Sanjyot Pethe, and Upinder Dhar, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.914$, assessing dimensions of Emotional Intelligence such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

High reliability coefficients (above 0.90) indicate strong internal consistency, confirming that the instruments measured the constructs with accuracy and stability.

Data Collection

After obtaining authorisation from the competent authorities, the researcher distributed questionnaires to the participating teachers. Clear instructions were provided and completed responses were collected within the stipulated timeframe. The response rate was high, and all data were screened for completeness before analysis.

Data Analysis

The responses were coded and analysed using SPSS version 21.0. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentages) were used to summarise teacher characteristics and leadership style distribution. Inferential statistics included t-tests to examine gender differences in EI within each leadership style, one-way ANOVA with Scheffé post hoc tests to assess differences based on teaching experience and type of school, and Pearson's correlation analysis to measure the strength and direction of the relationships between EI and leadership styles. The level of significance was set at $P \leq 0.05$. This systematic approach ensured rigorous testing of the hypotheses and reliable interpretation of patterns in the data.

Data Analysis

Table 1 Distribution of Leadership Styles among High School Teachers

Variables	Authoritative		Democratic		Laissez-faire	
Leadership Styles	N	%	N	%	N	%
	144	30.316	221	46.526	110	23.158

The results in Table-1 indicate that among the 475 respondents, the democratic leadership style is the most prevalent, adopted by 46.53% (N = 221) of teachers. This was followed by the authoritative style at 30.32% (N = 144) and the Laisser-faire style at 23.16% (N = 110), reflecting a clear preference for participative leadership.

The findings reveal that high school teachers predominantly favour the Democratic style, suggesting a tendency toward participative and collaborative classroom practices, with fewer teachers adopting authoritative or laisser-faire approaches.

Testing of Hypotheses

$\mathbf{H_1}$: There is no significant mean difference in the Emotional Intelligence of high school teachers with respect to various Leadership Styles based on gender.

Table 2 Significant Mean Difference in the Emotional Intelligence of High School Teachers with Respect to Various Leadership Styles based on Gender

Leadership Styles	Variables		N	Mean	SD	't' value	df	Sig.	Results
Authoritative Leadership	Gender	Male	52	67.77	16.877	0.466	142	0.642	NS
		Female	92	69.85	29.563				
Democratic Leadership	Gender	Male	89	61.61	22.694	0.095	219	0.925	NS
		Female	132	61.90	22.731				
Laissez-faire Leadership	Gender	Male	36	58.86	16.952	0.145	108	0.885	NS
		Female	74	59.35	16.404				

(*Significance at 0.05 level)

The results in Table-2 show that the calculated t-values for authoritative (0.466), democratic (0.095), and laisser-faire (0.145) leadership styles are all below the critical value of 1.96 at the 5% significance level. The corresponding p-values (0.642, 0.925, and 0.885) were greater than 0.05, indicating that the null hypothesis H1 fails to be rejected. This confirms that there was no statistically significant difference in Emotional Intelligence between male and female teachers across the three leadership styles.

Emotional Intelligence did not significantly differ between male and female teachers, regardless of whether they adopted authoritative, democratic, or laisser-faire leadership styles. This implies that gender is not a determining factor in the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and leadership preference.

H_2: There is no significant mean difference in the Emotional Intelligence of high school teachers with respect to various Leadership Styles based on Teaching Experience.

Table 3 Significant Mean Difference in the Emotional Intelligence of High School Teachers with Respect to Various Leadership Styles based on Teaching Experience

Leadership Styles	Variables		Sum of Square	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Results
Authoritative Leadership	Teaching Experience	Between	540.238	3	180.079	0.269	0.848	NS
		Within	93662.400	140	669.017			
		Total	94202.639	143				
Democratic Leadership	Teaching Experience	Between	5608.717	2	1869.572	3.777	0.011	S*
		Within	107404.858	217	494.953			
		Total	113013.575	220				
Laissez-faire Leadership	Teaching Experience	Between	881.101	3	293.700	1.080	0.361	NS
		Within	28825.889	106	271.942			
		Total	29706.991	109				

(*Significance at 0.05 level)

The results in Table-3 show that for authoritative (F = 0.269, p = 0.848) and Laisser-faire (F = 1.080, p = 0.361) leadership styles, the p-values exceed 0.05, indicating no significant difference in Emotional Intelligence based on teaching experience. However, for the Democratic style, the F-value (3.777) with p = 0.011 is statistically significant at the 5% level, leading to the rejection of H2 for this leadership style. This suggests that Emotional Intelligence levels vary significantly among teachers with different teaching experiences when they adopt a democratic leadership approach.

Teaching experience did not significantly influence emotional intelligence for authoritative or laisser-faire leadership styles. However, under the Democratic style, mid-career teachers (10–19 years of experience) tended to exhibit the highest Emotional Intelligence, possibly reflecting greater maturity and refined classroom management skills.

Table 3 (i) Result of Scheffe's Post Hoc Test in the Emotional Intelligence of High School Teachers with Respect to Democratic Leadership Style based on Teaching Experience

Teaching Experience				Mean Difference	Sig.	Result
Below 10 yrs.	10-19 yrs.	20-29 yrs.	30 yrs. & above			
60.147	69.516	-	-	9.369	0.087	NS
60.147	-	56.593	-	3.555	0.830	NS
60.147	-	-	57.400	2.747	0.987	NS
-	69.516	56.593	-	12.924	0.023	S*
-	69.516	-	57.400	12.116	0.467	NS
-		56.593	57.400	0.807	1.000	NS

(*Significance at 0.05 level)

Scheffe's post hoc test results in Table 3(i) show that teachers with 10–19 years of experience (mean = 69.516) have significantly higher Emotional Intelligence than those with less than 10 years of experience (mean = 60.147; p = 0.023). No other pairwise comparisons among the remaining experience groups yielded significant differences.

Only teachers with 10–19 years of experience displayed significantly higher Emotional Intelligence compared than early career teachers, while other experience groups showed no notable differences.

H_3: There is no significant mean difference in the Emotional Intelligence of High School Teachers with respect to various Leadership Styles based on school type.

Table 4 Significant Mean Difference in the Emotional Intelligence of High School Teachers with Respect to Various Leadership Styles based on Types of School

Leadership Styles	Variables		Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Results
Authoritative Leadership	Types of School	Between	39812.896	3	13270.965	34.160	0.000	S*
		Within	54389.743	140	388.498			
		Total	94202.639	143				
Democratic Leadership	Types of School	Between	21666.743	3	7222.248	17.157	0.000	S*
		Within	91346.832	217	420.953			
		Total	113013.575	220				
Laissez-faire Leadership	Types of School	Between	7975.766	3	2658.589	12.968	0.000	S*
		Within	21731.225	106	205.012			
		Total	29706.991	109				

(*Significance at 0.05 level)

The results in Table 4 indicate that for authoritative ($F = 34.160$, $p < 0.001$), democratic ($F = 17.157$, $p < 0.001$), and laisser-faire ($F = 12.968$, $p < 0.001$) leadership styles, the p-values are below 0.05, and F-values exceed the critical threshold. Therefore, H3is rejected for all three leadership styles, confirming that Emotional Intelligence significantly differs among teachers based on the type of school in which they work. This finding highlights the strong influence of the institutional context on Emotional Intelligence, regardless of leadership style.

Teachers' Emotional Intelligence levels varied significantly across different types of schools for all three leadership styles, suggesting that the school environment and institutional culture play an important role in shaping EI.

Table 4 (i) Result of Scheffe's Post hoc Test in Emotional Intelligence of High School Teachers with Respect to Authoritative Leadership Style based on Types of School

Types of School				Mean Difference	Sig.	Result
Government	Govt.-Aided	Corporation	Private			
60.000	71.906	-	-	11.906	0.081	NS
60.000	-	125.181	-	65.181	0.000	S*
60.000	-	-	62.163	2.163	0.998	NS
-	71.906	125.181	-	53.275	0.000	S*
-	71.906	-	62.163	9.7430	0.467	NS
-		125.181	62.163	63.0186	0.000	S*

(*Significance at 0.05 level)

The Scheffe's post hoc test in Table-4(i) shows that teachers in corporate schools (mean=125.181) have significantly higher Emotional Intelligence than those in government (mean=60.000) and government-aided schools (mean=71.906). Likewise, corporate schoolteachers scored significantly higher than private schoolteachers (mean=62.163). No significant differences were observed between Government and Government-Aided schools, between Government and Private schools, or between Government-Aided and Private schools.

Corporation-school teachers demonstrated the highest Emotional Intelligence under the authoritative leadership style, whereas Government, Government-Aided, and Private school teachers showed relatively similar and lower EI levels.

Table 4 (ii) Result of Scheffe's Post hoc Test in Emotional Intelligence of High School Teachers with Respect to Democratic Leadership Style based on Types of School

Types of School				Mean Difference	Sig.	Result
Government	Govt.-Aided	Corporation	Private			
50.594	60.000	-	-	9.406	0.251	NS
50.594	-	46.543	-	4.051	0.884	NS
50.594	-	-	71.320	20.726	0.000	S*
-	60.000	46.543	-	13.457	0.033	S*
-	60.000	-	71.320	11.320	0.017	S*
-	-	46.543	71.320	24.777	0.000	S*

(*Significance at 0.05 level)

The Scheffe's post hoc test in Table-4(ii) shows that teachers in private schools (mean=71.320) have significantly higher Emotional Intelligence than those in government (mean=50.594), government-aided (mean = 60.000), and corporate schools (mean=46.543). Government-aided schoolteachers scored significantly higher than corporation schoolteachers. No significant differences were found between Government and Government-Aided schools, or between government and corporate schools.

Under the Democratic leadership style, private school teachers display the highest Emotional Intelligence, while corporate school teachers show the lowest EI, with Government and Government-Aided school teachers occupying the middle range.

Table 4 (iii) Result of Scheffe's post hoc test in Emotional Intelligence of High School Teachers with Respect to Laissez-faire Leadership Style based on Types of School

Types of School				Mean Difference	Sig.	Result
Government	Govt.-Aided	Corporation	Private			
50.586	64.143	-	-	13.557	0.042	S*
50.586	-	45.071	-	5.515	0.706	NS
50.586	-	-	66.321	15.735	0.000	S*
-	64.143	45.071	-	19.072	0.008	S*
-	64.143	-	66.321	2.178	0.968	NS
-	-	45.071	66.321	21.249	0.000	S*

(*Significance at 0.05 level)

The Scheffe's post hoc test in Table 4(iii) shows that private school teachers (mean=66.321) have significantly higher Emotional Intelligence than those in government schools (mean=50.586) and corporate schools (mean=45.071). Government-aided schoolteachers (mean=64.143) also scored significantly higher than both the Corporation and Government schoolteachers. No significant differences were observed between government and corporate schools or between Government-Aided and Private schools.

Under the Laisser-faire leadership style, teachers in Private and Government-Aided schools demonstrated higher Emotional Intelligence, while government and corporate school teachers scored comparatively lower.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis measures the strength and direction of the relationship between variables using a coefficient (r) ranging from -1 to +1. This study assessed how Emotional Intelligence relates to high school teachers' preferred leadership styles—authoritative, democratic, and laisser-faire — highlighting how EI influences their style choices.

H_4: There is no significant correlation between leadership style and emotional intelligence of high school teachers.

Table 5 Correlation between Variables (Leadership Styles and Emotional Intelligence

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value 0.01)	Level of Correlation	S / NS
Authoritative Leadership & Emotional Intelligence	0.246**	0.003	Low positive	S*
Democratic Leadership & Emotional Intelligence	0.376**	0.000	Moderate positive	S*
Laissez-faire Leadership & Emotional Intelligence	-0.252**	0.008	Low negative	S*

(*Significance at 0.01 level)

The results in Table-5 reveal significant correlations between leadership style and Emotional Intelligence among high school teachers. Authoritative leadership showed a low positive correlation with Emotional Intelligence ($r=0.246$, $p=0.003$), whereas democratic leadership demonstrated a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.376$, $p<0.001$). In contrast, laisser-faire leadership exhibited a low negative correlation with Emotional Intelligence ($r = –0.252$, $p = 0.008$). All correlations are statistically significant at the 0.01 level, resulting in the rejection of H4.

Higher Emotional Intelligence is associated with a stronger preference for authoritative and democratic leadership styles, while lower Emotional Intelligence is linked to a greater tendency toward the laisser-faire approach.

Limitations and Future Scope

While this study offers important insights into the relationship between Emotional Intelligence (EI) and preferred leadership styles among high school teachers, it has certain limitations. The research was confined to teachers within the Coimbatore Corporation, which restricts the general is ability of the findings to rural areas, other districts, or national contexts. The cross-sectional survey design limits the ability to establish causality between EI and leadership preferences, while reliance on self-report questionnaires may have introduced a social desirability bias. In addition, the study did not examine the impact of EI and leadership styles on student outcomes such as achievement, engagement, or classroom climate and excluded potentially influential variables such as organizational culture, job stress, and exposure to professional development programs. Future research could address these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs to establish causal pathways between EI and leadership development or by conducting intervention-based studies, such as randomised controlled trials of EI-focused professional development programs. Expanding the scope to include teachers from rural and urban schools, multiple states in India, and cross-cultural settings would help to test the universality of the findings. Mixed-methods approaches that integrate surveys with classroom observations, interviews, and student feedback would provide a more holistic understanding of how EI shapes leadership practices. Extending research across different educational levels, including primary, higher secondary, and university teachers, may also reveal developmental differences in the EI–leadership relationship. Finally, future studies could incorporate student-related outcomes as mediating or dependent variables while also testing additional predictors such as burnout, stress, and professional development exposure. Such work would not only strengthen the evidence base, but also provide actionable insights for policymakers and teacher training programs seeking to build emotionally intelligent and effective educational leaders.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Emotional Intelligence (EI) significantly shapes high school teachers' leadership style preferences, with higher EI strongly linked to democratic leadership, an empathetic, collaborative, and student-centred approach (Goleman, 1995). Emotionally intelligent teachers are likely to foster inclusive and participatory learning environments. While demographic factors such as gender and age showed no significant effect, teaching experience (10–19 years) and school type

(corporate and private) positively influenced EI and leadership alignment, highlighting the role of professional maturity and institutional culture (Day et al., 2009). The negative association between EI and laisser-faire leadership further underscores emotionally intelligent teachers' tendency to avoid passive leadership styles (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Despite its contributions, this study had several limitations. First, the sample was restricted to teachers at Coimbatore Corporation, which narrows the general is ability of the results to other regions or rural contexts. Second, the use of a cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of causal relationships between EI and leadership style. Third, reliance on self-report measures introduces potential response bias, whereas the absence of classroom observations or student performance indicators limits the scope of the outcomes assessed.

These limitations open avenues for future research. Longitudinal and intervention-based studies could clarify causal pathways and measure how professional development in EI affects leadership growth. Future research could expand across diverse geographic, institutional, and cultural contexts to test the consistency of the findings. Mixed-method designs that integrate surveys with classroom observations, student feedback, and case studies would provide richer insights. Additionally, incorporating variables such as teacher stress, burnout, organizational climate, and student outcomes would deepen our understanding of the mediating and moderating factors in the EI–leadership relationship.

By addressing these areas, future studies could build a stronger evidence base for policy and practice, particularly in designing professional development programs that enhance Emotional Intelligence as a pathway to effective, adaptive, and student-centred school leadership.

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