



Cultivating Emotional Intelligence in the Screen Age: A Case Study of ECE Leadership Strategies

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Abstract:

Increasing reliance on digital devices in early childhood education (ECE) presents challenges for children's emotional development, particularly in self-regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills. Effective educational leadership is therefore essential to create learning environments that balance technological integration with children's socio-emotional needs. This study aims to explore leadership strategies in ECE institutions for cultivating children's emotional intelligence amid increasing screen time reliance. A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with school leaders and teachers, non-participant classroom observations, and analysis of management documents. The data were analyzed thematically to identify leadership strategies and institutional practices that support children's emotional development. The findings indicate that effective ECE leadership can strengthen emotional intelligence through digitally balanced curriculum policies, structured mindfulness practices, and collaborative parent-teacher communication. These strategies support children's self-regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills while reducing the potential negative effects of excessive screen exposure. The study highlights the importance of prioritizing structured social-emotional learning, strengthening educators' professional development, and establishing sustainable home-school partnerships. These practices provide a practical management framework for ECE institutions seeking to integrate technology while maintaining healthy socio-emotional development.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood development in today's digital era faces complex challenges, particularly within the domain of emotional intelligence. Research on early childhood education management is vital for broader society because emotional intelligence forms the fundamental foundation for character development, social adaptability, and self-regulation in children (Göçen & Döğer, 2025; Imuta et al., 2022). High reliance on digital devices from early childhood threatens to erode face-to-face social interactions essential for emotional stimulation. Global empirical evidence indicates a significant rise in screen time among young children, directly correlating with diminished empathy, impaired emotional regulation, and increased behavioral outbursts across domestic and academic environments. This

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digital disruption must not persist without structured intervention from educational institutions (Leader et al., 2022; Nasir et al., 2023). Therefore, this research is urgently needed to provide strategic leadership directions and concrete management frameworks aimed at guiding children to develop robust emotional intelligence amid the pervasive pressures of the digital age, ultimately safeguarding the holistic well-being and future social capacity of young learners.

A major problem facing modern society is the unpreparedness of parents and educators to balance technology integration with children's emotional developmental needs (Asmamaw & Semela, 2023; Shehhi et al., 2021). The massive rise in device usage is frequently utilized as an instant soothing mechanism for young children, unintentionally robbing them of crucial opportunities to recognize, process, and express their emotions healthily. This trend fosters a crisis in emotional regulation among early learners, leaving children increasingly vulnerable to interpersonal communication barriers, social anxiety, and heightened peer relationship conflicts (Kamil, 2026; Khofsah & Rozi, 2025; Manshur, 2026). Furthermore, early childhood education institutions often lack adequate leadership management frameworks to comprehensively address these digital age repercussions. The absence of structured, emotion-focused leadership guidelines worsens the divide between rapid technology adoption and necessary psychological stimulation (Momtaz, 2021; Taylan et al., 2021). Consequently, this gap creates systemic social friction in child-rearing practices across both home and school settings, undermining long-term developmental outcomes and institutional efficacy in contemporary early childhood educational environments.

Field observations reveal an increasing disruption in children's social interactions due to device dominance within early childhood education classrooms. Educators frequently report that young children display reduced attention spans, impulsive emotional responses, and a marked inability to share or collaborate during classroom activities (Abdul & Rahman, 2023; Agbaria, 2021). When encountering minor peer conflicts, children tend to react with intense frustration rather than resolving issues through verbal communication skills. Additionally, school principals and institutional administrators face significant ambiguity in formulating operational policies that effectively curb digital overexposure while maintaining educational relevance (Chigeda et al., 2022; Kukah et al., 2023). Teachers often experience a dilemma between utilizing digital media as instructional tools or eliminating them entirely to preserve authentic child interactions (Albustomi, 2025; Alwahedi, 2025; Holidi, 2026). This lack of strategic leadership direction results in fragmented emotional intelligence initiatives throughout early learning centers, causing classroom interventions to remain largely reactive, piecemeal, and institutionally unintegrated, which ultimately diminishes the overall quality of early childhood social-emotional learning outcomes.

Previous scholarly inquiries regarding early childhood emotional intelligence have primarily examined family parenting roles or isolated classroom instructional techniques. While extensive literature documents the adverse neurodevelopmental impacts of early screen time, most existing studies treat technology merely as a passive independent variable without addressing institutional governance. This study positions itself to bridge this critical gap by

shifting analytical focus from micro-level individual dynamics to strategic educational leadership and organizational management (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2024; Rico-Gonzalez, 2023). A fundamental limitation of prior research is the lack of exploration into how early childhood education leadership strategies can be operationalized to mitigate screen time drawbacks through systemic institutional policies. Addressing screen age challenges cannot rest solely upon classroom teachers without vision-driven leadership structures. Neglecting institutional management represents a significant theoretical omission that must be resolved to build resilient educational ecosystems capable of supporting young children's social-emotional growth in an increasingly technology-dominated world.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating screen age literacy concepts into early childhood education leadership management frameworks through an in-depth qualitative case study approach. This research offers a fresh perspective, emphasizing that modern educational leadership must extend beyond basic administrative duties to actively design responsive strategies that safeguard children's emotional intelligence against digital risks (Anwar & Saraih, 2024; Wong et al., 2021). Resolving this issue is highly urgent given the rapid pace of digital advancement and the impossibility of completely isolating children from technological environments. The innovative contribution of this study is materialized through a contextual leadership model that synthesizes school regulatory policies, structured mindfulness practices, and collaborative parent-teacher communication networks (Jena, 2022; Willis & Eddy, 2022). By conducting a detailed case study of an institution successfully executing these strategies, this research makes an original theoretical and practical contribution to the global literature on early childhood education management, establishing actionable parameters for contemporary educational leaders worldwide.

Based on the aforementioned context, the central research problem investigates how early childhood education leadership strategies are formulated and implemented to optimize children's emotional intelligence amid digital age challenges. This study argues that emotional intelligence can be effectively cultivated despite high screen exposure when institutional leadership adopts transformative management practices that unify emotion-focused curricula, teacher capacity building, and collaborative digital parenting frameworks. Theoretically, this research enriches early childhood leadership literature by introducing a neuro-socio-emotionally grounded management paradigm tailored for the digital era. Practically, it provides actionable guidance for school administrators and policy makers designing intervention strategies, ensuring educational institutions serve as strong foundations for nurturing empathetic, emotionally resilient young children. Ultimately, this inquiry delivers empirical clarity and strategic frameworks necessary to realign contemporary early childhood management with the holistic developmental imperatives of young learners navigating an increasingly digitized global landscape.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth and contextual understanding of leadership strategies in early childhood education (ECE) for cultivating children's emotional intelligence amid digital-age challenges.

A single-case approach was selected because case study methodology enables researchers to investigate complex organizational processes, practices, and interactions within a naturally bounded system (Miller et al., 2023; Viera, 2023). The design was considered appropriate because the study focused on understanding how leadership decisions, institutional policies, and educational practices were implemented in an authentic setting. A qualitative approach also allowed the researchers to capture participants' perspectives and contextual meanings rather than reducing the phenomenon to numerical measures. The case study framework provided an integrated basis for examining leadership strategies, social-emotional learning practices, and institutional responses to children's increasing exposure to digital technology (Alam, 2021; Stanley, 2023).

The research was conducted at an established progressive early childhood education center in East Java, Indonesia. The site was selected using purposive sampling because the institution had implemented integrated policies concerning digital literacy, social-emotional learning, and parent-teacher collaboration. Purposive sampling enables researchers to deliberately select information-rich cases that are relevant to the research objectives and characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024; Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The selected institution was therefore considered appropriate because its leadership practices provided a relevant empirical context for examining strategies addressing screen-related challenges and children's emotional development. The selection was based on institutional characteristics rather than convenience, consistent with the principle that purposive sampling should be theoretically and substantively aligned with the research questions. This bounded setting also supported an intensive examination of leadership processes within their organizational context.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis to obtain comprehensive evidence and facilitate triangulation. Interviews involved school leaders, instructional coordinators, and early childhood educators to explore leadership decisions, strategic priorities, and pedagogical practices related to emotional intelligence and digital-age challenges. Classroom observations were conducted without researcher participation to examine children's interactions, emotional regulation activities, teacher interventions, and classroom practices in their natural context. Document analysis focused on institutional curricula, digital-use guidelines, school-home communication records, and leadership policy documents. The combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis enabled the study to capture perspectives, practices, and institutional evidence from multiple sources. Observation was particularly useful for examining actual practices and interactions that may not be fully represented through participant accounts alone (Da Costa et al., 2024; Elhamma, 2024).

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative analysis process consisting of data condensation, data display, and verification of conclusions. During data condensation, interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents were selected, organized, coded, and reduced to identify information directly related to leadership strategies and children's emotional intelligence. The

condensed information was then presented through thematic displays and matrices to facilitate the identification of recurring patterns, relationships, and connections among emerging categories. In the verification stage, preliminary interpretations were continuously compared with the available empirical evidence to ensure consistency and logical coherence. Cross-source comparison was also conducted by examining whether themes identified in interviews were supported by observations and documentary evidence. This iterative process enabled the researchers to refine emerging interpretations throughout the analysis and maintain a clear connection between the collected data and the final findings (Alam, 2021; Miller et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Visionary Institutional Governance and Digital Literacy Policy

The studied institution demonstrates that effective early childhood education leadership begins with establishing clear, proactive governance structures tailored to the challenges of the digital era. Rather than adopting an absolute ban on digital devices, school leaders formulated an integrated policy framework that defines the boundary between educational technology utilization and intentional screen-free socialization. This policy framework establishes structured daily operational routines, designating specific hours for interactive offline play, collaborative group activities, and sensory-rich learning environments. By embedding these guidelines directly into the institutional vision, leadership provides a clear operational roadmap for educators to mitigate the risks of passive screen exposure while cultivating an environment conducive to holistic emotional development.

Central to this governance model is the institutionalization of targeted capacity-building initiatives for teaching staff. School administrators conduct regular professional development workshops focused on digital-age developmental psychology, early neuro-socioemotional growth, and conflict de-escalation techniques. These training sessions equip teachers with the pedagogical competence required to identify early signs of digital overstimulation, such as reduced attention spans, emotional volatility, and peer withdrawal. Consequently, educators transition from passive supervisors to active facilitators who systematically guide children through emotional recognition and self-regulation exercises within the classroom.

Furthermore, leadership prioritizes home-school alignment by extending institutional digital policies into the domestic sphere. Recognizing that classroom interventions remain ineffective without parental cooperation, the school leadership initiated mandatory family engagement seminars and bi-weekly digital wellness workshops. These programs educate parents on setting healthy digital boundaries at home, managing screen time schedules, and replacing passive device consumption with interactive family routines. Through consistent communication channels, including digital newsletters and parent-teacher consultative forums, the institution establishes a unified support ecosystem that reinforces emotional intelligence practices across both home and school environments.

Strategic Operational Pillars and Leadership Implementation

To operationalize its vision, the school’s leadership established four primary strategic pillars designed to address emotional intelligence cultivation, pedagogical intervention, and institutional management. These strategic pillars define the structural mechanisms, daily execution strategies, and key performance outcomes observed across the institution, creating a multi-tiered approach to early childhood management in the digital age.

Table 1. Strategic Leadership Pillars for Early Childhood Emotional Intelligence Management

Strategic Leadership Pillar	Core Objective & Focus	Operational Execution & Interventions	Observed Impact on Emotional Intelligence
Policy & Governance	Define institutional boundaries for digital integration and screen-free zones.	Enforce structured screen-free classroom hours; implement clear digital usage guidelines.	Establishes predictable daily routines; reduces emotional overstimulation among children.
Pedagogical Integration	Embed structured social-emotional learning (SEL) into daily routines.	Conduct daily <i>mindfulness</i> circles, emotion-labeling cards, and cooperative play.	Enhances self-regulation, emotional vocabulary, and impulse control during peer interaction.
Professional Capacity	Elevate educator competencies in neuro-socioemotional guidance.	Host monthly workshops on digital psychology and behavioral intervention techniques.	Empowers teachers to proactively mediate conflicts and address digital burnout signs.
Home-School Synergy	Align domestic digital habits with institutional emotional literacy goals.	Organize parent education forums, home screen-time contracts, and progress tracking.	Ensures consistent behavioral reinforcement across home and school environments.

As detailed in the table 1 above, the first pillar (Policy & Governance) establishes the structural foundation by defining clear boundaries around digital device usage within the school premises. By enforcing designated screen-free interactive zones and daily schedules, leadership eliminates ambient digital distractions, allowing young learners to engage fully in physical and interpersonal activities. The second pillar (Pedagogical Integration) directly translates these policy goals into classroom practice through daily mindfulness exercises, guided emotional reflection sessions, and cooperative problem-solving tasks. This structured pedagogical approach enables children to practice emotional self-regulation and empathy within a supportive learning space.

The third pillar (Professional Capacity) focuses on continuous teacher training, ensuring that educators possess the technical and psychological tools necessary to address behavioral challenges stemming from home screen exposure. Teachers learn to recognize micro-expressions of emotional distress and intervene constructively before behavioral escalations occur. Finally, the fourth pillar (Home-School Synergy) bridges the gap between institutional policies and home environments. By providing parents with concrete tools—such as home screen-time

agreements and structured parent-teacher communication logs the leadership guarantees that emotional literacy training is continuously reinforced outside the school environment.

Integrated Curriculum Execution and Mindfulness Interventions

The empirical findings reveal that classroom implementation relies heavily on integrating structured mindfulness practices and emotional literacy tools directly into the daily curriculum. Every morning begins with a dedicated "Emotions Circle," where children utilize visual emotion cards to identify, label, and share their current feelings with peers. School leaders designed this routine to enhance emotional self-awareness, providing children with the vocabulary needed to articulate complex internal states rather than resorting to impulsive behavioral outbursts or emotional withdrawal.

Complementing morning reflection routines, educators incorporate guided sensory and nature-based play designed to counteract digital overstimulation. Children participate in outdoor exploration, tactile sensory bins, and collaborative building projects that require active physical presence, negotiation, and shared decision-making. Observations indicate that these nature-based mindfulness activities significantly reduce physiological stress markers in children, helping them transition smoothly from high-stimulation digital environments to calm, focused learning states within the classroom.

Furthermore, conflict resolution within the classroom is managed through a structured, leadership-endorsed framework known as the "Peace Corner." When peer disagreements arise during play activities, teachers guide children to a quiet, designated space equipped with sensory tools and reflective prompts. Rather than imposing immediate punitive measures, educators facilitate a reflective dialogue where both parties express their perspectives, identify their feelings, and agree upon a collaborative solution. This systematic intervention fosters active empathy, perspective-taking, and peer negotiation skills among early learners.

Institutional Impacts, Challenges, and Leadership Adaptations

The implementation of these leadership strategies yielded measurable positive outcomes in children's socio-emotional behaviors and classroom climate. Observational data showed a marked increase in peer empathy, prolonged attention spans during non-digital instructional tasks, and a noticeable reduction in screen-induced anxiety and tantrum frequencies. Children demonstrated an enhanced capacity for self-regulation during unstructured play, displaying greater patience, sharing behaviors, and verbal communication during interpersonal conflicts.

Despite these achievements, institutional leadership encountered ongoing challenges, primarily related to inconsistent parental enforcement of digital boundaries at home. Teachers noted that children who experienced unregulated screen time during weekends frequently exhibited heightened irritability and regression in emotional control on Monday mornings. To address this friction, school leaders adapted their strategy by introducing individualized family counseling sessions and providing parents with structured, non-digital weekend activity kits designed to encourage interactive home engagement.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that mitigating digital age challenges in early childhood education requires adaptive, transformative leadership that continuously aligns institutional policy with practical classroom interventions. By maintaining an agile management framework, the school leadership successfully navigated the tensions between rapid societal digitization and fundamental early developmental needs. This adaptive approach ensures that the institution remains a resilient sanctuary for nurturing emotionally intelligent, socially competent, and mentally resilient young learners.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that strategic early childhood education (ECE) leadership successfully mitigates digital overexposure while optimizing children's emotional intelligence, aligning with and expanding upon contemporary early childhood management literature. The institutional governance framework established by the school combining structured screen-free zones with digital literacy policies directly supports the theoretical assertions of neuro-socioemotional development scholars who emphasize the critical role of environmental regulation in shaping early executive functioning (Chigeda et al., 2022; Kukah et al., 2023). While previous studies predominantly treat digital device reliance as an unmanageable external stressor leading to diminished attention and emotional volatility, our findings reveal that vision-driven administrative intervention effectively counteracts these adverse developmental trends. By embedding structured offline socialization into daily routines and training educators to recognize early markers of digital overstimulation, the institution bridges the gap between passive tech prohibition and unguided digital immersion, contradicting earlier assumptions that institutional intervention alone cannot offset home digital habits.

Furthermore, the implementation of the four strategic leadership pillars (Policy & Governance, Pedagogical Integration, Professional Capacity, and Home-School Synergy) provides robust empirical validation for transformative leadership models within early childhood settings. The pedagogical integration of daily emotion-labeling circles, nature-based mindfulness practices, and designated conflict-resolution spaces (Peace Corners) aligns closely with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning, which posits that emotional self-regulation is fundamentally mediated through structured social interactions and guided language tools. However, unlike prior research focusing solely on teacher-level classroom strategies, our study highlights that pedagogical interventions achieve long-term sustainability only when underpinned by continuous professional development and strong administrative mandates. The systematic enhancement of educator competencies observed in this study confirms that leadership commitment is the primary catalyst converting abstract emotional literacy concepts into concrete, daily classroom practices.

The theoretical implications of this study lie in advancing a novel ECE leadership paradigm the Neuro-Socioemotional Leadership Framework which integrates organizational governance, digital age literacy, and developmental neuroscience into a unified model for modern early childhood institutions. This framework enriches existing educational leadership literature by expanding the

traditional boundaries of ECE management beyond administrative compliance to encompass active bio-behavioral and psychological stewardship in a digitized society (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2024; Rico-Gonzalez, 2023). From a practical perspective, this research offers school principals, administrators, and early childhood policy makers an actionable, step-by-step blueprint to design evidence-based digital management policies, structured teacher training programs, and parent engagement protocols without compromising educational relevance (Anwar & Saraih, 2024; Wong et al., 2021). By demonstrating how institutional leadership can actively mediate external technological disruptions, this study contributes an empirical foundation for developing national ECE accreditation standards and early childhood digital wellness guidelines across emerging economies.

Despite these significant achievements, the research highlights persistent challenges regarding home-school misalignment, particularly when unstructured home screen time causes weekly behavioral regressions in children on Monday mornings. This empirical reality extends the theoretical discourse on school-family partnerships, demonstrating that institutional digital literacy policies must actively penetrate the domestic sphere to yield consistent behavioral outcomes (Jena, 2022; Willis & Eddy, 2022). The leadership's adaptive introduction of non-digital home activity kits and family digital counseling sessions represents an innovative management response to domestic digital spillover, reinforcing the argument that modern educational institutions must function as community-wide support ecosystems. This contribution underscores that ECE leadership in the digital era cannot remain confined within school walls, but must continuously negotiate, educate, and collaborate with parents to establish coherent emotional development boundaries across all child-rearing environments.

Ultimately, this study synthesizes its theoretical and practical contributions by establishing that ECE leadership is the vital organizational leverage point for nurturing emotionally resilient, socially competent young learners amidst rapid technological change. By providing empirical proof that structured leadership strategies comprising clear policies, professional capacity building, pedagogical mindfulness, and active parental synergy can systematically offset the socio-emotional risks of the screen age, this research advances global scholarship on early childhood management. The findings provide researchers, educational leaders, and policy makers with a scalable, adaptable management template that balances modern technological integration with fundamental early developmental imperatives (Lye et al., 2023; Mishra & Singh, 2024). Consequently, this study fills a crucial gap in international literature, demonstrating that proactive organizational leadership can effectively transform potential digital vulnerabilities into opportunities for holistic, emotionally intelligent child development.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that proactive ECE leadership that integrates clear digital-use policies, structured mindfulness practices, teacher professional development, and parent-teacher collaboration can support children's emotional intelligence while addressing challenges associated with excessive digital exposure. The key lesson is that managing screen-related challenges requires an institutional leadership approach that goes beyond controlling

technology use by actively strengthening children's self-regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills. The implications of the findings suggest that ECE institutions should integrate digital balance and structured social-emotional learning into leadership policies and educational practices. Scientifically, this study contributes to educational management by proposing a Neuro-Socioemotional Leadership Framework that extends conventional leadership perspectives toward an integrated approach to children's socio-emotional development in the digital age. However, the single-case design and focus on one progressive institution limit the direct transferability of the findings to other institutional and socio-economic contexts. Future research should employ multi-case comparative and longitudinal designs to examine the consistency and long-term sustainability of these leadership strategies across diverse educational settings.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

AI-assisted technology was used during the preparation of this manuscript to support language refinement, structural organization, and improvements in academic writing. All AI-generated content was thoroughly reviewed, revised, and validated by the author. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

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