

From Athens to Paris: Socratic Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Educative Leadership Theories

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ABSTRACT	ARTICLE DETAILS
This paper examines the intersections between Socratic moral philosophy and seven leading 21st century theories of educative leadership (transformative, distributed, instructional, system, ethical, culturally responsive and adaptive leadership). It explores how Socratic principles, such as dialogue, self-reflection, and the pursuit of virtue, align with these theories. The paper demonstrates that Socratic thought complements transformative leadership by promoting personal and organizational growth through critical thinking, while it resonates with instructional leadership's focus on moral and intellectual development. Additionally, the collaborative nature of Socratic dialogue connects with distributed leadership, emphasizing shared responsibility and collective wisdom. Socratic moral philosophy also converges with ethical leadership, underscoring integrity, fairness, and moral decision-making. However, significant divergences emerge, particularly in the area of instructional leadership, which focuses more on measurable learning than on individual moral development. Similarly, Socratic moral philosophy's limited engagement with cultural identity and systemic inequality contrasts with the emphasis placed by culturally responsive leadership on social justice. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for educational leaders to integrate Socratic inquiry with strategies that address instructional quality, cultural responsiveness, and equitable leadership, suggesting avenues for future research into the practical application of these philosophical insights in diverse educational contexts. Epistemologically, further exploration is recommended into how these modern theories can be combined to foster adaptable, context-sensitive leadership models, and how Socratic inquiry can inform leadership practices in diverse educational settings that prioritize equity and inclusion. KEYWORDS: Socrates, ethics, educative leadership, leadership theories, epistemology	Published On: 19 July 2025 Available on: https://ijmir.com

INTRODUCTION

Socratic moral philosophy, with its emphasis on ethical inquiry, self-reflection, and the cultivation of virtue, offers timeless insights into leadership in education. Rooted in the classical Greek tradition, Socrates' approach to moral reasoning emphasizes the pursuit of truth through dialogue, the recognition of one's own ignorance as a starting point for wisdom, and the moral responsibility to act in accordance with ethical principles (Brickhouse & Smith, 2010). These foundations resonate deeply with the aims of contemporary leadership in education, particularly as leaders navigate the complexities of fostering equity, inclusion, and holistic development within diverse educational systems (Bush & Glover, 2014).

Interest in the potential influence of Socratic thought in modern theories arose out of the Educative Leadership Project that was commissioned by the New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and the Victorian state school systems. The project aimed to develop a practical and holistic framework for fostering the development of learners, leaders, and organizations. Central to this project was an emphasis on learning processes and intellectual engagement, with a vision of leadership that was explicitly "*educative* in intent and outcome" (Anonymous). By prioritizing leadership practices that actively enhance the learning experiences and intellectual capacities of all stakeholders, the project sought to bridge theoretical insights with practical application in three education systems.

The moral philosophy underlying the Educative Leadership Project integrated both teleological and deontological dimensions. The teleological perspective, rooted in the Ancient Greek concept of *telos* (purpose), emphasized leadership actions that are oriented toward achieving meaningful and beneficial outcomes for learners and organizations. This consequentialist focus highlighted the importance of aligning leadership practices with long-term educational goals.

Simultaneously, the project adopted a deontological stance, grounded in the concept of *deon* (duty), which evoked a moral responsibility to adhere to ethical principles and fulfill obligations to learners and the broader educational community. By considering these two dimensions, the Educative Leadership Project articulated a morally robust framework that underscored both the purposeful pursuit of educational outcomes and the ethical integrity of leadership practices in three school systems. The framework can be used to evaluate more recent leadership theories in educational settings.

For example, the OECD's *Improving School Leadership* report (2008) provides evidence-based guidance for policymakers and educators in member countries, aiming to enhance school leadership practices to achieve systemic improvements and elevate educational outcomes. By addressing the increasing complexities of leadership roles, the report underscores the necessity for leaders capable of improving teaching quality, promoting equity, and adapting to the diverse challenges of dynamic educational settings. Redefining leadership roles is central to aligning leadership development with contemporary educational demands, emphasizing leadership's pivotal role in shaping equitable, innovative, and effective education systems. The report advocates four leadership styles considered key to fostering inclusive, sustainable improvements that reflect ethical leadership and collective well-being.

Transformational leadership seeks to inspire and motivate school leaders, teachers, and stakeholders to achieve shared goals that enhance educational outcomes. This approach emphasizes cultivating a vision for change, fostering collaborative cultures, and empowering individuals to innovate and contribute to systemic improvements across educational systems (Judge & Piccolo, 2022). Its moral foundation integrates virtue ethics, valuing qualities such as integrity, vision, and professional growth, with utilitarianism, aiming to maximize positive outcomes for students, teachers, and communities. Together, these principles establish transformational leadership as a morally grounded approach to meaningful and sustainable change.

Distributed leadership emphasizes shared decision-making and accountability by distributing responsibilities among educational stakeholders. It promotes collaboration, empowers staff, and fosters an inclusive leadership model that supports systemic resilience and improved outcomes (Harris et al., 2023). Its moral philosophy combines egalitarianism, which prioritizes equity and inclusivity in decision-making, with virtue ethics, emphasizing trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility to enhance the school community's collective well-being and growth.

Instructional leadership focuses on improving teaching and learning by prioritizing goal setting, curriculum management, and lesson monitoring. This approach directly enhances student outcomes by aligning school practices with educational objectives (Hallinger & Heck, 2020). Its moral philosophy blends teleological ethics, which highlights achieving purposeful results, with deontological principles, emphasizing leaders' ethical obligations to maintain professional standards, support teacher development, and ensure equitable learning opportunities.

System leadership extends influence beyond individual institutions to drive improvements across educational networks. By fostering collaboration and sharing best practices, this approach cultivates collective responsibility and innovation at a systemic level (Harris & Jones, 2020). Its moral underpinnings combine utilitarian ethics, which seeks to maximize system-wide benefits, with communitarian principles, emphasizing interconnectedness, mutual support, and shared accountability to advance education as a public good.

The UNESCO *Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/5: Leadership in Education – Lead for Learning* (2024) extends the list with three more leadership approaches designed to address the complexities of educational contexts in the 2020s: ethical, culturally responsive, and adaptive leadership.

Ethical leadership emphasizes integrity and the ethical dimensions of decision-making, ensuring actions prioritize the best interests of students while upholding fairness, equity, and moral responsibility. This approach builds trust and credibility, fostering an educational environment that values ethical principles and supports learners' holistic development (Brown et al., 2020). Its moral foundation combines deontological ethics, emphasizing adherence to moral duties and principles, with virtue ethics, which promotes qualities like honesty, fairness, and empathy to guide leaders in advancing student welfare and maintaining the integrity of the educational system.

Culturally responsive leadership seeks to recognize and integrate the diverse cultural backgrounds present in school communities. By fostering inclusive and equitable practices, it enhances student engagement and achievement while ensuring that cultural identities are respected and reflected in policies and practices (Gay & Kirkland, 2023). This leadership approach draws on relational ethics, which prioritizes understanding and respect for the lived experiences of students, families, and staff, and egalitarian principles, advocating for justice and equity in providing meaningful educational opportunities. Together, these ethical frameworks promote diversity, inclusion, and fairness in education.

Adaptive leadership focuses on equipping leaders to respond effectively to evolving challenges and changing environments. By promoting flexibility, innovation, and resilience, it enables leaders to address complex problems, drive continuous improvement, and navigate uncertainty while maintaining long-term goals (Heifetz et al., 2009). Its moral philosophy combines pragmatism, which emphasizes practical and context-sensitive solutions, with virtue ethics, encouraging the cultivation of courage, empathy, and foresight to guide ethical decision-making. This approach ensures leaders act with integrity and adaptability, prioritizing the growth and well-being of their organizations and communities.

This paper examines the coherence between Socratic moral philosophy and these seven contemporary frameworks of educational leadership. By integrating Socratic principles into the discourse on leadership in education, this study highlights the potential of an ancient moral philosophy to enrich our understanding of how leaders can create ethical, inclusive, and transformative educational environments. It argues that revisiting the moral philosophy of Socrates not only deepens theoretical perspectives but also provides practical guidance for addressing the ethical and relational challenges of leadership in the 21st century. A preliminary analysis of Socratic ethics and links to contemporary educational leadership theories now follows.

BACKGROUND

Socratic moral philosophy is grounded in core principles such as the pursuit of virtue, the necessity of self-examination, the centrality of dialogue, and the belief in universal moral truths. At its heart is the idea that living a virtuous life is the highest good, with virtue encompassing qualities like justice, courage, and wisdom. For Socrates, these qualities are essential not only for individual ethical conduct but also for fostering communal flourishing. This principle aligns closely with the goals of ethical leadership, which emphasizes moral behavior and decisions that benefit the broader community (Plato, trans. 1997).

Socrates placed significant emphasis on self-reflection, famously asserting that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” This commitment to critical self-assessment is particularly relevant to leadership, where leaders must continuously evaluate their values, decisions, and impact on others. Additionally, the Socratic method, or *elenchus*, highlights the importance of dialogue in uncovering truth and fostering mutual understanding. By engaging in questioning and critical reflection, leaders can empower others to collaboratively address challenges and build consensus. These principles resonate strongly with distributed leadership, which values shared responsibility and collective problem-solving (McDowell & DiCicco, 2022).

One of the defining features of Socratic philosophy is its belief in universal moral truths that can be discovered through reason and inquiry. This universalism provides a robust ethical framework that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries, offering leaders a clear set of principles to guide their actions. However, this commitment to abstract moral ideals also highlights some of the limitations of Socratic philosophy. For instance, its reliance on rational dialogue may inadvertently privilege those with higher levels of education or intellectual ability, potentially excluding voices from marginalized communities (Reeve, 2000).

Moreover, Socratic moral philosophy often operates at a high level of abstraction, which can limit its applicability to the complex, pragmatic challenges leaders face in real-world settings. For example, Nussbaum (1997) explores how Socratic methods, while invaluable for encouraging critical thinking and moral reasoning, can sometimes lack direct applicability to the nuanced and context-specific challenges of leadership in complex environments. She critiques the reliance on abstraction in moral philosophy, noting that it may not fully address the pragmatic and relational aspects of decision-making required in real-world settings.

Socrates' focus on ethical individualism also leaves structural considerations largely unaddressed. While his principles emphasize personal virtue and moral responsibility, they do not directly account for systemic inequities, which are critical concerns for educational leaders operating in diverse and multicultural contexts (Haslanger, 2019; O'Connor, 2019). Furthermore, while Socratic dialogue promotes deep reflection and mutual understanding, it does not always yield actionable solutions, posing challenges for leaders required to make urgent and pragmatic decisions (Northouse, 2022).

Despite these limitations, Socratic moral philosophy offers enduring strengths. Its emphasis on ethical integrity fosters trust and credibility, while its commitment to lifelong learning and dialogue encourages continuous growth and collaboration. By revisiting the principles of Socratic thought, modern leaders can draw on its universal and timeless values to navigate the ethical and relational challenges of educational leadership.

To illustrate, the educational leadership theories identified above represent a diverse and complementary array of approaches that address the multifaceted demands of contemporary educational contexts. Each theory emphasizes particular dimensions of leadership, offering distinct strengths and limitations in fostering equity, inclusion, and excellence in education.

Transformative leadership, for example, focuses on inspiring systemic change and individual growth, emphasizing the leader's role in challenging the *status quo* and fostering innovation. This approach highlights the importance of vision, motivation, and empowerment to drive educational reforms and address inequalities. However, its reliance on visionary leadership may overlook the practical complexities of implementation and the collaborative processes needed to sustain change (Shields, 2010).

Distributed leadership emphasizes collaboration and shared responsibility, promoting the idea that leadership is not confined to formal roles but is dispersed across individuals and teams. This model fosters collective agency, innovation, and professional growth among educators. Nevertheless, the reliance on shared leadership structures can sometimes lead to ambiguity in decision-making and accountability, particularly in high-stakes or hierarchical environments (Tian et al. 2022; Harris & Jones, 2021).

Instructional leadership prioritizes the core functions of teaching and learning, with leaders acting as facilitators of instructional improvement and student achievement. This theory is particularly effective in aligning resources, strategies, and professional development to enhance academic outcomes. Nevertheless, its narrow focus on instructional quality can sometimes neglect broader systemic issues, such as cultural inclusivity and socio-emotional learning (Hallinger, 2005).

The main purpose of system leadership is to drive improvements across educational networks by fostering collaboration, innovation, and shared responsibility among schools and stakeholders. Its significant strengths include enhancing collective capacity, promoting

equity, and enabling the dissemination of best practices to achieve systemic transformation. However, a major limitation is the challenge of maintaining coherence and accountability across diverse contexts, as highlighted by Fullan (2011), who criticises the difficulty of scaling and sustaining collaborative efforts in fragmented systems.

Ethical leadership prioritizes integrity and fairness in decision-making, ensuring actions align with the moral and best interests of all stakeholders, particularly students. Its significant strengths include fostering trust, credibility, and a culture of equity and ethical accountability within educational institutions. However, a major limitation, as Northouse (2022) notes, is that leaders may face conflicts between competing ethical principles or stakeholder interests, which can complicate consistent ethical decision-making. Further, the abstract nature of ethical principles can pose challenges in translating them into actionable strategies within complex and culturally diverse contexts (Bush, 2023).

Culturally responsive leadership seeks to create equitable and inclusive educational environments by recognizing and valuing cultural diversity. Leaders adopting this approach work to disrupt structural inequities and affirm the identities of marginalized communities. However, the effectiveness of culturally responsive leadership can be constrained by systemic resistance to change or insufficient cultural competence among leaders and educators (Mello-Klein, 2020).

The key objective of adaptive leadership is to equip leaders to navigate complex, changing environments by fostering innovation, resilience, and flexibility in addressing challenges. Its significant strengths include empowering teams to find creative solutions, promoting organizational learning, and encouraging collaboration to adapt effectively to emerging demands. However, a major limitation, as Heifetz et al. (2009) note, is that adaptive leadership can encounter resistance from stakeholders uncomfortable with change or ambiguity, making it difficult to achieve consensus and sustained progress.

Collectively, these leadership theories provide a robust framework for addressing the evolving challenges in education. Their strengths lie in their capacity to inspire change, enhance teaching and learning, foster collaboration, uphold ethical standards, and champion cultural inclusivity. Yet, their limitations underscore the need for a holistic and context-sensitive approach that integrates their complementary aspects to meet the diverse needs of educational communities.

Finally, on one hand, Socratic thought exhibits the characteristics of a foundationalist epistemology, as it seeks universal truths through rational inquiry and critical dialogue. Foundationalism, as defined by epistemologists, posits that knowledge is structured on basic, self-evident principles that support further reasoning (Audi, 2010). Socratic philosophy aligns with this through its pursuit of unchanging ideals like justice and virtue, suggesting a belief in objective foundations of knowledge.

On the other hand, the Socratic method also introduces complexity. Its iterative, dialogical process emphasizes questioning assumptions, an approach that resonates with elements of fallibilism and inquiry-based epistemology, which challenge rigid foundationalism (Benson, 2000). This duality positions Socratic thought as blending foundationalist goals with a non-dogmatic methodology, enabling adaptability to different contexts and perspectives (Vlastos, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

To manage the epistemological dilemma between Socratic foundationalism and its inquiry-based, fallibilistic approach, a mixed-methods research methodology is employed. This approach integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods to balance the pursuit of universal truths with a flexible, context-sensitive exploration of knowledge. By combining the rigor of logical reasoning and critical dialogue inherent in foundationalism with the iterative, adaptive nature of inquiry-based research, the study navigates the complexities of Socratic thought, capturing both objective insights and nuanced perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The preliminary research question for this study is: What are the intersections between Socratic moral philosophy and seven contemporary educational leadership theories, and their implications for practice and further research? To answer this question, the research reported here primarily employs a qualitative methodology grounded in philosophical inquiry and interpretive analysis. This approach is well-suited for examining theoretical constructs, enabling a nuanced understanding of the moral and ethical underpinnings of leadership frameworks in relation to Socratic philosophy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A central method used is conceptual analysis, which involves critically dissecting and interpreting primary and secondary texts on Socratic moral philosophy and the selected leadership theories. Key texts by Plato (trans. 1997) provide the foundation for Socratic philosophy, while contemporary policy documents, such as the 2008 OECD Report and the 2024 UNESCO GEM Report, serve as primary sources for analyzing leadership theories.

The analysis focuses on identifying shared principles, such as ethical integrity, dialogue, and community-focused practices, as well as divergences in their application to modern educational leadership. In addition, comparative analysis is employed to systematically explore similarities and differences between Socratic principles and the leadership theories. This method facilitates the identification of complementary elements and tensions, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how Socratic ideals align with or challenge the objectives of contemporary leadership practices (Fairclough, 2013).

A limitation of this methodology is its reliance on textual and theoretical analysis, which may not fully capture the practical dimensions of leadership implementation in diverse educational contexts. To address this, the study incorporates a review of empirical studies on leadership theories, ensuring that theoretical insights are contextualized within real-world applications.

However, the absence of primary data collection, such as interviews or case studies, limits the ability to explore lived experiences of leadership practices, which may provide additional depth to the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Another challenge lies in interpreting ancient philosophical concepts, which may not directly translate into modern educational contexts. To mitigate this, the study adopts a hermeneutic approach, considering the historical and cultural specificity of Socratic philosophy while exploring its relevance to contemporary issues. This interpretive framework ensures a balanced examination of philosophical principles and their potential contributions to modern leadership theories (Gadamer, 2004).

Despite these limitations, the chosen methodology is robust for addressing the research question, as it facilitates a deep, critical engagement with both classical and contemporary thought. By combining conceptual and comparative analysis with an interpretive lens, the study contributes to the growing discourse on the philosophical foundations of educative leadership.

RESULTS

The intersections between Socratic moral philosophy and contemporary educative leadership theories reveal both shared principles and areas of divergence, reflecting the ongoing relevance of Socratic ideas in modern educational contexts.

Socratic moral philosophy emphasizes the pursuit of virtue through reason, self-examination, and dialogue, highlighting the importance of ethical conduct and the cultivation of wisdom (Plato, trans. 1997). This philosophical framework aligns closely with transformative leadership, which is concerned with inspiring and motivating followers to transcend their self-interests for the greater good, fostering growth both individually and organizationally. Transformative leaders seek to challenge the status quo and engage followers in meaningful ways to shape positive societal change. Similar to the Socratic approach, transformative leadership values the development of moral character and the creation of a shared ethical vision.

For example, in the 2020s, transformative leadership has continued to focus on empowering others and encouraging moral leadership (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2021). However, while Socratic philosophy emphasizes individual reason and self-examination as paths to virtue, transformative leadership often emphasizes collective action and the empowerment of communities (Senge et al., 2023). Both perspectives highlight the role of leadership in cultivating an environment that encourages reflection, moral growth, and collective transformation.

The concept of distributed leadership emphasizes shared responsibility for leadership across a community rather than concentrating power in a single individual. This aligns with Socratic moral philosophy's focus on collective wisdom and the dialectical process, wherein truth is discovered through dialogue among individuals with diverse perspectives (Spillane, 2021). Distributed leadership embodies a collaborative approach, wherein the leadership role is distributed across various members of the educational community, enabling a shared decision-making process.

In the 2020s, research on distributed leadership emphasizes the importance of collaboration and collective problem-solving in educational settings (Bowers & Pugh, 2022). While Socratic philosophy advocates for intellectual dialogue, which is central to discovering wisdom, distributed leadership focuses on the organizational and structural mechanisms that facilitate collaboration. Both theories recognize the value of diverse voices in the decision-making process, though Socratic thought emphasizes personal virtue, while distributed leadership highlights collective responsibility.

Instructional leadership, which focuses on improving teaching and learning, shares a connection with Socratic philosophy through its emphasis on inquiry and dialogue as tools for enhancing educational practices. Socrates' method of inquiry, the *elenchus*, involves rigorous questioning to stimulate critical thinking and self-reflection, which mirrors the instructional leader's focus on fostering a reflective, inquiry-based approach to teaching (Hallinger, 2022). Instructional leaders, much like Socrates, seek to deepen understanding and challenge assumptions, but their focus is primarily on improving pedagogical practices to advance student achievement.

In the 2020s, instructional leadership continues to be seen as a critical factor in improving educational outcomes, with an increasing emphasis on fostering equity and teacher collaboration (VanDerHeyden et al., 2020). While both Socratic moral philosophy and instructional leadership emphasize dialogue and intellectual engagement, Socratic philosophy addresses broader ethical considerations, while instructional leadership is more concerned with the practical application of teaching methods.

The priorities of system leadership—equity, collaboration, and shared accountability—intersect with Socratic ethics in their shared commitment to justice, dialogue, and the cultivation of virtuous practices for the common good (MacIntyre, 2007). Both frameworks emphasize the moral responsibility of leaders to foster environments where ethical deliberation and collective well-being thrive.

In the 2020s, system leadership has increasingly incorporated culturally responsive practices and global competencies, emphasizing inclusivity and adaptability, which aligns with Socratic ethics' focus on understanding diverse perspectives and fostering moral dialogue (Harris, 2021). However, system leadership's pragmatic emphasis on measurable outcomes and systemic efficiency reflects a shift from Socratic ideals of philosophical inquiry toward action-oriented approaches tailored to contemporary educational demands.

Ethical leadership, which prioritizes moral principles such as fairness, justice, and integrity in decision-making, has a direct intersection with Socratic moral philosophy. Both perspectives hold that leaders must model ethical behavior and ensure that their actions promote the well-being of all stakeholders. Socratic thought aligns with ethical leadership's emphasis on justice and rational

inquiry, as Socrates believed that wisdom and justice are achieved through moral clarity and the pursuit of knowledge (Starratt, 2004).

In the 2020s, ethical leadership has evolved to address complex societal challenges, such as social justice, inclusion, and ethical decision-making in the face of systemic inequities (Brown & Treviño, 2021). While both frameworks emphasize leaders' moral duties, Socratic philosophy focuses on the intellectual and philosophical foundations of ethical action, while ethical leadership in education tackles contemporary challenges and strives to implement justice in complex educational environments.

Culturally responsive leadership seeks to engage and support diverse cultural identities within educational settings, ensuring that all students are represented and valued. This theory shares intersections with Socratic philosophy in its emphasis on inclusive dialogue and respect for different perspectives. Socrates believed that genuine knowledge and understanding arise through the exchange of ideas across diverse viewpoints, which resonates with the goals of culturally responsive leadership in addressing the needs of marginalized groups (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2021; Gay & Kirkland, 2023).

In the 2020s, culturally responsive leadership has become more critical, with an increasing focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational leadership (Aronson & Laughter, 2022). Socratic moral philosophy's respect for dialogue and differing viewpoints offers a philosophical foundation for culturally responsive leadership, though Socratic thought does not directly address the contemporary cultural and social complexities that culturally responsive leadership seeks to address.

The priorities of adaptive leadership intersect with Socratic ethics through their shared emphasis on critical inquiry and iterative problem-solving, fostering leadership that seeks truth and practical solutions amidst complexity. Both approaches value the cultivation of virtues like courage, humility, and adaptability, which are essential for engaging diverse perspectives and addressing evolving challenges (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

As foreshadowed by Uhl-Bien & Arena (2018), adaptive leadership has evolved in the 2020s, to prioritize inclusivity and equity in decision-making, reflecting broader societal shifts toward participatory leadership practices. This evolution aligns with Socratic ethics by emphasizing dialogue and ethical reflection but differs by emphasizing systemic accountability and the integration of diverse stakeholder voices in ways that extend beyond Socratic thought.

In sum, the intersections between Socratic moral philosophy and contemporary educational leadership theories demonstrate the enduring relevance of Socratic principles, such as virtue, dialogue, and the pursuit of justice. While there are differences in focus—particularly regarding the scope of leadership and its application in educational contexts—the core ideas of Socratic ethics provide a valuable foundation that can inform and enhance modern leadership theories. Through a shared commitment to moral development, equity, and the pursuit of wisdom, both Socratic moral philosophy and contemporary leadership theories offer complementary frameworks for educational leaders striving to foster ethical and transformative educational environments.

DISCUSSION

The epistemological characteristics of the five educational leadership theories reflect varying degrees of alignment with foundational and non-foundational frameworks, as well as their connections to Socratic thought. Transformational, instructional, and ethical leadership theories resonate with Socratic principles through their emphasis on moral grounding and structured methodologies. These theories share foundational traits, grounded in universal truths or traditional moral structures, aligning with the coherence theories of epistemic justification as discussed by Quine and Ullian (1978) and expanded in educational administrative contexts by Evers and Lakomski (1991). Transformational leadership integrates foundational moral principles with a dynamic adaptability to change, reflecting a bridge between foundational and non-foundational paradigms. Ethical leadership similarly balances universal principles with situational moral responsiveness.

Distributed and culturally responsive leadership, on the other hand, align more closely with non-foundational epistemologies. These frameworks emphasize the social construction of knowledge and situational adaptability, as they prioritize diversity, collaboration, and equity. This dynamic, context-dependent nature contrasts foundational approaches, aligning with Evers and Lakomski's (2015) argument for the importance of context in shaping comprehensive administrative theories.

The intersections between Socratic moral philosophy and contemporary educational leadership theories reveal areas of both convergence and divergence, which have significant implications for educational leadership practice. These intersections offer insights into the ethical, intellectual, and organizational dimensions of leadership, providing educational leaders with a robust framework for fostering growth and transformation in their communities.

One of the areas of greatest convergence is the emphasis on ethical leadership. Socratic moral philosophy places a strong emphasis on the pursuit of virtue through reason and self-examination, encouraging leaders to model ethical behavior, pursue justice, and reflect on their moral duties (Plato, trans. 1997). The shared focus is on moral decision-making, fairness, and integrity in guiding others. Both Socratic and ethical leadership frameworks prioritize leaders' responsibility to act with justice and integrity, fostering an ethical climate within organizations. In educational leadership practice, this convergence suggests that leaders should cultivate their moral character and engage in continuous self-reflection, ensuring that their decisions and actions promote equity and well-being for all stakeholders (Resick et al., 2009).

Another area of significant convergence lies in transformative leadership and Socratic moral philosophy, both of which seek to inspire and empower others to engage in self-examination, challenge the *status quo*, and work toward collective good (Eacott & Niesche, 2020). Transformative leadership calls on leaders to be change agents, capable of guiding followers through deep personal and organizational transformation. This is mirrored in Socrates' view that individuals must undergo intellectual and moral development through questioning and dialogue. The implications for practice here suggest that educational leaders should not only focus on improving systems and structures but also prioritize the personal growth of those they lead, fostering a culture of reflective inquiry and ethical transformation (Moore, 2024). Both perspectives emphasize the importance of fostering moral and intellectual engagement among followers, encouraging them to challenge assumptions and act with integrity for the greater good.

Distributed leadership, which emphasizes the shared responsibility of leadership across a community, also intersects with Socratic moral philosophy, particularly in the value it places on dialogue and collective wisdom (Liu et al. (2022). Socratic ethics promote the exchange of ideas and knowledge among individuals, which resonates with the collaborative nature of distributed leadership. In this respect, both frameworks advocate for the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives in decision-making. However, the divergence between the two theories lies in their organizational focus. While Socratic thought emphasizes individual moral development through dialogue, distributed leadership focuses on the structural mechanisms that support collective decision-making and collaborative problem-solving (Bolden, 2022). For educational leaders, this means that while fostering a culture of intellectual exchange and shared responsibility is important, there is also a need for formal structures and processes that facilitate the distribution of leadership and collective action across the educational community.

The connection between instructional leadership and Socratic ethics is also notable, particularly in the shared focus on inquiry and dialogue as tools for intellectual growth (Rigby et al. 2023; Kierner et al. 2022). Socratic questioning encourages critical thinking and self-reflection, aligning with the instructional leader's role in fostering a reflective, inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning. However, the divergence between these two perspectives lies in their focus: while Socratic philosophy is concerned with the pursuit of wisdom and moral development, instructional leadership is primarily concerned with improving teaching and learning outcomes (Sebastian et al. 2023; Meyer & Campbell (2022). In practice, this divergence suggests that while Socratic methods can deepen intellectual engagement, educational leaders also need to focus on the practicalities of enhancing pedagogical effectiveness and aligning instructional strategies with student needs.

System leadership and Socratic moral philosophy converge in their emphasis on ethical reflection and the pursuit of common good, fostering collaboration and critical dialogue to address complex societal challenges (Harris, 2021). However, they diverge in that system leadership prioritizes collective action and systemic reform, while Socratic philosophy focuses on individual virtue and inquiry. In the 2020s, system leadership's focus on equity and sustainability highlights practical implications for addressing global challenges, emphasizing adaptive solutions that align ethical leadership with systemic impact (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Ethical leadership and Socratic ethics converge in their commitment to integrity, justice, and fostering ethical behavior through reflective inquiry and moral reasoning (Ciulla, 2020). However, they diverge in focus, as Socratic ethics emphasizes individual virtue and philosophical dialogue, while ethical leadership incorporates a broader responsibility for organizational and community well-being. In the 2020s, ethical leadership's emphasis on promoting equity and diversity has gained practical significance, addressing systemic inequalities and creating inclusive organizational cultures (Brown et al., 2022).

Culturally responsive leadership seeks to engage and support diverse cultural identities within educational settings (Khalifa et al., 2016). Socratic moral philosophy is inherently dialogical and open to different viewpoints, making it an appropriate foundation for understanding the value of diverse perspectives. Both frameworks promote inclusivity and respect for different ways of knowing, with Socratic questioning allowing for the integration of multiple voices and experiences into the search for truth. However, Socratic philosophy does not directly address the contemporary social and cultural dynamics that culturally responsive leadership seeks to navigate, such as issues of power, identity, and social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Hence, while Socratic dialogue can serve as a valuable tool in promoting equity and inclusion, culturally responsive leadership requires a more explicit focus on addressing systemic inequalities and ensuring that diverse cultural perspectives are not only acknowledged but also actively integrated into the decision-making process.

Adaptive leadership and Socratic moral philosophy converge in their emphasis on addressing complex challenges through critical inquiry, reflection, and fostering individual and collective growth (Grint, 2010). They diverge in scope, as Socratic ethics primarily focuses on personal virtue and philosophical ideals, while adaptive leadership emphasizes pragmatic solutions and organizational resilience in dynamic contexts. In the 2020s, adaptive leadership's focus on flexibility and innovation has become increasingly practical for navigating unprecedented global disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting workplace dynamics (Denis et al., 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The convergence and divergence between Socratic moral philosophy and contemporary educational leadership theories highlight the multifaceted nature of leadership in education. The common emphasis on ethical behavior, moral development, and reflection across these frameworks underscores the importance of cultivating virtuous, reflective leaders who foster inclusive, transformative

environments. However, the differences in focus—such as the practical applications of instructional leadership, the structural aspects of distributed leadership, and the cultural responsiveness of leadership in diverse settings—point to the need for educational leaders to adapt and integrate diverse approaches to leadership while remaining committed to ethical and intellectual growth. These insights suggest that Socratic moral philosophy offers valuable principles for guiding educational leaders but must be complemented with contemporary leadership theories to address the complexities and challenges of modern educational contexts.

Placing the seven theories of educational leadership—transformative, distributed, instructional, system, ethical, culturally responsive, and adaptive—on an epistemological continuum reveals a spectrum from foundational to non-foundational approaches. Instructional leadership sits at the most foundational end, emphasizing structured, evidence-based practices. Ethical and transformative leadership occupy a transitional position, blending universal principles with adaptability. Distributed leadership focuses on collaboration and context-specific practices, while culturally responsive leadership represents the most non-foundational stance, prioritizing systemic responsiveness and contextual diversity. Adaptive leadership, while incorporating foundational elements, leans further towards the non-foundational end, emphasizing flexibility, innovation, and the ability to navigate complex, dynamic educational environments. This continuum highlights how these leadership theories balance foundational and non-foundational epistemologies to address the evolving demands of education.

Drawing conclusions about the major convergences and divergences between Socratic moral philosophy and the seven contemporary theories of educational leadership reveals both shared principles and significant differences. These intersections have important implications for educational leadership practice and future research, particularly given the limitations of the research methodology employed in this exploration.

One of the most significant convergences is found in the ethical dimensions of both Socratic moral philosophy and the leadership theories. Socratic philosophy emphasizes virtue, self-reflection, and the pursuit of moral truth, aligning closely with ethical leadership's focus on integrity, fairness, and moral decision-making. Both frameworks advocate for leaders who model virtuous behavior and engage in self-examination to foster an ethically sound environment. This convergence underscores the importance of educational leaders who prioritize ethical behavior and create spaces where moral reflection and accountability are central to educational practice.

Similarly, transformative leadership shares common ground with Socratic philosophy, particularly in its commitment to fostering personal and collective transformation through dialogue, critical thinking, and moral development. Socratic questioning encourages individuals to challenge assumptions and seek greater wisdom, mirroring transformative leadership's goal of inspiring and empowering others to engage in meaningful change. Both seek to promote intellectual and moral growth, challenging the status quo for the sake of improvement and equity. In practice, this convergence suggests that educational leaders should focus on cultivating the moral and intellectual development of both themselves and those they lead, creating a culture of reflective inquiry.

Distributed leadership also reflects key elements of Socratic philosophy, particularly the value placed on collaborative decision-making and the pursuit of collective wisdom. Socratic thought values the exchange of ideas and the search for truth through dialogue, which mirrors the distributed leadership approach that encourages shared responsibility and collaborative problem-solving. This convergence highlights the importance of creating structures in schools that support shared leadership while fostering critical reflection and open dialogue.

However, significant divergences between Socratic philosophy and the leadership theories emerge. Socratic philosophy, with its emphasis on individual moral development through questioning and self-examination, diverges from instructional leadership, which primarily focuses on improving teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. While both value reflection, instructional leadership tends to prioritize organizational and pedagogical aspects over personal moral development. Educational leaders must strike a balance between fostering reflective inquiry in leadership practice and addressing the pragmatic demands of improving instructional quality.

Culturally responsive leadership further highlights a divergence between Socratic philosophy and contemporary leadership theories. Socratic philosophy emphasizes intellectual and moral development but does not explicitly address issues of power, cultural identity, or systemic inequality in the way that culturally responsive leadership does. Culturally responsive leadership is deeply concerned with recognizing and valuing diverse cultural perspectives and addressing social justice issues in educational settings. The implications for practice suggest that while Socratic principles of dialogue and inquiry can support an inclusive educational environment, they must be complemented with a focus on addressing the lived experiences of marginalized communities and the structural dynamics of power in education.

System leadership theory mirrors Socratic thought in its emphasis on collective wisdom and collaborative action, aiming to achieve systemic improvements through shared decision-making and dialogue. Both stress the importance of fostering ethical leadership at various levels of the education system to drive meaningful change. However, system leadership tends to operate within broader, structural frameworks that may limit the immediacy of moral inquiry typical of Socratic thought.

Adaptive leadership converges with Socratic ethics in its flexibility and emphasis on responding to dynamic, complex challenges through moral decision-making. Both approaches encourage leaders to engage in reflective practices and adapt their strategies based

on context. Yet, adaptive leadership's emphasis on adaptability may sometimes dilute the fixed principles that Socratic thought upholds, leading to potential conflicts between moral consistency and situational responsiveness.

The convergences between Socratic philosophy and contemporary leadership theories suggest that educational leaders can draw upon Socratic principles of reflection, dialogue, and moral inquiry to strengthen their practices. Leaders can encourage moral and intellectual development in those they lead, creating an environment where ethical behavior, critical thinking, and collaborative decision-making are prioritized. Socratic questioning can serve as a tool for engaging educators and students in deeper reflection on their practices, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

However, the divergences indicate the need for educational leaders to integrate these philosophical insights with practical strategies that address the immediate needs of instructional improvement, cultural responsiveness, and distributed leadership. Leaders must recognize the importance of not only fostering personal moral development but also addressing broader structural and systemic issues that influence educational outcomes. Socratic philosophy may need to be supplemented with other leadership models that emphasize equity, justice, and the practical application of teaching and learning strategies.

Given the limitations of the research methodology employed in this study—primarily the reliance on literature analysis—future research could benefit from empirical investigations exploring how Socratic moral philosophy is applied in contemporary educative leadership contexts. Case studies of educational leaders who incorporate Socratic principles into their practice could provide valuable insights into the practical implications of these philosophical ideas. Additionally, research that examines the intersection of Socratic philosophy with issues of social justice, equity, and culturally responsive leadership could help clarify how Socratic thought can be adapted to address the challenges faced by modern educational leaders in diverse, multicultural environments.

Further research should also investigate how Socratic questioning techniques and reflective practices can enhance instructional leadership and contribute to improved student outcomes. Understanding the balance between intellectual and moral development on one hand and the practical demands of leadership on the other will be essential for advancing both educational theory and practice. Hence, the intersection between Socratic moral philosophy and contemporary educative leadership theories presents opportunities for enhancing educational practice. While there are significant convergences, particularly in the ethical and transformative aspects of leadership, the divergences highlight the need for a holistic approach that integrates Socratic principles with the practical demands of instructional leadership, cultural responsiveness, and distributed leadership. The implications for practice call for leaders who foster a reflective and inclusive environment, while the need for future research into the application of these ideas suggests opportunities for further exploration and development in educative leadership scholarship.

To conclude, the epistemological analysis of Socratic thought and its implications for educative leadership provides several avenues for further research and practice. First, the integration of foundational and non-foundational principles within leadership frameworks offers potential for balancing universal values with contextual adaptability, aligning with recent calls for hybrid approaches in leadership studies (Eacott, 2020). Second, the use of Socratic dialogue as a practical tool in leadership training could enhance critical thinking and moral reasoning, particularly in diverse educational contexts (Khalifa, 2021).

Additionally, empirical studies are needed to validate the continuum of leadership theories from foundational to non-foundational epistemologies. Such research can be particularly relevant in multicultural or rapidly changing educational environments, where adaptability is critical (Lumby & Coleman, 2022). Finally, the development of culturally responsive and distributed leadership practices rooted in non-foundationalist epistemologies can address systemic inequities and promote diversity, a direction supported by ongoing scholarship in inclusive leadership (e.g. Gumus et al., 2022).

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