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Exploring ethical leadership perspectives of district officials: a case study of one education district in KwaZulu-Natal

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative, interpretivist case study sought to explore the conceptualisations and enactments of ethical leadership by officials based in one education district office in KwaZulu-Natal. The study was underpinned by two analytical frameworks: Shapiro and Stefkovich's Multiple Ethical Paradigm and Khoza's Attuned Leadership: African Humanism. Purposive sampling was used to identify the research participants, while semi-structured interviews, documents reviews and questionnaires were employed to generate data which was analysed thematically. The findings seem to suggest that the researched district officials had a profound conceptualisation of ethics (propriety, compassion, care, empathy, honesty and trustworthiness, role modelling; collaboration and teamwork), however, there appeared to be a disjuncture between the conceptualisation and enactment of ethical leadership. The findings also indicate that most district officials were selfish and did not care about their core duties which constitutes the basic values of ethical leadership. Some were running the different sections of the District Office as a private property and spent most of the time absent from work; hired their own companies to work in schools by colluding with unscrupulous school principals and circuit managers; received bribes; they sometimes exchanged teaching and management posts for sexual favours and money and engaged in general nepotism. The findings also showed that there were networks of unethical practices linking the schools, circuit offices which escalated to the district office. Based on the study findings, this research report recommends that there should be an overhaul of the recruitment process in the Department of Education. When recruiting the district officials, in addition to the interview process, there should also be easement tools to assess the character and the integrity of the potential official. The frequency of unethical practices suggests a deep moral decay in society,therefore, it is recommended that ethics education should be made compulsory, not only in Higher Education teacher training institutions but also through in- service staff development programmes. Furthermore, the South African Council for Educators (SACE) should be de-politicised, be decentralised and, made more visible to play the developmental role which it was created to in the first place. While this study acknowledges that the district officials work in a highly unionized and politicised environment, they should recognise their agency as transformational and morally upright people that they have a responsibility to promote professional ethics and minimise unethical practices both in the District Office and the schools under their care.

Keywords: Attuned leadership, ethical leadership, school district, *Ubuntu* leadership.