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Exploring ethical leadership in schools: voices of teachers from four schools in Gauteng East District

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents the research findings of a multiple case study using qualitative research, employing interpretive paradigm on ethical leadership in three schools located in Gauteng East Education District. Specifically, the study sought to explore the conceptualisations, experiences and enactment of ethical leadership among school principals, heads of department and teachers in the researched schools. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data that was generated through interviews, questionnaires and documents reviews. All issues of trustworthiness in research and ethical considerations were observed. The findings suggest that most participants had very little knowledge of ethical leadership at school and classroom levels, despite the fact that the teaching profession not only focuses on teaching, but goes beyond the presentation of subject content and requires school leaders and teachers to be beyond ethical reproach, hence there was a multiplicity of ethical challenges in the researched schools. Most participants failed to demonstrate appreciation of their agency role in promoting an ethical culture, both in leadership and in teaching, despite the prescripts of the SACE Code of Professional Ethics and other laws governing their employment. The participants highlighted a variety of unethical practices, such as recording of marks for unmarked assessments; leakage of examinations by teachers; general laziness and *laissez faire* attitude to work; greediness and abuse of positions of authority. Despite these negative findings, a minority of participants indicated that they promoted an ethical culture, integrity and honesty among the learners that they taught. Amidst all these challenges, the findings suggest that there was minimal presence by the Provincial Department of Education and SACE to empower the School Management Teams and teachers on ethical leadership and teaching.

While there were numerous ethical leadership challenges in the researched schools, this study posits that various role-players, such as the Provincial Department of Education, SACE and the school management teams led by the school principals, have a direct responsibility to intervene with credible and workable continuous professional development programmes to address ethical lapses in the schools. Further, SACE does not have sufficient human resources to physically visit each school or district, however, they have made their teacher development resources available on their website for easy access by teachers and other school leaders. These stakeholders should exercise their agency to utilise these resources to empower themselves and those around them. In conclusion, the findings suggest that comprehensive and compulsory programmes should be offered as part of pre-service teacher development at universities, as well as regular in-service training to develop ethical awareness, ethics development, ethics reasoning and ethical leadership and teaching at an early stage of the teaching career.