Corrupted Principles
And the Challenges of Critically Reflective Leadership.

Christine L Cunningham

Being a report of an investigation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University.
I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

Christine L Cunningham
Abstract

_Corrupted Principles_ documents my research as a naïve and new K-12 principal in Bolivia. From 2002-2006 I spent four years teaching and observing hundreds of incidents that detailed the hidden underbelly of a prestigious and elite American International School in one of the western hemisphere’s poorest nations. During those years I kept a daily journal of my work that revealed exactly how some of the richest and most powerful families in Bolivia colluded to ensure that their children gained exclusive access to education opportunities and privileges.

Against a backdrop of national crisis while Bolivia’s Indigenous majority struggled to gain executive political power and invoke inclusive and pluralistic education reform, _Corrupted Principles_ details how the school’s plutocratic processes helped to guarantee that a new generation of wealthy young graduates would continue to stand against their fellow citizens as advocates of neo-liberal imperialism. Grounded in Critically Reflective Practice and its four step cycle from professional critique, through confrontation then to reconstruction of education practice, the text weaves thick description of school administration experiences and whole-school events with critical education theory. Through this process I uncover how the school fabricated college transcripts and passed failing students and examine why the school remained unaccountable for its corrupt actions.

As the title suggests, _Corrupted Principles_ reveals my professional dilemma to remain true to my education ideals while leading a corrupt school. How I resolved this ethical predicament is the crux of this study and illuminates the challenges and inspiration of doing Critically Reflective Leadership.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation could not have been completed without the unerring guidance of my two wonderfully professional and inspiring supervisors: Dr Nado Aveling and Professor Barry Down of Murdoch University in Western Australia.

I could not have conducted this research without the assistance of many dedicated teachers and auxiliary staff who worked, and in some cases still work, at Colegio Americano. The dedication they modelled to students and the integrity they maintained throughout the years I worked in the school are testimony to their professionalism and moral principles. I do not mean to cause any harm or offence to these colleagues by writing Corrupted Principles.

I dedicate this thesis to my young Australian-Bolivian daughter, Helen Ani Lujan-Cunningham. May she grow up in an environment that allows her an education that excites, inspires and changes our world.
# Contents

Title Page
Declaration  
Abstract  
Acknowledgments  
Acronyms and Tables  
Translations

**Chapter One: Ethical Dilemmas of Leadership**

Introduction  
Rationale  
My Background  
Bolivian Education and American International Schools  
Research Questions  
Research Paradigm and Method  
Thesis Structure  
Significance and Limitations of the Research

**Chapter Two: Critical Education Theory**

Introduction  
Critique  
Qualitative Inquiry  
Middle Century Critique and Inquiry  
Voices of the ‘Other’  
New Methodologies  
Questioning the Role of School  
Towards Transformative Pedagogy  
Lived Experience

**Chapter Three: Critically Reflective Practice**

Introduction  
Choosing a Critical Theory Methodology  
Field Work and Data Collection  
School Entry Negotiation Documents  
Journaling  
Other Data  
Critically Reflective Practice  
CRP According to Smyth  
Stage One: Describing  
Stage Two: Informing  
Stage Three: Confronting  
Stage Four: Reconstructing  
Ethics
**Chapter Four:** Describing the Bolivian International School  

Introduction  

Bolivia  

- Race and Class Segregation  
- Politics  

The School: *Colegio Americano*  

- History: A Tumultuous Story  
- A Glimpse of the City Surrounding *Colegio Americano*  
- First Impressions on a Typical School Day  
- School Day  
- Governance: The Owners as School Board  
- Leadership: The Role of Director  
- Staffing: International and Local Teacher Disparities  
- The Students: Privileged, Racist and Entitled  
- Curriculum: Americanization, Text-books and Dual Diploma  
- Language: Bilingualism versus English Dominance  
- Mimicking the USA: Americanisms on Campus  

Conclusion  

**Chapter Five:** Contesting Assumptions that Inform Practice  

Introduction  

Choosing a Theme to Focus and Inform  

- It looked as if...there was a complex mishmash of systems.  
- It looked as if... the school was trying to enact authentic assessment practices.  
- It looked as if... grading processes were unworkable.  
- It looked as if... *Colegio Americano* ‘created’ reports that contradicted teachers’ evaluation decisions.  
- It looked as if... grades were manipulated to ensure student promotion by age.  
- It looked as if... school transcripts were enhanced to help students get into college.  
- It looked as if... students understood the rorting in the system.  
- It looked as if... wealthier parents were buying educational advantage in a competitive education market.  
- It looked as if... teachers were complicit in unethical practices.  

Emerging Theories  

**Chapter Six:** Confronting Local Power  

The Story So Far  

Isolation and Exhaustion  

Stage Three: Confronting  

Corruption  

Plutocratic Dominance at *Colegio Americano*  

A Gentleperson’s D  

Meritocracy: Advocating a Myth  

Human Agency  

Culture of Grading  

Standards-Based Assessment  

Grading Theory Complexity  

Conclusions
References

291-310

Acronyms

AI / AIS  American International / School
AP      Advanced Placement
CRP    Critically Reflective Practice
ESL    English as a Second Language
GPA    Grade Point Average
IBO    International Baccalaureate Organisation
IOWA   The Iowa Test of Basic Skills
OBE    Outcomes Based Education
SACS-CASI Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Council on Accreditation and School Improvement
SAT    Scholastic Aptitude Test
        (renamed in 2005 to Scholastic Reasoning Test)
TOEFL  Test of English as a Foreign Language

List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table One</th>
<th>Approximate demographics of stakeholders at Colegio Americano</th>
<th>Page 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table Two</td>
<td>Possible Themes to Investigate</td>
<td>Page 110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table Three</td>
<td>American and Bolivian Grade Comparisons</td>
<td>Page 120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table Four</td>
<td>American and Bolivian Subject Comparisons</td>
<td>Page 123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table Five</td>
<td>Salary Scale at Colegio Americano</td>
<td>Page 185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table Six</td>
<td>Factors Affecting Grading</td>
<td>Page 212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table Seven</td>
<td>Doctorate Timeline</td>
<td>Page 268</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Translations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPANISH</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomía</td>
<td>Autonomy to such an extent that it is almost a declaration of independence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachillerato / Bachiller</td>
<td>High School diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buenos días</td>
<td>Good morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campesino</td>
<td>Peasant; or poor, rural Indigenous Bolivian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castellanización</td>
<td>Enforced learning of Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criollos</td>
<td>People of Spanish descent but born in Latin America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colegio Americano</td>
<td>American College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empleadas</td>
<td>Hired help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Horas Cívicas            | Literally: civic hours
A school period dedicated to civics instruction and celebration |
| Jailónes (a term of insult) | Spoilt snobs                                                          |
| Latifundios              | Agricultural land holding of vast size and wealth                       |
| Libretas Escolares       | Bolivian School Reports                                                 |
| Manifestación            | Political Protest                                                       |
| Mestizo                  | Mixed ancestry – usually a mix of Spanish and Indio-American.          |
| Pachamama (Indigenous term) | Mother Earth                                                         |
| Poco a poco               | Step by step                                                            |
| Quinceañera              | Fifteenth Birthday                                                      |
| Sindicato de Profesores  | Teachers’ Unions                                                        |
We teach to change the world. The hope that undergirds our efforts to help students learn is that doing this will help them act towards each other, and to their environment, with compassion, understanding and fairness. But our attempts to increase the amount of love and justice in the world are never simple, never ambiguous. What we think are democratic, respectful ways of treating people can be experienced by them as oppressive and constraining. One of the hardest things teachers learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice. The cultural, psychological and political complexities of learning, and the ways in which power complicates all human relationships [including those between students and teachers] means that teaching can never be innocent.

Stephen Brookfield, 1995: 1
Introduction

As Stephen Brookfield boldly declares in the title page quotation for this chapter, “we teach to change the world.” At least when I started in the profession that was the assumption that inspired me to first stand in front of a class of youth so as to try and find ways to infuse my love of learning to them. In the beginning I was filled with the certainty that only a young adult can feel; I believed teaching was a calling and that my career would help to transform the next generations into ‘better’ citizens of the world.

It took many more years to realise exactly how complex and political is teaching and how different are each school’s needs and dynamics. This became especially obvious as I chose teaching assignments in locations culturally alien to my own upbringing in a white, middle-class, Australian urban setting. As my experiences widened I began to question my naïve embrace of a change-making education philosophy. I wondered what impact I was actually having on my students because I was imparting a Western based knowledge agenda. Was this really changing students’ outlook in a, still undefined, ‘better’ way?

When I began teaching in Bolivia my concerns really came to the fore. Here I was in a Spanish, Quechua and Aymara speaking part of the world, in a country with a 500 year history of suppression of its ancient Indigenous cultures and in effect I had been contracted to continue that suppression through the teaching of Western History and Politics and English Literature and Language. The story underpinning this thesis begins at that point and in the following pages you will read of my journey into Bolivian culture and education and re-live my struggles to find a way to teach and lead with the goal of creating “better” world citizens in a manner that I could live with.
Rationale

While my personal philosophy of education suffered a battering of confidence throughout my thesis journey, in the end what I originally began with stood up to the tests I put before it. I now know that one can only stay in the teaching profession with a solid link to a tangible philosophy to fall back on when politics steps in to complicate one’s work. Therefore I present to you the following beliefs that underpin who I am as a teacher and a school leader in the understanding that such a declaration is the only way to move into this thesis story with honesty and integrity.

In the traditions of Paulo Freire, bell hooks and Peter McLaren, I choose to be a critical educator. I understand that teaching is a political action and I know that my profession is not a neutral one. I openly acknowledge at the start of this thesis that my political-education inclinations can be placed in the left camp of eco-feminist, critical pedagogy. These ‘isms’ translate into a conviction that when working with students it is my job to try and stimulate creativity and independent thought, which then gets students to think about the status quo so that they may challenge its unconscionable aspects. I believe that today’s youth live in a globally connected, capital driven, patriarchal world that tries to shape them into compliant consumers who are individualistic and self-focused. My obligation as a critical educator is to try and counter these forces by fostering in my students empathy for others and harm prevention for our planet.

As an educator, I concede that a crucial component of schooling is to prepare young people for the world of work. When students graduate from compulsory education they must leave school equipped with the skills necessary to be employable. This economic goal of schooling is today almost universally accepted and appears to require no further
justification. Yet I believe that it is a very limited goal for schooling that teaches our children only the value of possessive individualism and consumerism.

For me, what is of equal, if not more, importance to the capitalist goal of employability are goals for schooling that promote what Apple describes as “thick democracy” (2006: 15). Students need to learn in school how to feel a connection to their world through the pedagogical vision of what Paulo Freire (1972b) called conscientization;¹ which refers to education as a means of raising the consciousness of students and their teachers so that they may firstly see the social injustices and inequities in the world and then be inspired to do something about it.

My Background

As a teacher-activist, I spent the first ten years of my career working with students who all fit the label of oppressed in some way – Indigenous Australians in remote communities; then teenagers on the Autism Spectrum or with ADHD or generally ‘at-risk of failing’ high school in blue collar suburban Perth; and later East Timorese students in burnt out schools after their independence referendum of 1999. Faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles to a good life, I tried to show my students that education offers a solid pathway to equipping them with the skills needed to improve their individual economic prospects and at the same time empower them in a way that they could believe issues of social inequity and injustice can be overcome.

In 2002 I followed my heart and a man to his native home, Bolivia in South America. We had met when we were both working in Timor Leste. When our contracts ended in

¹ This is the English translation of the Portuguese term, conscientização.
our different jobs; I decided to seek work in his country so we could spend more time

once I got to South America, I was excited by the prospect of continuing my

work in Freire’s continent but was constrained immediately by my lack of Spanish and

Portuguese language skills. Given my professional predilections in the past, it was

personally confronting to me to realise that as I could only teach in English I would only

be able to work in schools of privilege. I confronted my personal attitude of disdain at

wealthy elites and wondered whether I could find the good in a new work challenge.

I was pragmatic and accepting of my language limitations and began to wonder if my

philosophy of critical pedagogy could be transferred to this new arena. So often in

critical education theory the focus has been on lower levels of society and the desire to

empower people from the ‘bottom up.’ I began to imagine what the world might be like

if not only the poor were conscientized but if the upper classes were too.

So I applied for jobs online and quite soon after flew half away around the world and

began teaching children of the Bolivian oligarchy as a high school Social Studies and

English teacher in an American International School. The school is located in a small

city in urban Bolivia. I have chosen not to specify the exact details of the city or school

any further so as to protect the individual identities of those whom I will discuss and, in

some instances, challenge and critique in later sections of this thesis. For the sake of

narrative ease, I will call the school Colegio Americano, which is Spanish for

‘American College.’ I choose this name because using a Spanish phrase may help the

reader remember that the school is located in a Spanish speaking environment, and the

actual words I have used to name the school I choose because it is a blunt reminder that

the K-12 school is culturally very (north) American.
While masking Colegio Americano’s identity, I can still provide a chart of some basic demographics about the school to allow those Readers who are more quantitatively minded to get a picture in their mind of the school. The numbers are deliberately inexact in the chart below, please only take them as a guideline to help envisage the case study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total numbers</th>
<th>Bolivian</th>
<th>International</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student K-12</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management (Director, Principal, Counsellor)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliary staff</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families with enrolled children</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Members</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1 (director)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table One: Approximate demographics of stakeholders at Colegio Americano*

At Colegio Americano I quickly learned that, like all children, cynicism and apathy are not natural traits in the young. My rich students responded openly and intelligently to the curriculum we constructed together. I confirmed that these students were capable of empathising with their impoverished fellow citizens and that, given their access to ‘developed world’ education resources and a plethora of high-tech information resources; they could hunt out creative solutions to many global and local dilemmas.

While I was attempting to raise the consciousness of my students by exposing them to thought provoking content, I made absolutely certain that this was balanced with rigorous academic expectations and precision analysis of writing, reading and comprehension skills. Students knew that in my classes merit was the only way to pass a course and if they applied consistent effort and hard work to their studies, they would succeed.
Unfortunately, a classroom level attempt at critical pedagogy can only be effective in a school environment that reinforces the messages taught in lessons. Outside the walls of my classroom, my students were surrounded by an aura of entitlement and racism. The colour of one’s skins, the wealth of one’s family and the passport one had all factored into the pecking orders of both staff and students at Colegio Americano. Irrespective of my perhaps utopian hopes, this American International School remained a site that reproduced the factors needed to keep the oligarchs in power.

After two years I was offered a promotion to K-12 principal. In this international school, the role was akin to what I had observed in Australia more at the deputy principal level. I accepted the offer based on the hope that in a beginner’s leadership position I would be able to learn how to facilitate transformative learning at the whole-school level (Sterling, 1999). I understood that this would not be an easy task but I was determined to try. If I could uncover the institutional structures that were facilitating the cultural reproduction of privilege I believed it would be a starting point to finding ways to change the status quo.

For the next eighteen months I was the principal, and then I was promoted again to the acting-director role and finished the final six months of my contract at that level. The director position is the chief executive officer role in the school. During my two years in leadership roles I gathered as much information as I could about how Colegio Americano functioned. The school was very secretive in its practices but as I ascended up the administrative hierarchy I was able to slowly piece together a picture of corruption, nepotism and the veneration of all things from the U.S.A.
During the four years that I spent working at Colegio Americano, I vacillated between disgust at the unfair and favourable treatment some students were receiving and determination to find a way to change the undemocratic practices that were being modelled in the school. On the one hand, I could see that as this school had been operating for fifty years it had an inter-generational support base for the continuation of its elitist and privileging practices. On the other hand, I believed that if I could expose how this school got away with its ethically questionable practices, it might bring the issues out into the open and thus be a beginning point to real change. In *Leadership for Social Justice: making revolutions in education*, Marshall and Oliva (2006) argue that moral transformative leadership begins with research and the uncovering of institutional abuses. With their arguments in mind, I enrolled in an Australian doctoral program and began formal research of the school by documenting my work as the school principal/director.

**Bolivian Education and American International Schools**

Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere and its public education sector is under-resourced, militantly unionised and suffering from bureaucratic graft and corruption. While literacy rates in the country have improved dramatically in the past decade, many students (especially females and students from rural areas) only attend school to the upper primary level (UNESCO, 2000).

Political instability is a historical and a present day reality in this country. During the four years that I lived and worked there (from 2002 to 2006) the country changed presidents five times. The government regularly shut down its service provisions due to strikes and other political actions and public education was often the first to suffer disruptions and days off. A nation-wide education reform program based on inclusivity
and modernisation was introduced in the early 1990s, but continuing political strife and strong opposition from the teachers union meant that public schools had been extremely slow to introduce any reforms. Even in 2006, most government funded schools continued to use rote learning methods in classrooms equipped with little more than chalk and blackboards that were jam-packed with a 45:1 student to teacher ratio.

In the face of such dreadful conditions in public schooling, any family that could afford to send their children to private schools did so. And yet, because most private schools in Bolivia are still subject to the education regulations of the government and as many private school teachers also teach in public schools (during different day or evening shifts) and are thus members of the teachers union, political strife affected these schools as well.

In contrast to the education situation facing most families in the country, the school I worked in offered an oasis of education privilege for those that could afford its extremely high tuition fees. As an ‘American International School,’ Colegio Americano existed in an accountability loophole because it was not directly answerable to the country’s education department and, as an “Overseas American School” (Orr, 1974), it was not directly accountable to any government structure in the USA either.

Before I go on, it is necessary to define what I mean by an ‘American International School’ (AIS) or its older terminology, American Overseas School. The AIS I worked in, Colegio Americano, was associated with quite a specific USA ‘brand’ of K-12 schools that all share the following attributes:

• Schools are not located in homeland USA;
• Schools are privately run and Board governed;
• Students are taught in English in a cultural immersion environment;

• Teachers are expected to choose the best United States’ state, or national, level curriculum standards as guidelines for lesson planning and to use USA manufactured textbooks as key classroom resources;

• The schools schedule an August through June school calendar with vacation times paralleling USA schools;

• The schools help to provide smooth student transitions to and from state-side schools as the course credits earned in the American International School and students GPA calculations are seen as equal to, and compatible with, those earned in State-side schools.

• The schools administer USA College Board Advanced Placement (AP) exams and courses and/or purchase the International Baccalaureate Organisation’s (IBO) courses and exams. American International Schools also administer many standardised tests from the USA, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) exams, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and grade level “No Child Left Behind” based assessments like the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (IOWA).

• The director of the school must be a certified USA administrator, or someone who holds qualifications perceived to be at least equal to an American’s education credentials.

• The majority of teaching staff are international hires, mainly from the USA, and it is common for contracts to specify that teachers be a-political and thus be non-union members.

• The schools are members of USA regional accreditation agencies (such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools - Council on Accreditation and School Improvement, or SACS-CASI) and subject to their standards, policies and procedures;
The schools are given funding from the USA’s Department of State and its Office of Overseas Schools officially sanctions many American International Schools.

The above list of characteristics, when viewed through the lens of critical theory, should raise immediate alarm bells. While it may be understandable that wealthy host-nation families choose to send their children to an American International School because of a perceived, or real, lack of quality host-nation educational service alternatives, I will develop an argument throughout this thesis that these types of schools are sites of unquestioned cultural imperialism - that deliberately promote the USA’s education and language norms.

Research Questions

I started my PhD investigation with the following questions that I used as an initial guide to my research:

1. What organisational and structural forces impede and encourage conscientization at Colegio Americano?
2. What impact can an individual administrator have on an American International school’s acceptance of deep structural transformation?
3. What positive effects could be unleashed on to a society if students of wealth and privilege are conscientized?

My aim in asking these three questions was to explore a rather broad scope of analysis that I thought might in some ways parallel Freire’s original work in Recife, Brazil when he used liberation pedagogy to make sugarcane workers literate in a few short weeks.
However as my investigation progressed, I began to see that Colegio Americano had such a unique story of its own to tell that I needed to re-shape my research in a way that would better suit the Colegio.

My original first question about structural forces at the school became more and more of a focus to my work. The school was so secretive about how it functioned and even as its principal I found it difficult to access information on governance and administrative practices; especially when I tried to delve into the grading systems we used in the school. This unsettled me greatly and led me to believe that my second original question about individual leadership impact would be summarily answered in the negative or negligible. As for my third original question regarding student conscientization and societal affects, I decided that the school was far too embroiled in plutocratic actions to allow my investigation to reach that far into a hopeful future.

Instead, I re-focused my research questions into what I believed were more pertinent to the then present-day realities at Colegio Americano. The following re-worked questions became the key themes that underpin this thesis:

1. How is Colegio Americano structurally organised and why are its governance and administrative arrangements so secretive; particularly when it relates to the school’s grading and reporting measures?

2. What was my role as a school principal and then director at Colegio Americano in perpetuating practices that advantaged the wealthy and privileged stakeholders and was I ethically culpable for being unable to transform the school?

3. What issues might my case study of Colegio Americano raise that may be pertinent generally to leadership in the international school market?
Research Paradigm and Method

My research paradigm is taken from the field of qualitative analysis and can be placed within critical education theory. It is informed by Freire’s work on critical pedagogy and the ideas of transformative intellectualism:

[A transformative intellectual is] one who exercises forms of intellectual and pedagogical practice which attempt to insert teaching and learning directly into the political sphere by arguing that schooling represents both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations. We are also referring to one whose intellectual preferences are necessarily grounded in forms of moral and ethical discourse exhibiting a preferential concern for the suffering and the struggles of the disadvantaged and oppressed. Here we extend the traditional use of the intellectual as someone who is able to analyse various interests and contradictions within society to someone capable of articulating emancipatory possibilities and working towards their realization. Teachers who assume the role of transformative intellectuals treat students as critical agents, question how knowledge is produced and distributed, utilise dialogue, and make knowledge meaningful, critical, and ultimately emancipatory.

Giroux and McLaren, 1986: 215

After re-familiarising myself with the research traditions of participant-observation, action research Critical Reflection on Teaching and Learning (1991a) and auto-ethnography, I decided the best fit would be to use a Critically Reflective Practice framework as the method for my research. I took guidance from the Australian critical education theorist John Smyth and used his text, where he outlined the need to employ four forms of action in one’s education practice. These ‘forms’ are characterised by four sequential steps which are connected to a series of questions: (a) describing (What do I do?), (b) informing (What theories emerge from what I do?), (c) confronting (Why did I come to work like this?), and (d) reconstructing (How might I do things differently?).

To gather the information needed to begin my critical reflective practice, I recorded my observations in a daily journal that ended up being over 100,000 words written over two school years. I wrote about my daily duties and my habitual interactions with staff, students, parents and Board members. I recorded the concerns and frustrations I had in
adjusting to my new role as principal and I used my daily journal writing sessions as a cathartic space to unload and unwind at the end of the working day.

To supplement my personal observations I gathered other data from various sources. I gathered vignettes from staff who were willing to share their work stories with me; I kept copies of reports and letters that I wrote for the school’s accrediting agency and the school’s board; I created an email survey which I sent to directors of American International Schools throughout South America; and with the consent of their parents conducted email questionnaires with graduating Seniors.

Despite the added data and other voices, this research primarily focuses on my own practice as recorded in my journal writings. This thesis considers the notion of personal agency, that is, what happens when I attempted to develop counter hegemonic practice in my daily work. I investigated myself, up close and personal and put my work practices and ethics under a microscope. It is/was really daunting to do this kind of research, and I am sure some people will struggle with the introspective and subjective nature of the data. Nevertheless, as a critical theorist I stand by my choice to focus on my own work and understand that while my presentation of data is selective it does offer a unique perspective on events described.

**Thesis Structure**

Following this introduction, chapter two’s theory review starts with a historical overview of critical education theory and then explores its modern directions in moral transformative leadership and red pedagogy. The theory review touches upon the academic ‘greats’ whose work in critical education theory has developed and enhanced its reach to a global audience from its beginnings in Europe with the Frankfurt School
intellectuals. I argue that my choice of paradigm is well suited for a thesis journey that attempts to uncover secretive organizational structures in the relatively closed world of elite international schooling because the only way to penetrate such an environment is through a radically critical approach. In the later section of the chapter I broaden the discussion to encompass cultural imperialism in an era of education globalisation. In this Sandy Grande’s work on indigenous education theory, which she terms Red Pedagogy, offers some alternative visions for schooling in Bolivia that in later sections of the thesis highlights the structural oppressions of Colegio Americano. Finally, in an exploration of transformative moral leadership coming out of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, I look to my own practice and offer their theoretical guidelines as measure to evaluate my work and growth as a professional and as ethical being.

In chapter three I outline my particular use of the method I refer to as Critically Reflective Practice (CRP) based on the Smyth model. I also explain my data collection and field work parameters and outline my school entry negotiations. As journaling is the principal data source, I spend a significant portion of the chapter explaining my approach to journal writing and offering a justification for its centrality in the thesis. Then I turn to a discussion of the ethics of CRP and examine the moral complexities of researching one’s own work place. I examine how as a school leader and participant observer I had to be extremely careful to always ensure that my work and my research did not create ethical conflict. To complicate the discussion, as my role moved from principal to director that fine ethical line continued to shift and I finish the chapter with an examination of how feminist ethics guided my research.

Chapter four begins the CRP stage of my thesis with its devotion to stage one of the process: describing Colegio Americano in-depth and recounting my role in the school
over a four year period. The chapter is filled with vignettes from my journal that capture the sights, sounds and lived experiences of the school’s day to day activities. I use the vignettes to explore the significant themes that I select to examine in the following chapters.

In chapter five I inform the reader of the inner workings within Colegio Americano and begin to theorise how the school’s organisational practices functioned. Repeatedly using the phrase, “it looks as if...” (Smyth: 1986; 1989; Smyth et al: 1999a) to dig deeper into the school’s secretive practices, I flesh out a picture of the school embedded in a specific cultural and political context. It is at this stage of Critical Reflective Practice that I choose to focus my investigations on the reporting and grading practices at Colegio Americano. In choosing this area of education practice, I am able to unearth the school’s plutocratic tendencies through real incidents which show the school’s attempt to blend the two mismatched Bolivian and USA education systems into one regulatory process.

Chapter’s six and seven functions together to build a theory to explain how a complex web of power allowed the school to perpetuate a system of corrupt reporting and grading practices. In chapter six, I dissect the notions of meritocracy and plutocracy in educational thought and examine how school level politics encouraged the school to err in its processes to favour the plutocracy. I confront the specific negative issues of grade and transcript fabrication; and other Board and parent abuses of power. In chapter seven I examine the almost inevitable potential for administrative corruption that can arise in an education culture that endorses voluntary international accreditation. Then I confront the political and social realities of Bolivia’s racism and poverty to help explain how
Colegio Americano’s choices were determined by pragmatic opportunity while surrounded by a State in severe political and economic crisis.

Chapter eight attempts to reconstruct a more hopeful future by looking at what my work and research demonstrated in terms of what might be possible when students of wealth and privilege are conscientized. Nevertheless, this chapter ultimately becomes my darkest theorising as I confront the reality that it was not possible to create lasting change in a school that does not share my education values and outlook.

I conclude my thesis by looking again at my role in Colegio Americano and judging what I did and did not do to confront various unethical situations. I look at the limitations and power that I held as one transient administrator in the school, re-examine the forces of agency and consider the corruption of my professional principles. I end with an acknowledgement that my outlook and educational philosophy has irrevocably altered and I show how I learned that alone I cannot teach to change the world.

In my final chapter I also reflect on the fact that this process of Critical Reflective Practice has assisted me to become a better teacher and educational leader. It has helped me to embrace my leadership potentials and it has inspired me to continue trying to make my work in education more socially just and inspirational.

**Significance and Limitations of the Research**

While studies in international schooling is a growing field of research, very little analysis of American International Schools within the paradigm of critical theory has taken place previous to this study. Aside from Peter McLaren’s (1986) study of a Catholic school in Canada, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Towards a Political*
Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures, I know of no other investigation where a privileged school have been investigated against the pedagogic philosophy based on Freire’s beliefs about social change through empowerment by education. International schools now enrol more than 15 million students worldwide so I believe it is imperative that critical analyses of these type of schools occur. The global reach of international schools makes this thesis significant as it contributes to expanding the reach of critical pedagogy and transformative learning into the realm of private and elite schools. Ultimately, I hope Corrupted Practices will be an initial case-study that inspires more critical research in the realm of international schooling.

This thesis also contributes to the collection of CRP research by offering insights into the, as yet, relatively under-represented participant-researcher group; school administrators. Typically, CRP has been undertaken by classroom level practitioners and has critically investigated individual pedagogic instances or issues usually within a classroom setting. In my research, I investigate whole school practices and critically analyse the role of school leadership from a socially critical perspective.

Another significant contribution that Corrupted Principles offers in the field of academia is its critique of grading and reporting structures in the American International School sphere. In common with many other American International Schools, Colegio Americano operated in a ‘developing’ country – Bolivia – while incorporating many of the administrative structures and systems common in United State homeland schools. My thesis offers a detailed analysis of the dual-grading structure used in Colegio Americano and argues that by using two different nation’s grading systems in one school neither grading system operates effectively or ethically.
The detailed nature of my analysis in this thesis of the inner workings at Colegio Americano also highlights my contribution to academic research in the form of an ‘insider’s voice’ in educational leadership. Too often, critical leadership studies have been marginalised and ridiculed (Gunter, 2001: 96) for being too theoretical and focusing on unrealistic change-agendas in schools. My study challenges these assumptions by offering extensive description of actual change-making procedures that took place in the school. Furthermore, because I draw on more than two years of daily reflexive narrative, this thesis contributes to the field of gender-studies and leadership in that it offers a concrete example of my praxis – detailing how I tried to put critical-feminist leadership theory into action.

Nevertheless, this thesis has limitations especially because a case study analysis can only extrapolate to the wider sphere with limited scope. My work took place in a unique setting that is subject to historic and cultural specificity. While the conclusions in this thesis can resonate in the wider field of international education, more research in a wider context must take place to further illuminate how critical educators might work in counter hegemonic ways in sites of privilege.
CHAPTER TWO

CRITICAL EDUCATION THEORY

What kind of educational system do we have? What kind do we need? How do we get from one to the other? Can education develop students as critical thinkers, skilled workers, and active citizens? Can it promote democracy and serve all students equitably? These big questions preoccupy many people because schooling is a vast undertaking and mass experience in society, involving tens of millions of people, huge outlays of money, and diverse forces contending over curriculum and funding. All this activity converges in schools, programs, and colleges, where each generation is socialized into the life of the nation.

Ira Shor, 1992: 11
Introduction

This chapter examines the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of my thesis. In doing so, I acknowledge the importance of locating myself in a specific theoretical terrain so that my thesis journey is developed from a clearly articulated personal praxis. As a teacher and principal I ground my personal and professional choices within the tradition of critical education theory. This tradition allows me to articulate a dialectic between critical theory and red pedagogy and in the following chapter I will attempt to elaborate on the contribution of each to my own practice.

I will first introduce critical education theory by tracing its historical development through what I consider, its three principal incarnations: critique; qualitative inquiry; and, transformative pedagogy. Throughout the process I will highlight the key categories that are central to my alignment with, and adoption of, critical education theory. These include the capacity of critical theory to account for matters of social justice; its analytical critiques of hegemony; the theory’s embracement of ‘other’ perspectives in academia other than white, western males; and its uncompromising call for educators to acknowledge the political nature of all research. Ultimately, I will try and include my thoughts about why I believe my thesis needed to be grounded in critical education theory generally and specifically frame that discussion around the concept of ‘lived experience.’

Critique

Critical theory is aptly named because one of the central features of the paradigm is the notion of critique: for instance, critique of the status quo; critique of educational aims and societal visions; and critique of academic pragmatism. As a philosophical paradigm, critical theory reaches across a wide variety of disciplines, though most especially
encompassing what I loosely refer to as the humanistic disciplines. Personally, I first came to critical theory because I was outraged about the circumstances in Bolivia in which I was working. I was looking for a research paradigm that would allow me to vent my anger, my frustrations and my criticisms. The early intellectual giants of the paradigm encouraged me to roar.

The ‘Frankfurt School’ of intellectuals is credited with giving this paradigm its critical orientation and are also frequently cited as the founders of critical theory. These early proponents of critical theory critiqued the Age of Enlightenment and positioned themselves in opposition to liberal humanist traditions and elite-rule ‘democracy.’ Critique is of course a far older academic tradition than the middle of the twentieth century when Adorno and Horkheimer first started writing together in 1947. However, their rethinking of the most famous ideas of Marx, Kant and Hegel coupled with a conscious self-critique of their own ideas made their work quite distinctly new and radical enough to stand as a unique theoretical tradition (Giroux, 1983). While the ‘Frankfurt School’ theorists were not always in accord with each other, their neo-Marxist perspective meant that they all shared an anti-capitalist critique of the modern world. Their varied writings reveal that they were emotionally frustrated yet intellectually curious to understand why the global revolution that Marx had asserted was inevitable had not yet come to pass. Adorno and his colleagues asked:

How can the progress of modern science and medicine and industry promise to liberate people from ignorance, disease, and brutal, mind-numbing work, yet help create a world where people willingly swallow fascist ideology, knowingly practice deliberate genocide, and energetically develop lethal weapons of mass destruction?

Cited in Zuidervaart, 2007: 185

I believe that the sub-field of critical education theory began to emerge when the philosopher and activist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) described how he could see that
so called ‘late capitalism’ was flourishing in the twentieth century and that society and culture were adapting to the situation rather than successfully revolting against it. Both Gramsci (1929-1935) and the ‘Frankfurt School’ intellectuals argued that cultural hegemony was preserving capitalist society through educational indoctrination (Hill, 2007). And it is at this point in critical theory, in contrasting Marx’s assertion that only violence and economics enforces hegemony, that the critical theorist’s boost schooling in its importance to hegemonic enculturation.

The ‘Frankfurt School’ used complex philosophical arguments against a positivistic version of culture and showed how this version was imbued “within the ethos and practices of schools” (Giroux, 1983: 35). Gramsci (1929-1935) urged the proletariat to reject bourgeois cultural norms by creating their own sites for schooling. He challenged education’s meritocratic principles and argued that the goals of schooling should counter the dominant ethos of “education for obedience, subordination and marginalization” (Chomsky, 2003: 36).

At a similar time to the ‘Frankfurt School’s establishment, on the other side of the Atlantic John Dewey was writing prolifically in the USA on themes that also offered stimulus for critical education theory. Dewey was a progressive educator who published in 1938 a theory of “learning by doing” with the aim that students could become self-fulfilled active citizens (Schugurensky, 2002: 68). Dewey was highly critical of the way schooling was conducted in America at the turn of the twentieth century and his volumes regarding education showed an understanding and commitment to social reconstruction. Unlike the European intellectuals in Frankfurt his arguments were not based on neo-Marxian contempt for capitalism, in fact, Dewey respected capitalism. Nevertheless, his belief that “the ultimate aim of production is not production of goods,
but the production of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality” emphasised education imperatives over economic goals for a just society (Chomsky, 2003: 26).

Dewey was thus a radical democrat who expanded critical education theory’s academic traditions beyond neo-Marxism. Dewey clearly enunciated the goal of schooling to be the advancement of democracy in society but his vision of democracy was not the Americanised version of democracy championed by Jefferson and Hamilton where the elite “fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes” (Chomsky, 2003: 31). Dewey’s was a more radical vision of a democracy where all citizens are considered truly equal and who are fully involved in their nation because they graduate from school with a thorough grounding in how to be effective participants in society.

I would argue that both Dewey and the European intellectuals involved in critical education theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were writing ahead of their time. In today’s world, their works resonate with foresight that proves the quality and wisdom of their ideas. Yet in their own time much of their argument was ignored or scorned. This was because they were writing truths that their contemporaries were not prepared to hear, and a further reason their writings were criticised in the mainstream academic arena was due to their rejection of traditional methods of research.
**Qualitative Inquiry**

This leads me to another hallmark of critical education theory - its use of qualitative forms of inquiry in research. Qualitative research emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century as a reaction against the restrictively linear thinking of the positivist assertions that truth and reality were objectively knowable and the conviction that scientific methodology, or quantitative inquiry, was the only acceptable form of research to produce academic scholarship. The Enlightenment traditions in academia which established the theoretical paradigm of positivism had been dominant for centuries yet positivism had also been exceedingly exclusive – silencing the voices of women, the lower classes and non-Western intellectuals. The social trauma which developed after the catastrophic and in many ways pointless annihilation of millions of people in World War One, led many to question the nature of existence and the purpose of life. Thus the time was ripe for a paradigmatic shift in perspective with the rise of Dadaism, Nihilism and Bolshevism reflecting the great disillusionments of the era (Pegrum, 2000).

The ontological roots of qualitative inquiry are based on a belief that truth and reality are subjective propositions. World War One had certainly provided a stark example of the fallibility of assertions put forward by the elite, and in following decades further evidence was accumulated with the rise of right and left wing totalitarianism. The ‘Frankfurt School’ scholars could see in the rise of Hitler a whole nation’s perception of truth and reality being manipulated to devastating effect. These Jewish intellectuals argued that ontology was culturally relative and contradictory and utilised empirical research (directly observing the cultural situation in Germany in the late Weimar republic and early Nazi period) to support their arguments.
Qualitative enquiry did not start out as excessively different from its quantitative cousin. In fact, both Dewey and the ‘Frankfurt School’ scholars’ use of empirical research reveals the relatively tentative nature of their epistemological evolution. While they were pioneer thinkers in ideological critique, and at the time their methods were marginalised as too radical when compared to the functionalist paradigm of positivist rationality, in actuality their methodology started from quite traditional conventions. In an early speech as director of the institute, Horkheimer stated that he wanted "to pursue the great philosophical questions using the most finely honed scientific methods, reformulate the questions during the work on the subject, state things precisely, think of new methods and yet never lose sight of the general" (History of the Institute of Social Research, 2007). However, this reformulation of old methods led some academics to attack the ‘Frankfurt School’ scholars’ work as “pre-formulated” theory-making (McLaren, 2006). While this was not actually the case, it is true that these early critical theorists focused on “big picture abstract theory… rather than providing any detailed exploration [of their] theoretical applications” (Choules, 2005: 2).

Middle Century Critique and Inquiry

In the 1950s virulent and successful attacks on Marxian thought and the changing geopolitical situation called for critical theory to find ways to remain relevant. The second generation ‘Frankfurt School’ scholar, Jürgen Habermas, did just that believing “that the Frankfurt School had become paralysed with political scepticism and disdain for modern culture” (Calhoun et al., 2007: 358). Habermas believed that democratic socialism was a ‘lifeworld’ possibility in the future and criticised the excessively pessimistic direction that critical theorists had been taking up to that point. His critique of his forbearers and his foundational theory of “how we ought not to do things”
(Morrow and Torres, 2002: 175) are examples of how critical theory consciously and continuously questions its definitionality.

As with critical theory, for most of the twentieth century qualitative inquiry continued to be a very marginal and disputed methodological framework. Nevertheless, the methodology expanded its definitionality too and as its use extended across academic disciplines it moved further away from quasi-positivist methods. Psychology and anthropology were two early disciplines to utilise qualitative research methods extensively mostly using ethnography and grounded theory. Both of these methods generated theory from data collected from fieldwork. Academia did not know quite what to do with these new methods and relied on criteria such as rigour and generalisability to try and evaluate their worth. New studies which were written using complex, well argued and thorough research were attacked because few academics had the capacity to think laterally enough to accept studies which had “no predetermined course established or manipulated by the researcher such as would occur in a laboratory or other controlled setting” (Schram, 2003: 7).

It should be noted that many of the early studies were posthumously maligned. For example, the theories generated by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski which arose from his ethnographic journal data were considered by some to reveal more about the man’s personal prejudices and arrogance than any credible insights into the culture of the Trobriander people. I am not nullifying the value of his groundbreaking ethnographic work, but what I am stating that the Malinowski study demonstrated a lack of what Kincheloe and McLaren later called “researcher humility” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1998: 286); that is, an epistemological standpoint that the researcher herself is not infallible, or able to achieve objective detachment in a study.
Critical theory considers all research as political and subjective work and as the use of qualitative methodologies began to spread through many of the schools in the social sciences and humanities, critical researchers identified that their use of qualitative methods had to be different from interpretivist and post-positivist scholars’ usage. To do this, critical theorists embraced unashamedly the political nature of all research and the politicality of their own role in research. The upfront nature of critical research is another area of the paradigm that I could work within and I started this thesis investigation prepared to place all my “assumptions on the table” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1998: 265) fully realising that my presence “filters and affects what counts as meaningful knowledge” (Schram, 2003: 8).

Voices of the ‘Other’

Critical education theory began to move beyond its Western orientation in the middle of the twentieth century when it started to incorporate thinkers studying within post-colonial and post-modern paradigms. Nevertheless, many of these academics’ original writings were translated into English after many years or even several decades passed. So it was generally not until the 1970s that post-colonial and post-modern theories came to prominence in the West. Some examples of the critics who gave impetus to these areas of study include Said (1978, 1989) and Bhabha (1994) in the former group and Lyotard (1979) in the latter. Both areas attacked the grand narrative view in research undertakings and insisted on the insertion of voices of once silent majorities: Indigenous peoples and women. Critical education theorists understood that “we have ignored the many other ways that other societies have sought to meet many of the same challenges” (Reagan, 2005: xi) and sought to expand the discussion of schooling to incorporate views and goals that challenged Western education’s ethnocentrism.
One such early voice came from the South American intellectual Paulo Freire (1921-1997), who introduced much to the field of critical education theory. His educational theories were developed from a Gramscian critique but he extended the concepts to a Developing World context. This included criticism of the banking method of teaching and positioning Western knowledge as superior to all other forms. Freire’s original works (1972a, 1972b, 1973a, 1973b) were foremost critiques and strongly political in nature but he also wrote persuasive accounts of a student-teacher democratic pedagogy that he insisted was the only way to be a truly authentic critical teacher. His research was very site specific (in Brazil, Chile and Guinea Bissau) and helped broaden academic discussions on education to non-Western topics and settings.

Paulo Freire also contributed to the wider academic community’s acceptance of critically grounded research method. Through reflection of his own practice in Brazil and his analysis of Marx’s theory of praxis Freire developed the idea of a “problem-posing education” (1972: 84) which would “enable teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism” (1972: 86). It was only in the 1970s that Freire’s work was translated from its original Portuguese text into English and thus available to a wider readership. Once it was known in Western universities, his method of action based on self-reflection and theoretical support gained fast credence and offered a practical example of how critical education theorists could move beyond theory-making to applying ideas in real-school situations. Freire’s research was groundbreaking at the time because until that point “there were few accepted models to which educational researchers with a qualitative bent could turn for direction” (Garman, 1994: 4).
While there is not enough scope in this theoretical review to mention more of the post-colonial writers’ work, I agree with the following sentiments expressing the need for critical researchers to ensure Indigenous educational voices are included in academic discussion:

We find it pedagogically tragic that various indigenous knowledges of how action affects reality in particular locales have been dismissed from academic curricula. Such ways of knowing and acting could contribute so much to the educational experiences of all students; but because of the rules of evidence and the dominant epistemologies of Western knowledge production, such understandings are deemed irrelevant by the academic gatekeepers… Our intention is to challenge the academy and its ‘normal science’ with the questions indigenous knowledges raise about the nature of our existence, our consciousness, our knowledge production, and ‘globalized’ future.

Semali and Kincheloe, 1999: 15

The multiplicity of other narratives that have been given voice through critical theory inspired my decision to write about a Bolivian school and disrupt “the normativity of Whiteness” within it (Aveling, 2004: 82). At the same time, these multiple narratives cautioned my decision with wise warnings that included “anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive efforts involved” (Alcoff, 2003: 24).

Critical theory also welcomed the varied voices of women into the paradigm but in doing so recognised the highly contested nature of the feminist label and the complexity of gender politics. In the education discipline, feminist writers such as bell hooks and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre added the dimension of patriarchal oppression to the list of criticisms that schooling encouraged while critical feminist teachers generally challenged themselves to use “critical feminist and antiracist pedagogies … designed to disrupt the canon of the academy in order to bring about social change” (Bell et al., 1999: 23). The nature of power relations in schools and the agency to resist and contest patriarchal institutions were themes in an ever increasing store of feminist critical writings. As a woman, this expansion of feminist thought into critical education theory
enhanced the legitimacy of the paradigm for me, most especially because of the statistical dominance of women in education professions and the need to hear their contributions in studies into the profession. Thus, feminist education theory also helped enhance my allegiance to the critical theory paradigm because it seemed completely logical to me that “the best way of putting an end to the theory and practice of masculinist power is to bring into being the theory and practice of feminist power” (Flammang, 1983: 74).

Of course, the expansion of critical theory into the fields of post-modernism, feminism and post-colonial research occurred not without consternation. Perhaps inevitably, those with a propensity to critique challenged one another’s theories. What differences there were between the theorists, however, did not outweigh the drive and vision that all the new-generation critical theorists shared. This point can be illustrated by the relationship between bell hooks and Paulo Freire. Their initial academic encounters may have seemed tense, as hooks challenged Freire’s neglect of the female perspective in his writings. Nevertheless, hooks has said that “the fact that there was some mud in [the] water was not important” (Burke, 2004) and their collaborations over the decades strengthened both of their academic insights.

**New Methodologies**

Critical theorists became a community of thinkers based on their like-minded views of ontological and epistemological parameters; but generally, critical theorists utilised diverse research methods “not so much to achieve closure in the form of definitive answers to problems but rather to generate questions that raise fresh, often critical awareness and understanding of problems” (Schram, 2003: 6). By the later decades of the twentieth century postmodernism’s influence was becoming pervasive and helped to
expand even further “the scope of what counted as critical theory within the social sciences… to include world systems theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, critical race theory, performance studies, transversal poetics, queer theory, social ecology, the theory of communicative action and structuration theory” (Wikipedia, 2007).

It is difficult to pin-down a specific list of research methods that critical theorists favoured because there “exists an almost baffling number of classifications or typologies from which to choose” (Schram, 2003: 66). Nevertheless, I will distinguish here some of the more popular instruments used by critical education theorists because I believe their new methodologies, and new ways of interpreting traditional methodologies, contributed so much to the community building of academics within the paradigm. Furthermore, the rationale for the development of each methodology that I will outline below helped me gradually decide upon my own choice of investigative method.

Based on the theories of philosophers Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984), text and narrative deconstructivism emerged to become a very powerful method of critique in research by second and third generation critical theorists. The purpose of this form of critique is to deconstruct “Western metanarratives of truth and the ethnocentrism implicit in the European [and American] view of history as the unilinear progress of universal reason” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1998: 271). Post-colonial and feminist theories in particular have found this method of research useful to “emphasize the legitimacy of knowledge that arises from socially marginalized positions” (Bell et al., 1999: 23) and develop curriculum materials that incorporate voices of the ‘Other.’ Critically grounded theorists have also used this method to counter the dominance of the psychometric model of educational research (Garman,
1994: 4) with its founding assumption that the educational parameters of schooling are sound and all that needs to be done to improve the reporting of student performance is by measuring educational indicators more accurately. Deconstructivism allowed theorists to explore and critique those founding assumptions by explicitly uncovering who owns and controls research knowledge and in whose interests’ knowledge is produced and thus expose the political nature of research that claims to be neutral.

For a long time critical theory had concentrated on “big picture, abstract theory” (Choules, 2005: 3:1) and even deconstructivism, even though effectively critiquing the big picture, failed to bring tangibility to the call for a change-making agenda with a framework of actual practice. Noting this inadequacy in achieving significant educational change, critical theorists searched for new ways to get their message across. Deconstructive analysis had begun to break down the primacy of quantitative methods, so critical researchers began to try “small picture” studies as a model of what might be done in schools to counter the prevailing neo-conservative influences.

One example was the multi-faceted term ‘case studies’ which is a qualitative research method that focuses on one case, or a few similar cases in a localised space such as, in the field of education, a school or classroom. As a unique instrument case studies exemplify one of the key differences between quantitative and qualitative inquiry. Whereas quantitative studies are often concerned with a macro level of analysis and thus use statistical analysis of a large survey of sites, qualitative studies focus on the micro level of analysis to offer profound descriptions of specific sites with less regard for the generalisability of the data.
Two other methods of similar design which can be placed under the umbrella of ‘case studies’ are frequently encountered in critical educational research: action research and ethnography. Action research was first used in the United Kingdom in the field of education (Garman, 1994, 4), where practitioners (often teachers) investigated school-based evaluation techniques and curriculum development by exploring their own practice (that is, their action). Shirley Grundy offers three criteria to define the method: a project that investigates a social practice; being undertaken by those responsible for the practice; and proceeding through a cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection (Grundy, 1982). Action research is valuable in critical education studies as it empowers teachers as researchers and legitimises their work as authentic data for theory-making.

Ethnography is another of the earliest forms of qualitative inquiry but it was not until 1986 with Peter McLaren’s groundbreaking ethnography, *Schooling as a ritual performance: towards a political economy of education symbols and gestures*, moved the method into a radically critical position. As Giroux observed in the foreword to the first edition, McLaren’s original style perplexed many educators as he blended complex theory with animated storytelling. McLaren observed daily life in a Canadian Catholic school and drew on symbolic anthropology in an attempt to “penetrate and eventually illuminate the dark side of the schooling process otherwise known as the hidden curriculum” (1986: 235). He spent several months in the classrooms of the school as an observer and documented what he saw in diary format. He was self-reflexive in his writing, coming to each day’s observation open to writing about any issue that caught his attention. He also documented his own interjections in various experiences, such as, taking over the class when a teacher had to leave momentarily and attempting to stop a
student from being bullied when he stumbled upon the incident just outside of the school yard.

Critical pedagogy is arguably the most common research tool now used by critical education theorists, though whether it is a teaching strategy or a research method is sometimes unclear. Ira Shor (1992: 15) offers this definition:

Empowering education, as I define it here, is a critical pedagogy for self and social change. It is a student-centered (sic) program for multicultural democracy in schooling and society... The goals of this pedagogy are to relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality and change.

The power of critical pedagogy is that this method moved theory not only into the realm of application - showing teachers what they can do to become empowered - but it also suggested how students can be actively awakened from their stupefying enculturation.

Critical pedagogy continued to shift the paradigm to a more transformative perspective that emphasised challenging the dominant ideologies, still through critique, but with a view to encouraging liberatory learning. In this new atmosphere critical education theory in a sense was maturing – no longer did it rely solely on rebellion and complaints, now it assertively argued for democracy and social justice as tangible justifications for educational theory-making.

The final research method that I will mention here, but elucidate in greater detail in the next chapter, is the method I have chosen to use in this thesis - critical reflective practice. In a similar vein to critical pedagogy and action research, critical reflective practice seeks to break through the isolationist practices of routine teaching-behind-closed-classroom-doors in what Rudduck termed a “hegemony of habit” (1985: 285).
This method challenges educators to reflect on their own practice by describing what they do in their work, analyse what informs their practice, confront the reasons why they practise in the manner they do and then reconstruct their work practices to incorporate alternative pedagogies that are more hopeful in nature (Smyth, Shacklock, et al., 1999b).

The common trait of all of the methods I have mentioned – deconstruction, case studies, action research, ethnography, critical pedagogy and critical reflective practice – is their embodiment of ‘lived experience.’ By this I mean that all six methods are grounded in the understanding that knowledge only has meaning and worth within the context of the knower. These critical methods emphasise the significance of peoples’ lives in social research and the realisation that this type of research would not be possible if divorced from the knower or other participants. The power of these qualitative methods lies in the understanding that one’s lived experience of day to day practice is how meaning is constructed. In short, knowledge is not "out there" or separate from human inexperience/interpretation.

**Questioning the Role of School**

Armed with new and honed qualitative tools of research, by the early 1970s critical education theory was starting to gain academic traction as the “political and intellectual ferment of the [era] challenged the grand theories and methodological orthodoxy of a previous generation” (Anderson, 1990: 249). It was a radical period with critical theorists questioning almost all aspects of schooling in passionate and very controversial ways. Some examples include: Neill’s (1960) radical *Summerhill* manuscript about a school where students are involved in self-governance and lesson attendance is optional; Illich’s (1971) *Deschooling Society* which argued for the
elimination of schools; and, Kozol’s (1967) *Death at an Early Age* which suggested that classrooms induce a “death-like miasma” in students because of their sterile, antiquated and rigid environment (McLaren, 1989: 192).

Inside tertiary institutes these writings were receiving critical acclaim, but outside of the universities conservative forces were marshalling their supporters for a sustained attack on left-wing radicalism and critical education theory in particular - as Ira Shor lucidly details in his 1986 text, *Culture Wars: school and society in the conservative restoration 1969-1984*. At its heart, the ‘war’ was over the role of schooling in modern society. Schools were continuing century old practices based on goals of nationalism, civic obedience and work-readiness but as the first signs of globalisation began to infuse into the general psyche, more and more teaching professionals questioned whether the grand visions were becoming outdated. For me, this idea of a culture war resonated exquisitely in my critique of *Colegio Americano* and encapsulated the core concerns I had about the role of the school and its effects on Bolivian society.

The 1980s was a time of some tangible victories for the theory. In some areas of the globe where centre-left and left of centre governments held power, critical education theories gained influence in educational policy. For example: in Labor-governed Australia, curriculum reform in the 1980s led to the adoption of outcome based education frameworks being adopted in most states that used progressive, student-centre approaches to help “students develop… understandings through processes of social inquiry, environmental appraisal, ethical analysis and the skills to constructively critique various perspectives from past and present contexts” (Curriculum Framework WA, 2006: 250); and in post-apartheid South Africa a major reform movement in education
was introduced in the 1990s with the intention of radically democratising the syllabus while removing “racially offensive and outdated content” (Jansen, 1998).

Unfortunately, in the United States critical education theory largely failed to make inroads into mainstream schooling as both major political parties pandered to the corporate and conservative Christian power blocks in an era where neo-conservatism was steadily becoming all pervasive (Apple, 2006). In such an environment critical education theory continued to argue against traditional methods of schooling, however the arguments (and often the authors of them) were maligned, marginalised or domesticated. Through the 1990s and turn of the millennium the world witnessed the “unabated mercilessness of global capitalism” (McLaren and Farahmandpur, 2004: 160). A plethora of critical academics weighed in with various attacks on global capitalism, for example: Harvey berated “endless consumerism” (2003: 65) and “accumulation by dispossession” in the new imperialist order (2003: 20); Urry lamented society’s “unpredictability,” “irreversibility,” “disorderliness” and “complexity” (2003: 138); and Bauman (2002) argued that global capital induced a society under siege resulting in “personal helplessness,” “ineffectuality” and “vulnerability.” Global capitalism’s pervasive influence ensured the political influences in American schools remained far to the right of the spectrum. By 2006 Kincheloe reported this rather bleak assessment:

The right-wing world view driving contemporary schooling policy in the first decade of the twenty-first century is characterized by:

- positivism;
- indoctrination of Western/American superiority;
- belief that intelligence is genetically determined;
- universally valid knowledge; one ‘truth’ that is universally valid;
- standardized curricula;
- an emphasis on low-level cognitive activities; rote memorization;
- the reality of an isolated individual removed from social, historical and cultural context;
- a fear of multiple points of view and dissent.

Kincheloe, 2006: 31-32
Towards Transformative Pedagogy

Faced with the reality of the continued dominance of conservative education traditions and their encroachment across the continents from the globalisation phenomenon, critical educationalists emphasised urgency in the change-making agenda of their paradigm, arguing that “research should engage in inquiry with the expectation that [the] work will be instrumental in bringing about change” (Schram, 2003: 34). In response to continued criticism of the theory’s ineffectiveness in transferring into mainstream scholarship, critical scholars began to deliberately move away from theoretical works that concentrated on what is wrong in their field of research, for example, Freire’s (2000: 57) Pedagogy of the Oppressed:

In their unrestrained eagerness to possess, the oppressors develop the conviction that it is possible for them to transform everything into objects of their purchasing power; hence their strictly materialistic concept of existence. Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal.

and bell hook’s (1981: 121) “Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism:”

One measure of the success of such indoctrination is that we perpetuate both consciously and unconsciously the very evils that oppress us. I am certain that the black female sixth grade teacher who taught us history, who taught us to identify with the American government, who loved those students who could recite the pledge of allegiance to the American flag was not aware of the contradiction; that we should love this government that segregated us, that failed to send schools with all black students supplies that went to school with only white pupils. Unknowingly she planted in our psyches a seed of the racial imperialism that would keep us forever in bondage. For how does one overthrow, change, or even challenge a system that you have been taught to admire, to love, to believe in?

These theorists altered their approach and ‘relived’ their critical experiences by infusing their words with a more transformative style, for example, Freire and Araujo-Freire’s (1995: 244) Pedagogy of the Heart: Reliving a Pedagogy of the Oppressed:

The role of the progressive educator, which neither can nor ought to be omitted, in offering her or his ‘reading of the world,’ is to bring out the fact that there are other ‘readings of the world,’ different from the one being offered as the educator’s own, and at times antagonistic to it.
Instead of focusing on what was ‘wrong’ they wrote texts about hope, activism and transformation, like bell hook’s (2003: xiv) *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*:

My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know.

This change from an emphasis on critique to one of change-making was a watershed in the evolution of Critical Education Theory as it heralded the paradigms shift towards a transformative approach to pedagogy and theory making.

The term ‘transformative education’ was first introduced by Jack Mezirow in his 1978 study *Perspective Transformation*. He argued that when an adult engages in critical reflection of her own experiences she should do so to transform her perspective. The old perspective, Mezirow argued, lacks critical awareness and by reworking oneself through psychoanalysis we can reach a more socially just, connective and discriminating understanding of the world we live in (Imel: 1998). The new terminology may have come from Mezirow, but he acknowledged that his concept was akin to Freire’s conscientization philosophy and Habermas’s emancipatory action theory (Mezirow: 2000). Whoever the original author of the idea, forces must have been converging in the early 1980s because Henry Giroux and Michael Apple were two of the leading critical educators whose theoretical works also relied on the concept of human (specifically teacher) agency to transform the way schools functioned.

Apple’s influential work *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979) argued that in the USA schools reproduce social hegemony through an overt standardisation of curriculum content and also through a more hidden curriculum of student control. Apple noted that
teachers should not be blamed for the situation in schools, suggesting that many of them were in what Mezirow described as a pre-transformed state:

Few groups of people work harder and in more uncertain, difficult, and complex circumstances than teachers and administrators. Rather, it became clearer that the institution itself and the connections it had to other powerful social agencies generated the dominant rules and practices of educators’ lives.

Apple, 1995: 20

Giroux’s early works (1981, 1983a, and 1983b) were similarly themed but his text *Teachers as Intellectuals: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (1988: 87) extended these ideas into the realm of transformation:

Critical educators need to develop a discourse that can be used to interrogate schools as ideological and material embodiments of a complex web of relation of culture and power… linked to the need for critical educators to fashion a discourse in which a more comprehensive politics of culture and experience can be developed.

The discourse advocated by Giroux was a radical democratic vision: “a vision of history that is committed to possibility – to an unwavering belief that the future must always be considered a site of hope” (Schugurensky, 1988). To reach that vision Giroux believed that teachers should be considered the “central agents of enacting educational reform… By envisioning teachers as transformative intellectuals” (Schugurensky, 1988) Giroux attempted to hand back power to those at the chalkface and this was really a radical call in a political climate in the USA where pedagogic and content control was being centralised and standardised in a newly strengthened Federal Department of Education.

Critical theorists in the education field took to the refreshingly hopeful perspective of transformational learning in droves. Many re-analysed their previous writings and extended their theories with the goal of transformation: Ira Shor urged educators to become empowered (1996); Giroux articulated a discourse of possibility (2006, 2007); and the always feisty Peter McLaren argued for the end of quasi-fascist politics in
America through oxygenation by a “revolutionary optimism of the will” (McLaren, 2004). Empowerment, engagement and revolution were all adjectives for activism. This overtly political message was another key feature of transformation. Margaret Ledwith wrote: “Critical thought leads to critical action” (2001: 177) and no longer was it enough to just criticise a position, now the theory argued for emancipatory solutions or at the very least overt resistance to dominant ideology.

While critical scholars may have been supportive of the new shift in emphasis, the wider education community struggled with envisioning concepts so diametrically different to the status-quo. Many teachers considered the ideals of critical pedagogy to be too abstract and/or impractical for implementation in their classrooms. Indeed, if the primary goal of schooling in this new era of critical education theory was to foster a Girouxian vision of radical democracy some teachers correctly pointed out that the eighteenth century factory model of the institution itself makes it an impossible aim. McLaren acknowledged this and went so far as to contend that if attainment seemed possible then critical pedagogy has been co-opted into the existing order of things (Rizvi, 2002).

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, ‘transformation’ had become synonymous with contemporary critical education theory. It emphasises learning and change making and noting less than a profound reanalysis of the place of education in the world:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift in consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.

O’Sullivan et al., 2002: xvii
One of the focal sites for this new direction in theory-making is at the Transformative Learning Centre at the University of Toronto in Ontario, Canada. There transformative educators, such as Kathy Bickmore, George Dei and David Livingstone, are analysing schools and pedagogy with hopeful and critical awareness. The Transformatists perceive criticism as only a partial first step in theory-making in a world that they believe needs immediate global solutions for disastrous scenarios being brought about by climate change; the psychopathy of global corporatism; and the world in a state of permanent war. Today the transformative paradigm looks at education from a global perspective which is fitting in a time that is “remarkable not only for the ways in which it is changing, but for the pace and intensity of those changes” (Buang, 2005). There is urgency now in the scholarly writings of many critical/transformative academics, such as John McMurtry, as they grapple with doomsday questions like ‘will humanity survive?’ and ‘what can educators do to help survival remain a possibility?’

Matt Maxwell calls for a profound reanalysis of education ontology, arguing “to remain solely at the level of critique is to remain committed to an atomistic paradigm that privileges exclusivity (either/or) over complimentary (and/also)” (Maxwell, 2002: 14). The transformative paradigm has responded by expanding the goals of schooling for the twenty first century to continue to embrace radical, participatory democracy but adding new features including environmental sustainability, world peace and holistic spirituality which in sum are termed an “integral planetary education.” (O’Sullivan, 2002: 2) It is too soon to judge if this new development in critical education theory will be effective in achieving its goals, but as McLaren (2002) points out:

While such a transformation is unlikely in our lifetime, or even in our children’s lifetime, it is important to keep the dream of another world – a better world. And, we need to believe that a better world is possible.
Lived Experience

Perhaps most important to my choice of aligning with critical theory and utilising qualitative inquiry for this thesis is that phenomenology, or lived experiences, sits comfortably within this paradigm of knowledge construction.

In educational research, lived experience was first championed by Max van Manen in his 1986 work, *The Tone of Teaching*, when he “provided a basis for educational researchers to reflect on their own personal experience as educators [and] educational theorists” (Barnacle, 2004: 57). He adopted his lived experience model from phenomenology which he described as “the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively” (van Manen, 1990: 9) and in my interpretation of his writing promoted lived experience as a superior knowledge source to that gained from purely theoretical abstractions about life.

I am drawn to the lived experience approach because it values a “researcher’s own particular experience as an educational practitioner” (Barnacle, 2004: 60). This is exactly what my thesis is based upon. Lived experience relates to both personal practice and temporality of experience and legitimates research that uses data that describes professional actions recorded in ‘real-time’ over an extended time period.

As I wish to use the lived experience approach in this thesis, I will not privilege the “concreteness of every day being-in-the-world” (Barnacle, 2004: 66) but offer itself as a genuine starting point to utilise education theory to reflect upon my experiences. It is this research style that links the theoretical and practical and I believe offers me the best way to use my four years of school-based field work as a foundation for educational knowledge making.
Lived experience highlights the tensions that were growing in the last decade of the twentieth century over qualitative methodologies from both conservatives and radicals. Conservative academia still questioned the ‘validity’ of research that was not based on so-called hard-science, while those on the left argued qualitative methodology was not going far enough and was being held back by only being defined in opposition to quantitative methods. Critical feminists attacked qualitative inquiry, arguing that it relied on the too traditionally minded methods of thesis and dissertation discourse which were still written in highly structured and prescriptive formulas which were therefore overly patriarchal in nature (Ellsworth, 1989; Qin, 2004). While thesis and dissertation texts are still utilised by critical theorists (and hopeful new recruits to the paradigm such as myself), critical methods that emphasise their transformative aspiration are now more “organic and emergent” (Knowles and Cole, 2002: 210) and open to a myriad of methods including autobiographies, scholaristry, poetic and theatrical renderings of research, and photographic exhibitions (Knowles and Cole, 2002: 202).

Perhaps because of this explosion in qualitative methodologies, many opponents of qualitative studies (positivists or Cartesians) have argued that it is not clear what sort of qualitative research is ‘good’ research. While I would argue that such a complaint reflects the rationalistic perspective of the critics far more than an inherent weakness in qualitative research parameters, several highly acclaimed critical and constructivist theorists, such as Guba and Lincoln (1985), and Kincheloe and McLaren (1998), have attempted to create criteria upon which to judge the efficacy of qualitative research. I am mindful of the fact that a set of criteria for judging qualitative inquiry may indeed be pertinent - at least for an inexperienced PhD candidate such as myself to follow. While, I am still wary of lists that have an innate propensity to narrow and curtail creative
possibilities, I find some resonance with the following defining elements which I use to
guide my research in this thesis:

- Intentionality: that the work has both an intellectual and a moral purpose;
- Researcher Presence: that the author of the research is accountable through
  ongoing self-reflexivity;
- Methodological Commitment: that the research is conducted in a principled,
  harmonious process that abides by a commitment to the parameters of the
  particular method chosen;
- Holistic Quality: that the work is internally consistent and authentic;
- Communicability: that the work is clearly articulated, accessible to the public
  and potentially transformative;
- Knowledge Claims: that there is sufficient humility and ambiguity in the
  work that readers are able to respond to the work in a multiplicity of
  interpretations; and
- Contributions: that the work has enough potential to contribute to theory-
  making and transformative opportunities.

Knowles and Cole, 2002: 210-212

I will end this chapter here with one final comment about why critical and
transformative education theory inspires me. Critical methodology does not have to be
of any prescriptive type but it does have to be cutting edge. As Kincheloe and McLaren
argue “qualitative research that frames its purpose in the context of critical theoretical
concerns… produces, in our view, undeniably dangerous knowledge, the kind of
information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign
As we enter the twenty first century, there is confusion and misunderstanding about what constitutes ‘good’ teaching. Teachers are leading damaged lives as processes of economic rationalism, globalisation and managerialism intrudes into schools … This is where what we call ‘Critical Reflection’ is so important. Being clear about what it means to be a teacher living and working in the ambiguity, perplexity and contradiction of current times is an important starting point for the reclamation of teaching. Being clear about what is going on in your work and the forces operating to shape it and make it the way it is, is an important part of moving beyond the paralysis of ‘being done to’ and see instead what alternatives might look like.

Smyth et al., 1999a:1
**Introduction**

Remembering that “methodology literally means the study of method” (Garman, 1994: 8) in this chapter I will examine the attributes of the research method I refer to as Critically Reflective Practice and attempt to explain why I have chosen to use a method that is most identified with critical education theorists. I will also outline exactly how I came to decide upon Critically Reflective Practice by moving into an in-depth description of the data collection methods I used over a two year period of fieldwork in the Bolivian International School, Colegio Americano, as well as the journal and reflective writing techniques I used to think about the data I had collected from my lived experience as a principal at the above mentioned school. The uniqueness of my contribution to critical theory-making will then be revealed as I foreshadow how as a school leader rather than a teacher practitioner my method of Critically Reflective Practice had to necessarily be altered from the original model advocated by John Smyth (1989). In the final section of the chapter, I will raise a number of ethical issues that invariably arose as a result of using a method that ensured I acted as whistleblower against school practices that I deemed unacceptable.

**Choosing a Critical Theory Methodology**

When I arrived in Bolivia I spoke not one word of Spanish and I stumbled in to a job at Colegio Americano without knowing anything about the school except that it would employ a monolingual English speaking teacher, like me. After two years of teaching in an elite school in the impoverished nation of Bolivia, my ethical compass was on high alert. I had never before worked in an elite, private school and the experience of teaching high school students from exceedingly wealthy and powerful backgrounds had surprised and shocked me in many ways, especially because the school situation was so different from those previously described by critical educators in South American
education settings, such as Paulo Freire (1972a and b, 1973a and b) and Aurolyn Luykx (1999). These writers had concentrated their research and story-telling on peoples labelled as ‘oppressed’ such as illiterate campesinos and poor, rural teachers in training. In contrast, my experience seemed quite surreal because the school in which I was working was a haven for designer clothed, English speaking students who took almost for granted their state-of-the-art technology rich school environment. From the start I realised that working at Colegio Americano would probably mean working in a school setting that did not resonate with my education philosophy but the reality was that as a monolingual English speaker, I was only able to find work in an English speaking school and in Bolivia this necessarily meant working in an elite school.

As discussed in chapter two, my own philosophy of education is grounded in the paradigm known as critical theory and after two years experience teaching at Colegio Americano I was even more certain that critical education theory should be my philosophical guide in my profession. With its twin purposes of critique and transformation, critical theory seemed the best lens with which to consider criticisms about the way the school, in which I had accepted a principalship, was operating. At the same time, I was looking for a way that a critical appraisal might lead to strategies to help me transform and improve my leadership practices within an elite school.

Aligning my research situation within the critical/transformative paradigm proved to be quite problematic when the majority of work in critical education theory has located its research in working-class and other underprivileged education communities. When Giroux claimed that students need to “fight for a quality of life in which all human beings benefit” (1988: 214) I believe implicit in that idea is the notion that the students he is referring to are not part of the group which already has access to benefits.
Certainly there have been many examples throughout history of privileged but principled progressives who have lent their support to underprivileged groups (e.g. White Abolitionists, native English speakers who advocate bilingual education, and straight allies of gay and lesbian movements) but overall, my readings have given me the impression that the very idea of “empowering education” which was coined by Ira Shor (1992) reinforces the fact that in critical pedagogy the subject focus is primarily on students who are currently disempowered.

Paulo Freire’s early writings were dismissive of attempting critical pedagogy with the wealthy. He wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that, “by virtue of their power (the oppressors) cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves” (2000: 44). However, during my two years of classroom experience in the American International School I had seen firsthand that rich kids also have a sense of youthful optimism to build a better, more hopeful world. So despite Freire’s warning I decided to go ahead with my research, curious to find out if transformational learning could be applied in school settings of privilege and power. Underlying my curiosity was a then partly formed contention that a type of critical pedagogy *for the oppressors* is possible and perhaps even valuable based on the same “critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change” advocated for underprivileged student groups (Shor, 1992: 15).

At the time, it seemed only logical to me that if teachers of students from all class levels created classrooms where the skills of “academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality and change” (Shor, 1992: 15) are encouraged, then they would have a better chance of actually achieving transformation than if schools where the wealthy learn are left to reproduce the old patterns of “cultural
pathology” (O’Sullivan, 2002: 5). My perhaps naïve belief in the logic of teaching critical empowerment to privileged students was also undergirded by my understanding that essentially such an opportunity would only arise from a whole school approach rather than a classroom level attempt. Thus, it would be up to me, the principal, to lead a change making agenda by example and encouragement. In appreciating this perspective, I also realised that a research project of this nature would be more about me and my professional practice and less so an investigation focused on the students in the school. By understanding that my research focus should be on my lived experiences, I was able to narrow my choice of method to one that would enable me to critically reflect upon my leadership actions.

My alignment with the critical/transformative paradigm of educational research also grew out of a belief that the liberal-humanist perspective that underpinned Colegio Americano’s mission statement was inadequate and perhaps even hypocritical:

The faculty and staff of [Colegio Americano] provide a quality and equitable education, measured by outcomes, effectively preparing students for a continually changing world.

Advocates of the liberal-humanist theory of education argue that schooling is designed as a meritocracy where anyone who works hard enough is rewarded with gate-keeping keys to career and financial advancement (Young, 1961; Hochschild, 1995). Their model for education is based on an Enlightenment epistemology which advocates the supremacy of a technical-scientific-industrial education and in this theoretical framework the socio-cultural status-quo is an imperfect yet acceptable vision for the future. This epistemology definitely grounded Colegio Americano’s education vision and yet what I observed in Colegio Americano was a meritocratic myth. Only families who could afford tuition fees were able to enrol their children in the school and there were no scholarship opportunities for gifted students from less well off backgrounds.
How was this providing ‘equitable education’ in Bolivia? Once enrolled even students who failed to meet the standards for passing individual classes received passing grades and graduated to the next year level. Was this providing a quality education? It seemed to me that high fees and a no-failure policy allowed the school to unfairly perpetuate the dominance and privilege of a small elite in Bolivia.

These specific observations were the essential issues upon which I based my initial critique of Colegio Americano. I decided that if I started my action-inquiry of the school around the issues of its no-failure policy and my critical assumption that the policy was perpetuating class privilege in Bolivia, they might provide a good starting point to launch my research. After I decided upon this initial focus, my next question was how was I going to research these issues effectively?

**Field Work and Data Collection**

My journaling as a practitioner/researcher grew out of necessity in the first instance. To be an administrator in an American International School one needs to have, or be studying towards gaining, at least a masters (but preferably doctoral) level qualification in an area of education that focuses on curriculum, supervision, leadership or administration. With the support of the then school director I chose to enrol in a purely research based Doctor of Philosophy in Education programme rather than do a course-work and thesis Doctor of Education, which she contended was a watered down way for non-scholars to gain administrative qualifications.

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2 Advanced Standard 5(B8): Employs an administrative head and administrative or supervisory assistants who have an earned graduate degree with 18 semester hours in administration or supervision (as a part of, or in addition to the degree) from an institution recognized by a U.S. regional accrediting agency.
After Murdoch University accepted my doctoral application, I flew back to Australia during the school’s “summer” vacation period and spent six weeks on campus getting to know my supervisors and reading the works of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor and other Critical Education Theorists. At the end of that time, I came away believing that the only way to conduct authentic research was to choose a topic that I was familiar with and academically curious about. I also believed that if I was to become a good administrator I should focus on my own practice and critically analyse my new career path.

School Entry Negotiation Documents

When I returned to the school to begin my principalship I informed my immediate supervisor, the school director, that I had been reading around Critical Theory in education and it seemed to me that the American International School system would be a fascinating setting on which to train a critical lens. I explained to her that within this broad research area I wanted to focus on my own development as a new K-12 principal at Colegio Americano and that I believed an ethnographic approach, in the form of self-reflective journal writing, would be my primary mode of data gathering. I discussed with her my tentative ideas of principalship based on critically democratic schools and ethical leadership practices but also acknowledged that the very nature of an ethnographic project meant that I only had broad brush strokes of ideas about where my thesis would go. I told her that my projected two year period of journal writing may lead me in unexpected directions and I also suggested that while my journal would be the principal method of data collection, I would like to consider the possibility of canvassing opinions from school stakeholders on topics that emerged from writings during the intended two year period of research gathering.
The director was very supportive of my ideas and agreed to grant permission for me to conduct research within and about the school. I gave her a copy of a ‘School Entry Negotiation Document’ (see Appendix A) that she signed and stamped with the school’s seal on 30 March 2005. At the time of our discussions, the director made it clear that as the Chief Executive Officer of the school she had the power to grant permission for research to be undertaken by staff members but that as a courtesy she would inform the School Board of my thesis project at the next scheduled meeting.

At the end of the 2004-2005 school-year, the director resigned from the school and left Bolivia to take up another directorship in another American International School. A new director was hired and he began work at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school-year. During his orientation period I briefed him on my PhD studies and asked him to re-authorise my project by signing another ‘School Entry Negotiation Document’ and dating it for the current school year. He agreed to do this and a second document was authorised by him on 15 November 2005.

In late February 2006, after only seven months in the role, the new director secretly left the country and sent an email resignation letter to the School Board. In that email he suggested that issues about unsatisfactory pay and conditions were the reason for his resignation, in private conversations with me just prior to his departure I was left with the impression that he chose to leave quietly more so because he had come to understand how the school was functioning and made a choice to leave rather than try and change the situation. As a result of his contract abandonment I was the first in line to replace him as director and on the 1st March 2006 the Board unanimously voted me into the position of director for the rest of that school year.
Over the next few months I grew more and more uncomfortable with the situation regarding my research project and eventually approached the Board president to discuss the matter with him. I explained to him that I had permission from the last two directors to conduct research on the school during the current and previous school years, but since my promotion to the directorship I felt uncomfortable with moving forward in my research unless the Board actively consented to its continuance. I presented another copy of the ‘School Entry Negotiation Document’ to him at this meeting and stated that I would like him to sign and date the document if he was comfortable doing so. The document was written in English and I suggested to him that he might like it translated into Spanish for clarity’s sake. He said that his business secretary was bilingual and could do the job and that he would take the document away with him to read at his leisure. Almost a month later the Board president and I met again for school business matters and at that time he returned my original document signed, dated 20th June 2006 and stamped with the school seal.

**Journaling**

The primary source of data for my research project came from writing a professional journal. Journal writing has a long history, dating back at least as far as the ancient civilisations and has been used in many different forms and for a variety of purposes. Professional journaling is not like writing in a personal diary, which simply records events. Rather journal writing records events but also includes thoughts, reflections and ideas about those recorded events:

> Journal writing allows one to reflect and to dig deeper into the heart of the words, beliefs, and behaviours we describe in our journals. Writing down our thoughts allows us to step into our inner mind and find interpretations of the behaviours, beliefs and words we write.

Janesick, 2004: 262

Being able to do journaling well is a learned skill and an important one because the “capacity to comprehensively describe an engagement in professional practice is an
essential part of developing researchable data” (Street, 1990: 6). But if the skill is well learned, then journaling can be a very powerful method of qualitative research because of its rawness as a true articulation of lived experience.

“Journaling is a means of telling the story of professional practice over time” (Street, 1990: 15) and it is this quality that first attracted me to using this method for my thesis. I wrote on an almost daily basis from the beginning of July in 2004 until the end of June in 2006. The starting date for the journal coincided with my first day of work for the school year 2004-2005 in a new position as K-12 principal. The final date of the journal aligned with my final week of work at the school at the end of the 2005-2006 school-year when I was the interim-director of the school. After two years, and 100,000 words my journal was quite a tome and therefore a very comprehensive descriptive account of the numerous dilemmas and contradictions which illuminated the socio-cultural world in which I lived and worked (Street, 1990: 15).

In the evenings of each school day, I would sit down at my home computer and write about events I had been involved in during that school day. During the course of each school day I was involved in many activities including teaching classes, scheduling and timetabling, organising substitute teaching, planning and conducting professional developments, meeting parents, disciplining students, writing reports, organizing school-wide events, hosting assemblies and a plethora of other tasks. Obviously time constraints and energy levels meant that I could not detail every single thing that I had done each day in the journal and so I had to be selective in what I chose to write down. This is another common trait in journaling because “it is impossible to write about the totality of experience… [so] journaling professional practices is always a process of making choices among multiplicities” (Street, 1990: 9).
The actual writing varied from day to day and included “partial transcripts of conversations” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 29) that I participated in or observed; descriptions of small incidents, extraordinary occurrences and major events that happened on campus; and the pasting in of “artefacts” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 29) which I thought provided interesting insights, such as documents produced by me, correspondences I received and sent, systems materials, school history pieces and school-wide reports and briefs.

In trying to frame what was legitimate material for inclusion in my journal writings, I was aided by the understanding that reflection is “exploratory and generative” (Cressey and Bourd, 2006: 22). As each day of my work was filled with different tasks, so too my writing focus varied depending on what issues piqued my interest during that day. In the first year of my writing I spent a good deal of time exploring aspects of my teaching and supervision roles but as I became more comfortable in my administrative role my writings evolved and I began to focus far more on administrative aspects of my principalship.

Cressey and Boud also noted that “it cannot be predicted in advance where [critical reflection] will lead” (2006: 22) and I found this to be apt in my situation. As my writings progressed I began to focus more and more on what I perceived was wrong in the school. I began to see patterns and hidden meanings because “as journals become resources for research into personal/professional practice, the issues, values and theories at work become evident” (Street, 1990: 28). With an increasingly critical eye I questioned how our school was functioning and found that I was using my journal entries as an investigative tool to try and uncover why the school was operating the way
it was. My journal was “revealing hegemonic practices” and helping me “examine the structural supports which contributed to the development and maintenance of… unjust practices” (Street, 1990: 29).

Eventually, “as distorted meanings and false assumptions” were revealed, my understanding of the school changed and so did my reality (Street, 1990: 36). By my second year as principal I faced a choice: change the way the school operated or leave as my two predecessors had. My journal writing had “sabotaged my autopilot” (Street, 1990: 45) and forced me to take a stand. As that happened my journal entries narrowed down to topics focusing on ethically questionable practices; including the school’s evaluation parameters, the weakness of whole-school accountability mechanisms; and Board governance issues which were shrouded in secrecy.

In the final months of my tenure at Colegio Americano, my journal writing became more acerbic and accusatory in tone. As Street had forewarned that I would, my unconscious assumptions and beliefs became conscious (1990: 7) and the political nature of my writing became more and more overt. I chose not to shy away from the path that my journal writing was taking, but as I will discuss more in the final section of this chapter, by the time I left Colegio Americano and Bolivia, my ethical, moral and professional capacities had been stretched far too thinly.

Smyth also warned that you “must have the capacity to handle the consequences your investigation might uncover” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 11). So in an attempt to act prudently with the material I developed over the two years of my journaling, I have re-shaped certain parts of my journal entries when transferring the content into this thesis. To wit, I have sanitised some of the angry and more vulgar words I wrote in the immediacy that
are my journal entries; removed specific references to days and months in the dates; and
changed or deleted names from all entries documented in this thesis to ensure
anonymity of personnel involved in the stories about Colegio Americano. I have also
decided not to make public the entirety of the journal by omitting it as an appendix to
this thesis. Both of my PhD supervisors have read every single page of my journal and
can vouch for the accuracy of the entries I choose to quote in the following chapters of
this thesis.

**Other Data**

When I first began collecting data for this research thesis, even though in my head I had
decided to conduct research within the paradigm of critical theory, in my heart I was
still concerned that as research based solely on a critically reflective journal may be
considered highly subjective it could be quite easily dismissed by some educationalists.
I was not yet comfortable with qualitative inquiry and unable to fully embrace the
legitimacy and authenticity of my own voice in research. I wanted to augment my
journal work with the voices of other stakeholders at the school, believing that the more
opinions and perspectives I garnered the more genuine my theory-making might be. As
I revise this chapter in the final days of editing my thesis, I am now far more
comfortable with allowing my journal observations to be the political act that they were
always meant to be. Furthermore, I can see too now that gathering other data from
school stakeholders and other colleagues is far from a neutral research devise.
Everything that I chose to ask and everything that I chose to include or omit in this
thesis from other sources, served to entrench me in my own partisanship. Now that I
realise this I wonder, if given the chance to do everything again, whether I would have
collected this extra data? Still, what’s done is done and I have decided to retain the other
voices in my thesis because I feel that their words might help to extend the tangibility of
the narrative story for my readers.
School Stakeholders

As a new principal I originally thought it would be acceptable to directly canvass the opinions of students, teachers and parents via face to face interviews, small group discussions and through the distribution of typed questionnaires. Using the guidelines set down in Australia’s “National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans” (NHMRC, 1999) I envisioned the stakeholders in my school being able to voluntarily choose to participate (or not) in my research in a manner that ensured them anonymity, confidentiality and sensitivity.

I broached the subject of participation with my colleagues and tested the waters to see if any teachers would be willing to submit to an interview. When a teacher approached me for more information I showed them my information and consent letter (Appendix B) and elaborated on my research aims. Several teachers agreed to participate and we discussed tentative dates for interviewing. The teachers who were interested in participating ranged in ages and nationalities and length of service at the school.

I spoke informally with students in the senior grades of high school at Colegio Americano and suggested that if any of them were interested in participating in my research that they should speak to their parents about it and if their parents were agreeable then they could come and speak to me about it further at their convenience. When a student followed up with me I gave them a copy of the information and consent letter (Appendix C). These consent forms were distributed in both English and Spanish and I verbally explained to all the students what the consent form stated and took questions from the students to clarify their understanding of the procedure. I emphasised to the students that participation was voluntary, that they did not have to choose to participate, and if they wanted to do so that they must get signed approval from their
parent or guardian. I elaborated on the point that no benefit or detriment would be bestowed on any student for the choice they made to participate or not. I also explained to the students that as their responses would be anonymous they should feel free to respond to the questions in any manner they saw fit. Several students asked if they could use swear words in their responses and I repeated that they could respond to the questions in any manner that they liked.

I also spread the word among parents of student in the lower grades who regularly visited the school that I was looking for volunteers to participate in an informal group discussion activity. After a short while, word began to spread and I began to hear from a small number of parents and grandparents who seemed reasonably keen to participate. Each time they approached me I would give them a copy of the parent information and consent form (Appendix D). At this point I also heard from several students who had graduated in the previous two years from the school and in our conversations I mentioned to them that I would be very keen to have them record their opinions about the school for my thesis.

However, just as I began to finalise all the documentation for acquiring informed consent and after settling on what type of questions I wished to ask participants, I was promoted to the very powerful role of whole-school director. I was no longer certain that participants could be involved in my research in a way that they would feel comfortable and not coerced to contribute. So I decided to delay my gathering of data from potential participants until after I had finished my work contract at the school and when I returned home to Australia. I explained to all my would-be participants that while I was very grateful for their volunteering that due to my promotion I had decided
to delay my research data gathering and would be changing the format to emailed-out questionnaires only.

During May 2006 I asked potential participants to sign the consent forms I had already distributed so that I had their signature as hard copy. Nonetheless, I emphasised to all who signed that the consent forms were in no way binding and that they would be free to choose to participate or not at the time I emailed out questionnaires. At the same time as collecting consent signatures I verbally asked each potential participant if they would agree to give me continuing access to their email addresses which, as director of the school, I had privileged access to. All verbally agreed to allow me continued access or gave me alternative email addresses which they accessed more frequently.

After I finished my contract as director of the school in the last week of June 2006 I immediately flew back to Australia. Once I had re-settled into Perth and oriented myself to full-time campus based studies, I began re-communications with all potential participants via email. I explained that now that I was no longer the director of the school I hoped to have them answer some questions about the school that I would send as a Word document attached to an email. If they agreed to participate they could type their responses directly on to the Word document that I had sent and then re-save the file and attach it to their return email. As the questions were being sent out at a time after school year 2005-6 had ended, I asked the potential participants to respond to the questions as they related to the school situation in 2004-2006 when I had been the principal and then director.

The emails with attached questionnaires that I sent out were of three sorts – one for staff; one for parents; and one for students and ex-students (Appendices E, F and G).
The attachments that I sent with each group email were slightly different in wording for each group and touched on different themes most relevant to each of the three stakeholder groups. To ensure participant confidentiality I made sure that all the email addresses were only listed in the ‘bcc’ box of the email message which would hide the email addresses from recipients and in the ‘to’ box I typed my own email address.

I received back quite a few responses from participants in all three groups during the first week after I had sent out the emails. After a fortnight, I sent out a generic email to all those who I had sent emails to initially thanking those who had returned filled-out questionnaires and urging the others to consider doing so if they wanted to. After that I received a few more responses and several potential participants emailed me to say that they would send through a response soon, but never actually did. In all, twenty one students and ex-students responded from a potential pool of thirty-five; thirteen staff members replied from a pool of twenty-one; and seventeen parents sent back answered questionnaires from a pool of twenty-four.

*Other Schools’ Principals and Directors*

Once I was promoted to the position of director of *Colegio Americano*, my journal writing topics intensified as I gained access to more and more facts about the school’s inner workings. In this new situation I realised that I was now very isolated in my position because no one had replaced me as K-12 principal. I decided that the questionnaires I wanted to use with students, staff and other stakeholders in my school would not provide me with the substantiations I felt I needed to discover if my experiences at *Colegio Americano* were distinctly unique or if they in some ways shared common traits with other American International Schools in South America.
So, I sought out the voices of other principals and directors in American International Schools (AIS) throughout Latin America. Almost all AIS have websites which publicly list email addresses of their administrators and I created a list of as many of these emails as I could find and then sent out a group email asking the directors and principals of the schools to consider helping me in my PhD thesis by answering some questions that I had attached to the email as a Word document.

In the exact same way that I used email as my mechanism to send questionnaires to my school’s stakeholders, I sent through a set of questions to administrators in American International Schools in Latin America (Appendix H). In the group email I sent out, I explained to the administrators that if they replied to my email with answers to my questions this would be taken as consent to participate. Given the fact that all potential participants in this group were my equals and contemporaries I felt that this level of consent was enough as no issues of power or dependency had to be factored in. Seventeen completed responses were returned to my email address and three other responses were sent with unreadable attachments.

**Critically Reflective Practice**

Critically Reflective Practice is a research method defined in its name: critically, relating to critical education theory; reflective as in Freire’s theory of praxis where one reflects on their actions; and, practice describing an educator’s day to day practice in the work place (generally teaching in a classroom setting). It is this methodology that I finally settled upon to use not only for my principal data collection method (my journaling) but also as a way through the writing of this thesis. I believe, and will show below why, that it is the method that best suits my decision to critically analyse my work as a principal at Colegio Americano in Bolivia.
Critically Reflective Practice (CRP) is a process of research that offers education practitioners, usually teachers, a way “to establish an informed view of [their] teaching and the wider context within which it is occurring” (Smyth, 1999a: 2). The beauty of this method is that it offers a way for teachers, and other education practitioners, to “identify and scrutinize the assumptions that undergird” (Brookfield, 1995: xii) their practice in real-time and focus in on what their work entails as detailed reality. Teachers normally work in almost complete isolation and are offered few opportunities to examine their classroom practice in a self-critical manner. This method urges such reflexivity and in doing so elevates teachers’ data to a level that acknowledges the research worthiness of such work.

The CRP method is most commonly associated with education research and has evolved from a blending of action research and critical ethnography. CRP is still a relatively new research methodology, having been utilised for only the last two and a half decades as a discrete method, but it has achieved growing recognition especially through the work of the distinguished American Professor Stephen D Brookfield and Australian research Professor (William) John Smyth. Both of these professors have written books that offer differing formula for conducting critically reflective research and encouraging practitioners to use the method (Brookfield, 1995; Smyth, 1999a). As well as these two leading voices in the method, a mounting body of literature has been produced dealing with similar research technique: autobiographies (Nelson, 1994; Jalongo and Isenberg, 1995; McCulloch, 2004); teachers’ ethnographic studies (Ducharme and Dippo, 1993; Robinson, 1994; Brown and Dobrin, 2004)); case studies of teaching practice (Grossman, 1990; Bullough, Knowles and Crow, 1992; Cohen 1991; Schatzki, 2001; Kyburz-Graber et. al, 2006) and reflective practice (Brown, 1995; Jordan 1997; Yancey, 2004). In the last decade, reflections focused on principal’s work have also started to be
written (Sergiovanni, 2001) but so far these types of reflective practices and narratives have been theorised within the inductive and constructivist paradigms.

What sets Critically Reflective Practice apart from other methods of reflective practice is its “concern about the way in which educational goals and practices become systematically and ideologically distorted by structural forces and constraints that work in educational settings” (Smyth, 1986: 17-18). Thus reflective practice within the paradigm of Critical Theory goes beyond a recognition that teachers’/principals’ action are “inextricably linked to particular value commitments” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 10) and argues that there is a “professional responsibility to contest” (1999a: 12) the political influences that have shaped those value commitments if they produce instrumental pedagogy that is philosophically indefensible or apathetically practiced.

**CRP According to Smyth**

I chose to follow the CRP method created by Smyth and his colleagues from the Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching (Smyth et al, 1999a) because its suggested guidelines, or minimal conditions, that I felt were adaptable to my unique situation. The Smyth Model is targeted specifically for teachers embedded in a classroom setting but it has enough flexibility to be adaptable to my situation as a K-12 principal. It recommends four stages of data collection and analysis: describing, informing, confronting and reconstructing.

**Stage One: Describing**

According to the Smyth Model, the preliminary stage of CRP begins with straightforward description of one’s daily practice in a journal. What is actually recorded depends completely on the unique set of circumstances each teacher-researcher (principal-researcher) encounters but the overarching guide question starts with the
interrogative pronoun, what? For example; ‘What sort of school am I working in? ‘What does my job description entail?’ ‘What did I do today in my work hours?’

Smyth suggests quite a conclusive list of examples of things that can be included in the description stage of writing:

- The flow of events in daily context;
- Field notes regarding class activities, projects, people interviewed and significant incidents;
- Anecdotal records;
- Observations of a sequence of behaviours;
- Document analysis;
- Personal accounts on topics of concern/interest;
- Professional development sessions;
- Research hindrances and facilitations.

Smyth et al. 1999a: 15

These examples provided me with a great starting point to freely write about any and all things that occurred during my two years of (almost) daily journal writing. This wide ranging freedom was especially important for me as a K-12 principal where the concrete tasks that I undertook each day were multifaceted and responsive to ever changing circumstances. In reality I could have tried to describe almost all of the events that were going on within the campus each day because I always had some involvement with almost every event and issue. Of course I knew it would be impossible to write that comprehensively but I wanted to try and cover enough of the broad flavours of the school to build a picture of a site with which most Australian readers would not be familiar. The Smyth model recommends “settling on some aspect of your teaching to focus upon” (1999a: 14) as a preliminary proviso before starting a journal. However, even though in the very preliminary stages of writing I had a vague idea of writing about class privilege and the no-failure policy at Colegio Americano, generally I preferred to start my journaling as relatively open-ended and then eventually settle upon a more specific focus which I hoped would emerge in an organic manner. I felt that as my journal descriptions would cover two school years I would have the time to slowly
reign-in my descriptions to a sharper focus when issues naturally pointed me in that direction.

The Smyth Model includes in the description stage of CRP a corresponding part of the journaling process that I did not follow. The second part of the recommended process involves a parallel recording of critical reflections regarding the descriptive accounts of events written in the journal and a running theorising about the actual process of keeping a descriptive journal. I did start my journaling intending to use the two-part process but very quickly found that time factors hindered my progress. Furthermore, I came to feel that attempting to reflect on my reflections at such an early stage in the CRP process was, in fact, extremely difficult to do because in that state of embeddedness, as Smyth acknowledges, “it is sometimes hard to see what is happening when you are struggling to manage the many complex events occurring” (1999a: 14). So I decided to continue being real-time reflexive from initial critical reflection on my journal writing but postponed any attempt at deeper reflective analysis until after the following three stages of the CRP process: informing, confronting and reconstruction.

The Smyth Model and other models in the field of reflective practice encourage the use of Critically Reflective Practices that involves collective reflection and shared organisational learning (Street, 1990; Western Australia Education Department, 1996; Mullen, 2004; Cressey, 2006). The idea behind this collectivity is that discussions with trusted colleagues during as much of the CRP process as possible should help to break down the isolated nature of the method and make it more active, social and dialogic (Smyth et al., 1999a: 30). By including trusted colleagues in the process a further theoretical advantage would be to make the method more immediately reflexive because in discussing their descriptions the teacher (or principal)-researcher would get feedback
and perspective of her practice and in turn the teacher-colleague would gain insights from the sharing of what would otherwise be quite an opaque activity. While the justifications for this form of sharing has merit, my own situation as the sole administrator in an independent international school setting in Bolivia necessarily meant that my reflective journey virtually began and ended alone. In the end, it was my PhD supervisors who provided a “reflective surface” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 14) for my practice and helped me keep my descriptive writings as articulate as my energy levels and time constraints allowed me over the two year period from August 2004 until June 2006.

The final part of the first stage of my CRP process culminated in my writing a chapter dedicated to description in the thesis – “Chapter Four: Describing the Bolivian International School.”

Stage Two: Informing

The informing stage is the preliminary analytical stage of CRP. Though it is the second stage in the process, it is the first stage of stepping back from the immediacy of the descriptions written so as to consider what issues outside of the control of the practitioner are impacting on the work. I like to think of it as the HOW section of analysis; that is, the questions that arise in this stage start with the interrogative pro-adverb, how? For example: How come I acted in that manner in those circumstances? How was my practice informed by outside factors? and, How did my assumptions about what is good education practice help me make the decision I made?

CRP was developed because of a concern that much of teachers’ practice develops from implicit knowledge assumptions and therefore, are largely unconscious/unexamined. For example, teaching children to say please and thank you because of a belief that it is
a universally accepted politeness to do so; or, using seating arrangements in a circle formation as an attempt to indicate equality of teacher and student input. The ‘informing’ stage of the CRP process attempts to make explicit implicit assumptions and begin a process of critically considering if what informs a teacher’s (or principal’s) practice is actually reliable and if it leads to good practice.

This second stage in the process starts when the data collection period of the research has been completed. So in my case, after two years as principal at Colegio Americano I had recorded nearly 100,000 words in my reflective journal by writing almost on a daily basis through the entirety of two school year periods. With little break between stage one and stage two, in August 2006 I began the process of making explicit the assumptions that had guided my work practices at Colegio Americano. These had been described in my journal entries about a month after I finished my contract in Bolivia in July 2006 when I returned to Australia to begin working full-time on my PhD at Murdoch University.

The informing stage of CRP begins with a re-reading of the descriptive journal accounts in a systematic manner to discover patterns, themes and pedagogic principles in the practices described. The point of this analysis is to try and decipher what broad assumptions are informing the way in which a practitioner carries out her work. After reading my journal in its entirety, I systematically re-read all that I had written and in a sense began coding the descriptions with several highlighter pens. I decided upon thirteen themes that I thought had emerged from the data and then cut and pasted large sections of the daily entries into each of the pertinent theme categories. By the end of this grouping of themes I had some, but very little, raw data left over that I discarded as being of little use for further analysis.
The themes I decided upon were:

**Process:** Issues that arose regarding the process of writing a critically reflective journal.

**Principal’s Role:** Issues and incidents particular to my role as the K-12 principal at Colegio Americano.

**Teaching:** Vignettes of classroom activities while I was teaching in my year 12 Advanced Placement Government class and other teaching anecdotes from when I provided relief instruction in other classes.

**School Climate:** Descriptions of whole-school activities, such as assemblies, co-curricular events and recess/lunchtime incidents that offered an insight into the current political and cultural climate of the school.

**American International School System:** Records of documents and descriptions of meetings, telephone calls and other communications that showed aspects of the unique American International school structures.

**Students:** Short sketches detailing incidents involving various students at Colegio Americano and records of comments made by students that I deemed interesting or relevant to other themes I thought were emerging in my journal writings.

**Teachers:** Anecdotes about various teachers working at Colegio Americano and their teaching practices and philosophical assumptions.

**The Board:** Issues that arose regarding the running of the school and the intriguing and powerful characters who were elected members of the School Board.

**Director:** Vignettes about the two directors of the school who preceded me in the job and discussions about how they ran their administration.

**Director’s Role:** A record of the timeline of events that led me to becoming the director of Colegio Americano and then analysis and reflection of me in that role.
Democratic Spaces: Examples of democratic (and undemocratic) spaces that could be found in the Colegio Americano experience.

Corruption: A catalogue of observations I made regarding ‘dodgy’ practices in the school by various staff and stakeholders, as well as recordings of my investigations into the past-history at Colegio Americano that revealed a litany of corrupt practices.

Society: Observations of political, cultural and economic issues that were impacting on the well-being of Bolivian society during my time in the country.

By grouping/coding my writing into the above themes, I was at the point where I could begin to deconstruct my practice and take a step forward in my preparation to see what assumptions and values and what institutional and cultural contexts informed my practice (Smyth et al., 1999a, 30). After much thought and reflection, I wrote “Chapter Five: Contesting Assumptions That Inform Practice” and set about to do exactly what the title suggested.

Stage Three: Confronting

Stage Three of CRP as outlined in the Smyth Model is termed the confronting stage. It is the step to theorise and attempt to construct adequate explanations for why a practitioner does what she does in her work place. For me, it is the most important stage in the process because it is the stage of practitioner empowerment - when a teacher (or principal) can assert her right to “define what counts as knowledge” and use her “extensive experiential wisdom” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 20) to make theory and test it.

As the informing stage should have spelled out, teaching and administering are not the results of “idiosyncratic preferences but… the product of deeply entrenched cultural norms” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 21). So at this third stage in the CRP process, the practitioner-researcher delves into a deeper analysis of WHY the wider cultural and
political assumptions which informs her practice hold such an effective sway. The type of WHY questions I needed to confront at this stage included: Why did teachers assume the school was operating meritocratically? Why did Board members want to allow all of the students in the school to pass all subjects and what were the implications of this unwritten school regulation? Why did I feel the need to confront and oppose staff and stakeholders who maintained the corrupt status quo in the school? and Why didn’t larger societal and educational forces intervene against the school’s actions?

In confronting the WHY questions, it is essential that I am guided by the body of critical education theory and cultural studies already written and use that accumulated knowledge to view the “situation differently” (Smyth et al., 1999a, 34). Ultimately, the practitioner-researcher at this stage in her CRP process should develop a coherent theory that confronts naive practices; analyses what Fay (1977) called the “social causation” of action; and having laid bare the taken-for-granted assumptions (mis)guiding my decision making choices to try and construct a detailed and coherent picture of the wider web of forces “constraining my view of what is possible” (Smyth, 1987: 20).

The result of this theory making stage was the writing of chapter six of this thesis: “Confrontation through Theory Making.”

**Stage Four: Reconstructing**

At the final stage of the CRP process, the focus is on reconstructing, by moving beyond old ways of practising and creating new, informed and critical modes of working. This is the ‘doing something rather than just griping about it’ stage that moves the CRP method from criticism to active engagement in change-making. It is at this stage that a practitioner-researcher goes from acknowledging the political nature of all work in
education to embracing her responsibility to be a powerful, intellectual force (Smyth et al., 1999a: 20-21). In terms of Critical Theory making, it is the part of the process where the researcher moves from critique and towards transformation.

While the reconstruction stage is linearly the final stage in CRP, in reality this fourth stage does not have a neat beginning or end. If the practitioner-researcher discovers ‘bad’ practice during the course of describing events in their journal writing sessions then after some field-reflection, new practices should be tested out within the field. In fact, I would argue that because CRP explores one’s lived experiences, as Critical Theorists we are bound to attempt to do things differently as soon as we realise that our practice is in need of self-improvement. This is because CRP is a method that is intended to be continuous and intentionally heuristic and should invoke personal agency rather than induce detached, academic criticism.

In my case, during the first year of writing my journal entries and while I was at the principal level within Colegio Americano, I observed and wrote about quite a few practices that I knew were not ethical practice and in my opinion may have even been examples of unethical practice. In the second year of my journal writing, when I was promoted to director, or Chief Executive Officer, of the whole college I was in a role where I could do something about some of the issues I had described in my journal. In that second year I chose to change school policies and tried different approaches to my predecessors in ways to deal with various school stakeholders. I did these things aware that they still might not have been the ‘best’ approaches to the dilemmas I faced and that time, distance and academic reflection may have produced far better solutions to the issues. Still, authenticity in one’s practice requires “responsiveness” (Brookfield, 2006), “self-knowledge and soul work” (Dirkx, 2002) and acting with “presence” in a way that
allows for openness, vitality and the abandonment of order (Kornelsen, 2006). Thus in order to reconstruct my practice with authentic transformation, I had to start and re-start my reconstructive actions again and again throughout the entirety of this thesis journey and accept that transforming one’s practice is more about a perspective shift than a ‘magical pill’ of innovative new methods.

In terms of writing, the reconstruction stage was the chronologically last stage of the CRP process which I began writing only when stages one, two and three had been completed. I remained mindful that reconstruction is really only fully completed for an artificially constructed reason - such as completing a written thesis; and divided my findings on this stage of the process into two chapters. Chapter seven, titled “Site Reconstruction” documents how I actually tried to make changes at the school so as to end its plutocratic and corrupt practices. As well, the chapter examines the ideas of Sandy Grande’s “red pedagogy” (2000) which calls for a celebration of Indigenous culture and education values within the paradigm of critical theory. Finally, “Chapter Eight: Reconstructing the Personal” explores my personal transformation as a teacher, principal and academic as a result of completing the four stages of CRP.

**Ethics**

My research project began with a set of awkward questions about the school in which I worked that no-one at Colegio Americano seemed to have answers for - or were unwilling to offer answers to if they did know. Coupled with this silence, whenever I tried to explain to people what I wanted to investigate I would receive stunned looks and sceptical comments suggesting that I might be brave to ‘take-on’ the Bolivian oligarchy but mixed with an almost universal belief that my educational administration career would be still-born as a result.
Right from the start of my research, even before I began to find answers to those awkward questions, I had an inner voice persistently asking me several things: What right did I have to investigate these questions? Was I being disloyal to the school, and/or self-sabotaging my career, if I tried to uncover what I suspected were corrupt practices at Colegio Americano? And, if I did not investigate those issues would I be complicit in a cover-up? After much soul searching the final question about complicity began to outweigh my other two concerns. I kept thinking that if it is okay, and even common place, for teachers to criticise the way a school functions in the confines of staffroom lunch-time chatter, why shouldn’t such topics be voiced in a more public forum?

This debate in my head was, of course, about ethics and my moral dilemma was based on a perceived notion that, somehow, if I thought about it for long enough I would find the ‘right’ answer to whether my research project was ethically sound. This search for a black or white answer to my ethical concerns never came; not after ‘official’ channels sanctioned my work when the Human Research Ethics Committee at my university approved my research project; nor after two directors and a Board president signed consent to conduct research forms at Colegio Americano; and even now I still feel an inner-squirm when I realise that this thesis makes me a whistle-blower.

Despite my careful design of a project that would protect the participants and school with shields of anonymity and confidentiality, I was still looking for objective justifications for my research. Yet I kept finding that an administrative critique of a Bolivian school by an Australian educator was anything but the neutral scenario that a traditional ethical framework seems designed for.
Critical theory again helped me meta-theorise my dilemma as I extended my readings further into the postmodern discussions of situated ethical research practice. In this ethical category, the ethicist John Caputo “emphasizes [that]… there are no firm and secure foundations for the judgements we make” (1993: 36) and eventually I found resonance in the belief that only I could judge if it was right to move forward with my investigation. Feminist theory also advocates a situated ethical perspective that “challenge[s]… the universality of morality” (Usher, 2000: 29) and believes in an ethical framework that is “relational and self-reflexive” (Usher, 2000: 24). Fortified by these readings, I used their approaches to re-analyse my intentions and consider again the ethicality of my research ideas.

Feminist ethicist Pat Usher acknowledges, “the recording of experience is fraught with ethical dilemma” (2000: 35) and this was very true of my case researching administrative practices in a school located in a country and continent foreign to my origins. I am a female, white, middle-class, publicly educated, ex-Catholic Australian and these biographical traits cast me as an outsider in the school I researched despite my insider position as a staff member. Rather than ask myself if my research questions were ethically sound I had to now consider if I myself was an acceptable researcher in the context of the specific physical, social and cultural location of the school. The answer that came and allowed me to begin my research also came from Usher when she explained that a critical, feminist perspective of ethics “refrains from ‘solving’ ethical dilemmas…” and that as long as I “force out in the open the issue of point of view” this would be sufficient (2000: 37).

During the two year phase of my research when I wrote an ethnographic work journal, the theoretical concerns of ethics became quite real dilemmas. The investigative nature
of both my journal writing and daily work activities became an issue for some in my work place who felt I was broaching subjects I shouldn’t be exploring. I recorded in my journal a particular discussion that I had with the counsellor at Colegio Americano who was most unhappy with the way I was directing the school, and who told me in no uncertain terms:

That you are too cavalier; that you are just the interim director and overstepping the job that you were promoted to do; …You are an idealist who needs to get off your white horse once in a while; [and], you are in danger of being seen as the scapegoat… [for unethical practices in the school and as] you will be coming back to Bolivia in the future you should be careful of protecting your reputation.

Journal Entry 2006

Perhaps ironically, the staff member’s name calling and threats helped me to continue my research because I knew I must be getting close to the answers I was seeking to my awkward questions. Still, later when my secretary also began to regularly warn me that I should be very careful because I was uncovering issues in the school that had been carefully hidden I knew that the warnings and advice were legitimate; after all, two directors before me had resigned from the school over the issues I was now writing about.

The extended nature of my two years of field work made it important to undertake regular self-revision and reflection, and this continual re-examination of ethical standards became essential as my role in the school hierarchy changed. What was acceptable as a new principal, had to be reinterpreted when I became the college director. The issues of power and dependency had been carefully analysed at the beginning of my research but my promotion substantially increased my authority in the school and so too did my autonomy increase. While I chose to alter my data collection methods for stakeholder participation in my research as a result of my changed circumstances, I actually found myself less ethically burdened in my new role as
director because I now had direct communication with the Board members who were also owners of the school. With their direct involvement in my work and their signed approval of my research I finally reached a point where I felt that as I had done my utmost to be transparent and professional it would have to be enough to satisfy my own ethical parameters.

Slowly over time, I began to not only accept the ethicality of my choice to write about Colegio Americano but also found myself proud of the decision I had made to pursue a morally pugnacious thesis topic. By the time I was promoted to the directorship at Colegio Americano, the school was in crisis and it was made clear to me by the Board that it was my responsibility to move the school out of it precarious situation. My interpretation of this directive was to attempt to repair the school’s reputation by trying to fix the core organisational structures that I had believed were flawed and corrupted. I knew it would not be possible to do this work without gaining “a reputation (in the eyes of some) as a troublemaking subversive who refuses to play by the rules that everyone else accepts,” (Brookfield, 1995: 229) and yet this was a reputation that I was willing to embrace.

It is one thing to attempt to take on a corrupt status quo and quietly work at changing practice to a more ethical and transparent model. It is quite another thing to record and then publish that attempt and by doing so become a whistleblower. Whistleblower, or not, I take solace in Smyth and his colleagues’ assertions that:

When you step out in ways that Critical Reflection invites you to do, you are exposing yourself and you’re teaching to some degree of vulnerability. We think that the best response is always to take the line that Critical Reflection is a highly professional way for a teacher [and principal or Director] to operate.

1999a: 18
Tell me about the incomes of your students’ families and I’ll describe to you your school.

Sizer, 1994: 6

What happened these past days in Bolivia was a great revolt by those who have been oppressed for more than 500 years. The will of the people was imposed this September and October, and has begun to overcome the empire's cannons. We have lived for so many years through the confrontation of two cultures: the culture of life represented by the indigenous people, and the culture of death represented by the West... This uprising of the Bolivian people has been not only about gas and hydrocarbons, but an intersection of many issues: discrimination, marginalization, and most importantly, the failure of neoliberalism... We face the task of ending selfishness and individualism, and creating... other forms of living, based on solidarity and mutual aid. We must think about how to redistribute the wealth that is concentrated among few hands. This is the great task we Bolivian people face after this great uprising.

President of Bolivia, Evo Morales: December 30 2005
Introduction

This chapter is designed to explore my version of stage one of the Smyth Model of Critically Reflective Practice, or CRP. To do this I will start by briefly describing the nation of Bolivia so as to place the school in some context. I am not an expert on Bolivia and its politics and the following summary will not come close to capturing the complicated articulation of ethnicity and class in Bolivia society. Still, I think it is important for the Reader to see what I observed and learned about my host nation of over four and half years while I was living in a bustling city and slowly integrated into my Bolivian partner’s extended family life.

I will then comprehensively detail the inner-working of the Bolivian International School, Colegio Americano. Much of that section of this chapter is composed of extracts drawn directly from field data, taken largely from my work journal that was written over a two-year period in 2004-2006 on an almost daily basis. With over two years of raw data, there is much from the journal that I have not reproduced here. Also, I have added one or two stories that are not from the journal because they took place in the two years prior to starting my formal writing period, but while I was a teacher at the same school. In addition to these two data sources, I have inserted excerpts from official school communications and reports authored by me or previous administrators in the school.

As is the nature of this type of qualitative inquiry, in choosing what vignettes I would decide to repeat here, I was guided by my inherent subjectiveness and perhaps also from a desire to shield myself from too many brutal judgements. As discussed in chapter three’s methodology analysis, it is not easy to “develop data for reflection” with “clear descriptive accounts” because one’s “internal censors often interfere with our
presentation of self in a written account” (Street, 1990: 5). Nevertheless, the ones I have chosen to share are vignettes of situations that I think help show the school in its unique, day-to-day, realities.

Before beginning, I also wish to reiterate that I have identified the nation but not the name of the city where the school is located. The school itself is recorded with the pseudonym Colegio Americano and I have made every attempt to disguise the specific people who are represented in various vignettes throughout this chapter. When I have cut and pasted in journal entries into this text I have formatted the words in a manner identical to the way I have quoted long citations elsewhere in the thesis.

Bolivia

Bolivia is a nation located right in the centre of the continent of South America. I have included here an outline map of the nation because it is my experience that many
people, most especially my fellow Australians, have little idea of where Bolivia is geographically positioned in the world.

Bolivia is considered one of the poorest nations in the Western hemisphere. The population is now close to nine million but “around two-thirds of Bolivians live below the poverty line” (Stalker, 2007). While Bolivia’s people may be poor, the country itself is teeming with natural resources including soya, zinc, gold, tin and natural gas. Furthermore, Bolivia has vast natural beauty and millennia old Inca and pre-Inca traditions.

The Bolivian citizenry is made up of a multiplicity of ethnic peoples with the largest groups coming from Quechua, Aymara and mestizo descent and the three official languages of the country are Spanish, Quechua and Aymara. A legacy of centuries as a Spanish colony ensures that the majority of Bolivians are still born into nominally Roman Catholic families. In practice, “religion and paganism come together in festivities that [are] a part of daily life and involve… the entire community” (Vidal, 2007: 91).

Bolivia has a thriving underground economy of cocaine, pirated DVDs, fake-label clothes etc. The official economy has had a chaotic history, with its lowest period in the mid-1980s when the country almost became bankrupted after an era of massive hyperinflation. Then the International Monetary Fund and World Bank introduced ‘shock therapy’ based on the Chicago School’s policy of ruthless neo-liberalism: “privatization, deregulation and cuts to social spending – the free market trinity” (Klein, 2007: 77). I observed a Bolivia divided between the haves and have-nots. I saw many of
the elite families I taught embrace neoliberalism and I witnessed the daily struggles my partner’s extended family lived through in a society deeply unfair to many.

**Race and Class Segregation**

Much has been written, by many more learned than I, about another legacy of colonial times in Bolivia regarding social status. As a fairly simplistic overview I think it is reasonable to suggest that race and class continues to be socially segregated in Bolivia. I certainly observed that at Colegio Americano social standing increased with the whiteness of one’s skin colour; the more European one’s surname; and, the more professional or entrepreneurial one’s occupation. Friends and my partner’s family agreed with what I had read (Sanabria, 2008; Vidal, 2007) that class boundaries are permeable in Bolivia but aspirational movement requires a rejection of one’s Andean cultural heritage.

In Bolivia there are acute racial and class divisions and it is one of “the most grotesquely unequal societies on earth, as grinding poverty is disproportionately concentrated amongst those of Amerindian descent” (Ford, 2005). At the other end of the spectrum, Bolivian families of Spanish, German and Dutch descent have always enjoyed discriminatory practices that increase their wealth and status unjustly. Just one example to illustrate this discrimination occurred in 1978 when the then Bolivian Under-Secretary for Immigration, Dr. Guido Strauss, invited white South Africans to immigrate to Bolivia:

> Settlers from all countries would be welcomed with open arms, but [Strauss] said, a special and natural sympathy predisposed Bolivians in favour of person of European origin, who shared with them a common heritage of culture and religion… Any white settler would be given, free, a minimum of 50 hectares of first class agricultural land, and would receive social, technical and economic assistance. Those who engaged in ranching would receive ‘very much much more,’ together with ample low-cost [Indigenous] labour.

Lewis, 1978: 10
While I lived in Bolivia, European-descended oligarchs still controlled many facets of the economic and political realms in Bolivian society. Much of their wealth comes from *latifundios* which are vast agricultural land holdings located mainly in the eastern regions of Bolivia. As a counterpoint, the union movements in Bolivia have long been a very important political force in the country. From 2002-2006, I observed race and class politics be forcefully played out.

**Politics**

Bolivia’s sovereignty was gained in 1825 after a sixteen year war of independence with Spain. Since independence Bolivian political events can be summed up as chaotic with an endless and bloody timeline including a civil war and nationalist revolution; *coup de tats* and military dictatorships. By the 1990s Bolivian citizens succeeded in bringing about some semblance of representative democratic rule: which was in reality rule by the oligarch clans.

By the beginning of the twenty first century, the Indigenous majority were starting to flex their political muscle and the old political parties suffered, in quick succession, several unrecoverable losses to their power base. Into this scene, in 2001, I arrived in the country. A few months after my arrival President Hugo Banzer resigned due to ill health and his vice-president Jorge Quiroga took his place. Soon after Banzer died and in the following year’s election the country’s richest man and former president, Sanchez de Lozada, was granted electoral victory after a very tight election against Evo Morales. It is an interesting aside to note that both Quiroga and de Lozado were educated in the U.S. and speak English with near native fluency: and I observed them to be powerful role models for many of the students I taught at Colegio Americano.
After that election Bolivia never really calmed down politically during the rest of the four years that I lived and worked in the country. However, in many ways, Colegio Americano’s operations were extremely sheltered from the nation’s political upheavals. When I started work in the school I was surprised at the juxtaposition between the calmness on the campus and the agitation on the city’s streets. By 2003, del Lozada was forced to resign his presidency and flee the country. In accordance with the constitution, del Lozada’s vice-president Carlos Mesa took over the presidency but he too lasted just over a year. In June I wrote in my journal:

There has been massive turmoil on the streets of La Paz and Sucre as another Bolivian president was forced to quit. Some people were quite worried about it all and stocked up on provisions and [one of our teachers] got caught inside the country unable to leave when [the] airport shut-down for a night…. While the streets were on fire, our families were celebrating senior graduation with lavish and exclusive parties and ceremonies. As the majority took to the streets demanding a democratic voice in the power structure, the relatives of our students plotted ways to continue their minority grip on power.

Journal Entry 2005

Despite their sheltered lifestyles, politics really mattered to the families at Colegio Americano and the political upheavals and the growth of Indigenous based political power worried these families almost uniformly. I remember in 2003 when the then president of Bolivia, Sanchez de Lozado, fled to the USA where he begrudgingly resigned, several of our students’ families took hastily arranged ‘vacations’ to Miami or posted armed guards outside of their mansions while the political landscape was redrawn.

By 2005 the political climate in Bolivia had altered to such an extent that the Indigenous majority of the country stood a real chance of gaining executive power for the first time in 500 years. Yet, in one edition of our students’ monthly newspaper the results of a straw poll of support for various presidential candidates in the 2005 election showed the absolute reverse of general public opinion. Almost 100% of those students polled sided
with the neo-liberal, pro-business, pro-American candidate. That candidate went on to lose the election by an historic margin and Juan Evo Morales Ayma gained a landslide victory and became the first ever Bolivian president of Aymaran and Quechuan descent. Scared and intimidated by the perceived threat of a new Indigenous president as well as congressional control in the hands of his party, the following vignette illustrates the changing landscape of Bolivian politics in the final months that I worked there:

Yesterday I had a few hours meeting with the Board President. It isn’t the meeting I [was fascinated] about, it was the fact that he rushed off at the end of it to go to a manifestación – which means a political protest – on the main street of the city….Before Evo became president all the rich folk wangled their way through back door deals with those in power and the poor were out on the streets. Now it seems it is the reverse situation.

Journal Entry 2006

The School: Colegio Americano

History: a Tumultuous Story

Colegio Americano was over 50 years old when I began contracted employment and had evolved from modest origins. It started off as a one-room school for children of American families who were living in the host-nation during an oil boom in the local area. Students studied school subjects with the help of their mothers by using the Calvert correspondence method that involved school work being sent from the United States and then returned back to the United States for grading and feedback.

When the oil industry moved to a different region of the country in the 1960s, the number of U.S. families needing schooling dwindled and so the school allowed enrolment of Bolivian and third-nation students to ensure its survival. The school became a formalised institution and gained official recognition as a K-12 school with the Bolivian education department and was given permission to grant graduates the Bolivian high school diploma. However, the school was structured as an American Sponsored Overseas School and defined itself as a “non-profit, democratic institution
based in (sic) parent-participation” which “receive[s] small grants and other assistance from the US State Department.”

By the 1970s the school grew to a point where it needed a larger site so the Bolivian owners of the school purchased a magnificent piece of property on the outskirts of the city. The school is an opulent environment with perennially green sports fields and lush flower bedded gardens. The buildings are sturdy, modern and filled with teaching resources that have been shipped in from education corporations in the USA. Continuing funding for the school’s operations comes principally from tuition fees and these are extremely high in comparison to other private schools in the city.

Following the trend of many elite private schools in Latin America, in the early 1980s the school sought and gained accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). For the Australian reader unfamiliar with such entities, this association is a USA based accrediting agency for private and public educational institutes, kindergarten through to college levels, in the southern states of the USA and all of Latin America. It is a 100-year-old voluntary, self-regulating organisation, which emerged as a legitimate education oversight institution in the decentralised and deregulated USA education system.

In the early 1990s the school’s Board members clashed over governance issues and the dispute resulted in a splitting of the school into two separate, and competing, American International Schools. At that time, the US Embassy in Bolivia withdrew its official support for the original school and endorsed the new institute as the city’s official American Sponsored Overseas School.
After the split the school became a for-profit entity which led to an autocratic shift in governance. The original school remained viable because of its accreditation status with SACS, which accorded the school with enough prestige and alignment within the international schools movement to remain competitive.

By the time I started at the school, the student body was close to 350 and Colegio Americano had become a proud and long standing institution.

**A Glimpse of the City Surrounding Colegio Americano**

The surrounding neighbourhood to the school was a stark contrast to the privileged oasis that is the American International School, Colegio Americano. Like most of the city, the land is a dust bowl of unpaved roads and half finished houses. While the neighbourhood is located on the outskirts of the relatively up-scale end of town, it would be hard for an Australian to recognise that fact because middle-class suburbs in our cities are not filled with litter and political graffiti where gangs of mangy dogs roam free to terrorise bicycle riders and the odd, unsuspecting gringo jogger.

Outside the walled compound of the school an ordinary passer-by would probably not realise that Colegio Americano is close by. This is a deliberate attempt by the school to keep the school secure from the threat of being targeted by political protesters. In many ways, this threat is a legitimate one because civic disobedience, union organised strikes and sometimes violent political marches are quite frequent happenings in this country where Anti-American sentiment is especially wide spread among the ‘lower’ classes.

Across the road from the school and up a steep embankment covered in dead grass there was a small, run-down government primary school. Our school had nothing to do with the other institution and the differences between the schools are extreme. The school
was similar to other government schools in design and it was dilapidated and in desperate need of infrastructure repair. There students all donned the white lab-coat uniform (or guardapolvo) used by public school kids throughout the country and they all walked to school on foot or arrived via public transport. The school day for the government students was half the time that our school’s students had because a lack of public schools meant that each institution had to have separate morning and afternoon intakes to accommodate all the children in each school zone. The teachers at the government school were all union members and were paid the equivalent of around $US100 a month; which is one quarter of the average Bolivian teacher’s wages at our school and a staggering thousand percent less than Colegio Americano’s average internationally hired teacher’s salary.

First Impressions on a Typical School Day

The following paragraphs describe a typical beginning of a school day based on my recollections:

At the crack of dawn the first staff members arrive at the school on foot or on wobbly bicycle. They are all men of dark coloured skin who wear a uniform of navy blue overalls and who speak in the local Indigenous languages. As they pass the guard house at the foot of the hill, where a fellow worker has been keeping the campus safe all night long with the help of two ferocious Alsatians, these gardeners and cleaners pick up their mops and brooms ready to start the day. They rake up the leaves of the towering jacarandas and eucalyptus trees that beautify the entrance way but also litter the pathways and private school road.

Next to arrive, usually around 7am, is the director in the school-supplied Mitsubishi Pajero. Previous directors complained about the age and condition of the vehicle but when I inherited the director’s vehicle my post-natal swollen body was simply grateful to not have to waddle up the steep hill as I had done throughout the nine months of my pregnancy.

About half an hour later, a ceaseless stream of ancient jalopies, which are the standard taxis of the city, puff and belch up the asphalted private road to drop off the internationally hired teachers. They pay the taxi driver the equivalent of approximately $US1 and constantly grumble about paying exorbitant fares because of their white skin and inadequate Spanish. These teachers are easily identified by their casual dress sense and dishevelled hairstyles. They defiantly wear clothes that look as if they were picked out from flea markets and believe that what one wears says nothing about their professionalism.
The next group to arrive are the parents and elementary students. Some children are driven to school by their parent’s chauffers but there are a large group of stay-at-home moms who escort their little ones up the manicured garden path to their classrooms. These idle ex-debutantes are always extremely well dressed, bejewelled and coiffed, and after dropping off their children they stop on campus to swap gossip with other moms or form self-important posses to confront administration staff about the latest teacher they don’t like; or a recent rumour they are concerned about.

The children are beautiful. They say hello if acknowledged. They walk up to class with a swing in their step. I like their happiness and enjoy their carefree wonder the most.

At about the same time as the little children are arriving, there is the daily mad rush of local teachers squealing into the staff car-park in their cars that they are very proud of. Their cars are immaculately cared for, but at least 10 years old and were second hand when they were bought. At precisely 7.43am two local female teachers are regularly seen jogging up the hill while trying to maintain their balance in highly polished heels and tailor fitted suits. They are jogging so as to comply with Bolivian employment regulations that all teachers must sign in at the beginning of the working day no later than 7.45 am. If they do not get there by that exact time they risk their pay being docked.

The final group to arrive each day is the straggling, yawning high school students. Many of the students drive to school. They come in driving their gifts – high powered, state of the art vehicles. These brand new cars have been presented to them at their 15th birthday celebrations, or *quinceañera*. Despite the illegality of driving under 18 years of age, many parents teach their offspring to flout the law maybe because it is convenient for them and the cost of bribing a police officer is easily afforded.

High school students do not wear a uniform and have the “American” freedom to dress as they please. For the girls, it is designer outfits and stilettoed boots coupled with a full face of make-up and hairdresser blow-dried manes. The girls have painted finger nails with little diamantes artfully arranged on each nail. The boys are also model-perfect as Latin America does not gender discriminate on the use of jewellery, perfumes and clothes kept pristine by maids. In my time at the school, a few of the new American students were more sloppily attired and affecting a grunge look. But as these kids integrated into the school more, there is often a noticeable change in attire to a more sophisticated style.

*Journal Entries 2004*

**School Day**

At 8.00 am the first bell of the day sounds and all around the campus classes begin. The school is divided into four subsets: the early childhood classes starting with half-day sessions for three year olds; the elementary grades from year one to five; the middle-
school classes from year six to year eight; and the high school grades which are termed freshman, sophomore, junior and senior classes.

The school day is divided into three sessions; morning classes until recess, mid-morning classes followed by lunch and then afternoon sessions. The official school day ends at 3:00 pm but after school co-curricular sports and other activities mean that the campus continues to be filled with students until at least 4:30pm most weekdays.

At lunchtime, the students and staff eat in the school’s undercover cafeteria. Hot meals are served with a mixture of Bolivian and American style food on the menu. The cafeteria is the place to be seen and as there are no teacher offices and only a tiny little staff amenities room, it is also the place where staff get together to catch up and enjoy some time together.

**Governance: the Owners as School Board**

During my time, at least, the school’s Board members were a secretive group and very little communication between staff and Board members took place. During the four years that I worked in the school I only met eight Board members and most of those only in the last few months of my time at the school. Board membership was a closed affair as only financial owners of the school could be elected to Board positions. This meant that all the Board members were men and women of great wealth and power:

The Board is made up entirely of Bolivians and there is a very limited number of families (26 or 27) on the Board. Many of the 27 owners of the school have absolutely no interest in being active Board members and so the Board positions continue to be recycled between no more than ten people. Board policy states that members of the School Board can be elected for a term of two years and can be re-elected for another consecutive term of two years but at the end of those two terms they must step down for a further two years. What actually happens is that during the obligatory two year absence from the school Board, these members join the Vigilance Board, continue to go to all Board meetings and continue to strongly assert their influence. Thus, whether any of these ten people are ‘official’ Board members or not, they continue to micro-manage the school year after year.

Journal Entry 2004
The general impression I had of Board members were that as members of the country’s oligarchy they behaved in a manner that suggested they were very used to throwing their weight around. I still vividly remember the first staff meeting I ever went to at the school when the then Board president got up to welcome us in Spanish while a bilingual teacher translated his words. The Board president was in his later years and his voice rattled aggressively. His tone was sinister and his active hand gestures were laced with accusatory pointing and vitriol. The teacher who was translating shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot and paused for long moments between phrases in what was an obvious attempt to soften the words that she had heard him speak. While the translator stated that the president welcomed us to the new school year and wished us the best for a productive and professional collaboration, what he really said (as I later learned from less diplomatic bilingual staff members) was that his school was a prestigious college that we were lucky to have jobs in and that anything other than professional behaviour and excellent results produced by our students would not be tolerated.

The Board grudgingly delegated some power to the director of their school and the director was the official liaison between Board and staff. Both the previous two directors before me complained that Board members treated Colegio Americano like all their other businesses - as their own personal fiefdoms:

**Vignette One:** A few hours before my first Board Meeting. I am nervous! This is it: real introductions with those that really run this school. [The Board President] had his first conversation with me in four years yesterday. He congratulated me on the flag salute ceremony. He told me that *poco a poco* it is getting better. He’d like the teachers to get more involved now, thanks. It seems I have passed that barrier where he can lower himself enough to have a conversation with me.

**Vignette Two:** It really is true that the Board is not able to delegate all executive and administrative functions to the administrative head. Yes, for a few months, the Board backs off and lets [a new] director run the school. This often happens in what I call the ‘honeymoon’ period when a new director first starts at our school. Inevitably though, an incident will occur which will bother a Board member and a phone call will be made and the director will be pressured into doing what a Board member demands. In
several SACS reports I notice that directors have said that the situation has begun to change or that a new Board president has come in and has promised not to interfere etc. This lack of interference never lasts.

Journal Entries 2005

One Board member in particular seemed to take pleasure in asserting his authority. On most mornings he would drive up in his top of the range BMW, a one-off type that you order from the dealership and have custom made to your unique specifications, and park his car in the middle of the staff parking lot in an unmarked spot that blocked off exit or entry for a dozen or so cars. Then he’d walk his kids (the doted on pair from his third marriage to a beautiful trophy wife who was at least thirty years his junior) to class and survey his domain. The following journal entry describes how he acted one morning when the grade twelves were getting ready to leave on a school excursion:

Senor ____, watched like a hawk … as the teachers and students prepared to leave the school to take part in the parade. He wasn't even subtle about it. He just took up a central position in front of the administration building and observed everything with his typical grumpy expression. I attempted a buenos días but was ignored and after that I ignored him too.

Journal Entry 2004

While the Board members seemed to have quite a negative attitude towards the teachers, this was nothing in comparison to their animosity to one another. The small group of owners, who were active on the School Board, formed factions to thwart their enemies. When one faction won the officer positions, the other group would not show up for meetings and all sorts of other petty in-fighting continually got in the way of an efficiently run school:

My school computer has been playing up and this has really slowed down my work. It's not just my hard drive that's having problems - so far 9 of the new computers we have purchased have had their towers melt down. The insurance company is refusing to pay up and the technicians at the school are sad to see that their predictions are coming true: the Board was advised that the computers they wanted to purchase were too cheap and not of good quality. [The director] explained that she brought the issue up during last week’s Board meeting but it was ignored. The new computers are a "legacy" from the last Board president and she thinks the new president is pretty bloody gleeful that his legacy is collapsing… I won't get started about how I feel about the Board’s maturity level.

Journal Entry 2005
I found the actual Board meetings difficult. The only outsider allowed at meetings was the director and the language of the meetings were always in Spanish. When I became director my Spanish was four years better than when I first arrived in the country but it was certainly not fluent. As a result, communication within Board meetings was less than satisfactory, from my perspective:

I just got back from another two and a half hour Board meeting. I left the meeting hoping fervently that my understanding of Spanish is enough that I didn’t misunderstand the key points of the discussion.  
Journal Entry 2005

Despite what the Board manuals prescribed, Rules of Order held no sway at the meetings and decisions were made irrespective of little details like whether quorum had been achieved. Sometimes decisions were made without even a vote taking place:

There was another Board meeting last night. There was no quorum but we still went ahead anyway. Senor ____ was there and went off on tangents about issues that were not on the agenda!

I had a meeting last night with [the Board president] instead of a full Board meeting as all other Board members didn’t show up. There is no democracy in the structure. After discussing [how to get the new Board policy book approved, he assured me]… that the Board President has authority to act individually without the express consent of a quorum vote. … I have to say it does explain a lot about the school.  
Journal Entries 2005 and 2006

**Leadership: the Role of Director**

As is common practice in American International Schools throughout the world, the leadership of *Colegio Americano* was assigned to a director position. The power and duties of the position was outlined in the school’s regulations:

The director is the CEO and responsible for all programs in campus, including development, revision, oversight and evaluation. The director’s responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the fulfillment of the School’s mission, continued accreditation of the School, and pursuit of the School’s strategic goals.
The director [must] provide visionary leadership and demonstrate exemplary management skills in the recruitment and development of faculty and staff, the implementation of a high standard curriculum, the assurance of long-term school financial stability, and the provision of effective communication with all the School’s constituents.

The school’s leadership team also included the K-12 principal position. In this role I was expected to oversee and provide leadership of all the day to day activities on the campus as delegated by the director. Throughout the history of Colegio Americano, the director and principal roles have been contracted for foreign nationals of whom the overwhelming majority have been citizens of the USA. While the school’s regulations do not specifically state that the leadership positions must be filled by non-Bolivians it does declare a preference for US citizens.

In addition to the principal and director, Colegio Americano employed two other staff in administrative/middle management roles. These two roles were a bursar (school registrar) and a college counsellor.

**Staffing: International and Local Teacher Disparities**

The school recruited staff from international hiring fairs and web-based employment sites. The hiring of international staff was a mark of prestige for the school and the Board was very direct about its desire to have certified teachers with English as first language credentials. While it is not openly acknowledged, there is a hierarchy in the teaching recruitment game that is based on citizenship status. One director of the school put it like this:

A candidate from the USA is like a gold medal recruitment. Silver includes teachers from Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Teachers in the bronze category would include European teachers who don’t speak English as their first language. Teacher recruits from anywhere else don’t even earn a rating – if they’re from the Philippines or India or have a name like Mohammad I just delete their application from the computer rather than waste time.

*Journal Entry 2005*
The internationally hired staff were generally young singles who accepted contracts with the school so they could earn enough money to travel around South America and improve their Spanish language skills. Repeatedly, new staff members arrived at the school armed with idealistic notions of teaching disadvantaged youth from the ‘Third World.’ When they realised that they were actually working with very spoilt and very rich youth, their disillusionment translated into a mixture of anger and disappointment:

Officially I finish at Colegio Americano tomorrow after 3 years of working in the library. I can’t say that I am sad. I can’t say that I will miss it either. The school has proven to me over and over again what is exactly wrong with the elites of this country. The School is run "for profit" which means instead of pouring money into resources for the school, they[!] skim off the excess for their own benefit. The staff are treated like empleadas [hired help] which I have found absolutely repulsive and attempts to change this mentality have always been shot down in flames. I will miss the staff at the school, although it will be nice not have to listen to the right wing views of many of them. I am grateful for the [school] for one thing only, and that is that it has given me the opportunity to live and work in this amazing country, and I will be forever thankful of that.

Cited in Journal Entry 2005 from a staff member’s Blog

Internationally hired staff were a very transient group of employees and there was an extremely high turnover of staff each year and quite a few broken contracts. In the years that I worked at the school we had three different directors, two principals and more than twenty teaching staff changes in a school where the total teaching staff numbered no more than thirty five.

About 15 minutes after the first period bell went, administration realised that the new mathematics teacher was AWOL. We called his apartment multiple times but there was no answer…

[Later that day] It’s official - the math teacher is now doing a runner. Yes, he has skipped the country. Poor [director] looked totally defeated at this news. He leaves an apartment that has been emptied, a contract that wasn't signed and a heart-broken grade one teacher who hasn't stopped crying since she heard the news…

Journal Entry 2004

As is common in many American International Schools, the host-nation staff at the school received pay and benefits packages that were dramatically lower than the internationally hired staff:
I want to talk about … the physical education teacher at Colegio Americano. It is payday today and for him it is a sad and unfair day. Teachers who are recruited from foreign countries earn $1000+ US dollars every month. They also receive a $500 settling in allowance and the same amount when leaving; they also receive international health insurance; and a return trip airfare before and after a two-year contract. The PE teacher gets $452 US dollars in total per month but the school takes out $50 for local insurance and forced retirement savings. He is pissed off [saying] "my country is racist to its own people" and he is right. He is exploited and does not earn a salary comparable to his gringo colleagues…

Journal Entry 2005

This policy of institutionalised racism was able to continue because even though local staff were paid far less than their international counterparts, they were paid far more than other teachers in the country. Unsurprisingly then, local staff were more likely to remain working in the school for many years and protected their jobs by overly pragmatic practice:

After conducting a survey of the staff's grading practices I have evidence that we are grade inflating way too much and are not documenting our evaluation practices enough to stand firm as a staff and defend progressive grading practices. Most of the local staff feel intimidated by parental expectations and seem to have decided that the best way to appease parents and to help keep their classroom practices obscured is to give all the students A's and B's only.

Journal Entry 2005

The Students: Privileged, Racist and Entitled

By the time I began to work at the school, enrolments were close to 350 students from pre-K through to senior high school. The great majority of students were Bolivian citizens from families of extreme wealth. The school continued to enrol American students and third nation citizens too, but the school mainly enrolled a homogenous group of upper class, Spanish as first language, Catholic, host-nation elites.

An American parent from the school described the host-nation students’ families’ economic status in these terms:
Colegio Americano is a school of the Bolivian elite and, to be honest, the Bolivian elite lives in a weird bubble of privilege that effects (sic) many of the kids. I was a volunteer for a while in my kid’s classrooms and have known their classmates for years. Most of them are great, even the wealthy ones. Some are just spoiled. I am actually happy that my kids survived that culture as unscathed as they have. We never had the trappings of those families. No 4x4 [vehicle]… No wide screen with cable … No monster house with a security guard.

Despite the fact that Bolivia is one of the poorest nations in the western hemisphere, the school’s students had access to all the trappings of moneyed life:

Every year the graduating class goes on a senior trip during Spring Break. For quite a few years now the kids have elected to spend a week at the 5 star resort town of Cancun in Mexico for an all expenses paid booze up worth about $US 4000 per person. They also organise an incredibly extravagant prom dinner and dance that costs about $US 10,000 for a five hour black tie party.

Journal Entry 2004

As children of privilege, the students understood that their high status in society would, if not guarantee then at least, assist them greatly in their future prospects. Ketter and Marsh (2001: 3) noted in their paper, Impact of U.S. Overseas Schools in Latin America on Political and Civic Values Formation, that:

It is a little known but important fact that a significant number of political and business leaders in Latin America nations have been educated in American Overseas Schools, and many enter American universities after successful completion of an American high school education in an overseas school. Bilingual and infused with the values implicit in US pedagogy, these young people become the mayors, judges, industrialists, journalists, cabinet ministers, and presidents of their countries.

Some of these future leaders at our school were disdainful of the school’s attempts at rigour and often resisted engaging in their studies as I observed in my journal:

Vignette One: I learned today that one of the Board of Directors is mad that his granddaughter had failed in her USA college and is now not doing well here in a Bolivian university either. How surprising… While she was a senior at our school she wore short-shorts every day and partied hard every weekend that I knew her. She spoke and wrote adequate English for 12 years of study in the language but she also was much more interested in boys and playing than study. The Board member blames this school for her repeated failure which is frustrating because the student was arrogant and her parents supported her choice to learn the bare minimum.

Journal Entry 2004
Vignette Two: A very rich parent’s son has been receiving excellent grades in all subjects for three years but the rumour is that he is actually barely literate or numerate… I took some time to observe [this student] and gauge his level in comparison to the rest of the class. He looks a lot like Sleepy in Disney's version of “Snow White.” He wears a gigantic man sized expensive watch on his left wrist… He stares dreamily off into space while the rest of the kids point their fingers at the page and follow the story along as [the teacher], or a fellow class mate, read a paragraph. When the worksheet is handed out there are a lot of kids who race to finish it first. [The student] isn't one of them. He sort of just sits. When I go over to see if he wants help he responds self-consciously that he doesn’t know what to do. I ask him to read me the English words and he barely enunciates the one-syllable words and silently skips over most of the words that he briefly tries to spell out. [This student] seems to be by far the weakest child in the class and it is well known that he is also one of the most coddled and spoilt kids in [the city]. But isn't that to be expected? If you live in a mansion and have Spanish speaking maids, cooks, gardeners and drivers at your beck and call; if you have huge flat screen televisions in most rooms in the house with Spanish speaking cable shows; and if both of your parents only speak Spanish - then where would [a little kid] get motivation to learn English?

And yet for other students, learning was prized and these students understood that they had been given a unique opportunity at educational stimulation in a country where rote-learning was the predominant pedagogy. Many of the students had been enrolled in the school since their early childhood days and as a result felt very comfortable at Colegio Americano. In fact, some students were emboldened and arrogant enough to poke fun in sometimes quite creative ways:

[The English teacher] was crying over an assignment four of the grade 12 boys had produced. She had asked them to make a video representation of “Macbeth.” Theirs had ended up being an extravaganza of 13 scenes in a 24 minute video of all five acts of the Shakespearean bloodbath. They wore costumes, paraphrased the script using accurate modern English, used one of their houses as a set and had day and night shoots. They used comedy in the nature of Monty Python movies and I laughed and laughed when I saw it privately. They also used pretty muffled swear words during the final fight scenes and the student playing Macbeth flashed his butt for a fraction of a second in the final moments of the video. [The English teacher] was horrified and couldn't see anything else but the butt moment. …I went and talked to the English teacher privately and gently suggested that the video showed students who had been engaged by the topic, stimulated by the themes and proud of the effort they had put in. At this, tears started to return to her eyes. She said she would have never made a filthy video like that and she had never worked with students who would have done so. What could I say? I had found the butt flash clever – the student knew that Scottish kings wore kilts without undies and Macbeth was definitely a proud Scot.

Journal Entry 2005
Perhaps due to their affluent backgrounds, many of the students were politically conservative and socially elitist. These attitudes were often a mirroring of parental positions, but resulted in a campus where quite blatant racism occurred:

_Vignette One:_ The kids … don't like the new Bolivian math teacher) and tell me classist things like, "he smells" and he's beneath them so they don't have to respect him. Hmmm… I have also been at the brunt of quite a few parent interviews where they are expressing concern that a Spanish speaking, Bolivian teacher has taken over the math classes. … I had a mother come in and tell me that even though she was a Bolivian educated English teacher at a government school, she wasn't happy that a teacher, who has only the same qualifications as her, is teaching her daughter…

Journal Entry 2005

_Vignette Two:_ This afternoon when a Jewish student got home from school, as is her usual routine, she got online and began chatting with friends. During the course of the chatting she was sent an email that was a death threat. While in Spanish, even I could figure out what it was saying and it was quite vile. The perpetrators were clever though and cowardly - of course chat mail is quite untraceable… [Later, after investigating the incident I discovered] that the chat attack was not the work of just one student, but is a campaign by quite a few.

Journal Entry 2005

_Vignette Three:_ Last year a student had been sent through the discipline system at school for throwing eggs at a Jewish family's house and other bullying incidents. After talking with the Director, I learned that it was not only our Jewish kids who had been harassed by this bully but also a Chinese family as well! The mother of a Chinese student had in fact come up to the school, asking that the student bully not be sent up for expulsion as she was afraid her son would be blamed and noted that the egg throwing incidents had slowed down and had only happened once in the previous month…It seems also that the school had actually caught this student and his fellow hate-crimers, because one of the students cracked and confessed who was involved. This confession was not enough for our Board members who chose to just give the students a warning and allow… them to continue at the school.

Journal Entry 2005

_Vignette Four:_ During mid-morning Li* comes to my office to tell me of an incident that happened the afternoon before. His story, which I confirmed from several sources over the next hour, was that Michael* upon hearing Li talk to a mate in Mandarin started to imitate his language in a pretty crude way. Posturing then broke out with strong insults thrown. Li tried to not escalate and got into his taxi, but Michael came up to his open window and slapped him across the face and said something about how dare he insult him. [* not the students’ real names]

Journal Entry 2006
Of course, not all of the students were racist and in fact some were extremely mature and thoughtful as this extract from one student’s college application reveals:

After I conduct my studies in education, my goal - and I feel it is an ambitious one - is to build the best children’s special education centre in Bolivia, to accommodate children from any social, economic or ethnic background. A centre of this kind is badly needed in Bolivia. Nevertheless I plan to undertake the project, with the feeling it will be a difficult mission, but with the conviction that it will improve Bolivia’s education.

Cited in Journal Entry 2005

Curriculum: Americanization, Textbooks and Dual Diplomas

The curriculum at Colegio Americano was guided by the standards set down by the accreditation agency that called for research-based curriculum and instructional methods. All grades had access to a broad education that included mathematics, science, humanities and language classes (both English and Spanish) as well as classes in music, physical/health education and the arts and crafts.

English as a Second Language (ESL) was a strong focus of the first years of schooling as the overwhelming majority of students were Spanish-as-first-language-learners. The techniques for language acquisition varied in each classroom but as most teachers were not specifically trained in English language acquisition or bilingual pedagogy the default pedagogy was immersion. By this I mean that most teachers did not use Spanish in the classrooms at all, mainly because they could not speak the language, but even the bilingual teachers did not. The justification behind this was that students would learn their first language at home and if a child was immersed in English at school they would be more likely to pick up the new language quickly.

For most teachers, especially at the elementary level, textbooks drove the curriculum. All textbooks were purchased in the United States and their authors intended an audience of American students. Very few modifications were made to accommodate local conditions. For example, it was common to see children learning about money...
using plastic replicas of American pennies, dimes and quarters; and, an American teacher who had taught in the school for close to fifteen years was very proud of the fact that every year her grade five students did very similar projects on ‘Native American Indian tribes’ and famous USA citizens publicly speaking at a ‘Tea at the White House.’

As a dual-diploma school, the secondary curriculum was designed to fulfil high school graduation requirements for both Bolivia and the USA. In reality this meant that the school taught subjects based on what a typical American K-12 school offers and then creatively assigned grades for quasi-comparable host-nation subjects. The school replicated curriculum performance standards cherry-picked from national (USA) and state standards, but was not mandated to do so. In fact, without strict adherence to federal/national guidelines or national ministries of education, the school had greater freedom in interpreting what and how to teach. The school prided itself on using best-practice pedagogy and on its website maintained that:

*Colegio Americano* affirms a commitment to quality education and a belief that every child can and will succeed in ways that reflect his or her own unique aptitudes and interests. Students are continuously exposed to complex learning experiences, focusing around critical ideas, meaningful questions and purposeful projects.

As a teacher and principal in the school this philosophy of education meant that for me I had latitude to experiment, be creative and push boundaries:

*Vignette One*: The new teachers came in for more assistance with their new job. I sat them down and discussed previous curriculum, resources and answered questions. I trust their experience and individual expertise. That's the plan really: guide anyone who asks for help but otherwise coordinate curriculum without too heavy a hand.

Journal Entry 2005

*Vignette Two*: I have been working on tomorrow’s staff development workshop all this week. It is going to be a peer review session on curriculum mapping. As we near the two year mark it is time to explore what we have done successfully and what we still need to improve.

Journal Entry 2005

*Vignette Three*: If our teachers are going to grade without fear of censure by the parents, we need to stick together and support each other by having a set
of guidelines to follow. Thus, I proposed that a criterion rather than a norm referenced structure should be set up based on our school's agreed upon standards; I’m recommending school wide rubric use for performance based assignments, justified by a diverse assessment portfolio for each child.

Journal Entry 2005

The school marketed itself as a 'college-prep’ school which meant that students who were enrolled in the school were all expected to attend tertiary level education after high school graduation. To this end, the school offered several USA College Board sanctioned Advanced Placement (AP) exam courses which could earn US college credits if students achieved high enough exam results. Colegio Americano also used standardised testing regimes from the USA including the Iowa Testing Programs (ITP and TAP), the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL):

Vignette One: All this week the teachers have been conducting IOWA and TAP tests in grades 3 through to 10. The Director advised me on what to do for next year. She said that overall kids here have always achieved below grade level and that it is best to never distribute test scores information to the parents and general school community.

Journal Entry 2004

Vignette Two: I read an interesting criticism of AP courses yesterday and I agreed with its main theme that the courses are very rigid and teacher centred. I am looking forward to teaching during the time after the AP Comparative Government and Politics exam when the kids and I will have time to deconstruct the course and talk about issues that appeal to them. Already they have said that green issues and the drug trade are two areas that they would like to get their hooks into.

Journal Entry 2004

Language: Bilingualism versus English Dominance

The school used English as its language of instruction in all subjects except Spanish and Bolivian social studies. English as Second Language (ESL) classes were available for students who struggled to master their second language and new students at the high school level were admitted only if they had functional levels of English. On campus the social languages were both English and Spanish, though the use of Spanish was discouraged:
Vignette One: The high school Spanish teacher is up in arms today. She submitted a request for an excursion to the theatre for grades 9-12 to see a Spanish language play that is on the upper classes syllabus. The director turned it down with the explanation that our school promotes English, not Spanish… The director said that the school is to be considered an English speaking school and any subject taught in Spanish is secondary or ‘complimentary’ only. … How ironic, that the director uses Spanish all the time in his job and yet scorns the teaching of it in our school.

Journal Entry 2005

Vignette Two: A Board member expects the elementary teachers to fine the kids if they speak Spanish on campus. He thinks if the rest of us followed suit we would eliminate the ‘problem’ of these kids functioning as the bilingual kids that they are.

Journal Entry 2004

The majority of teachers at the school were monolingual English speakers and even staff in administrations positions were generally barely functional in Spanish, if at all. This sometimes caused confusion because most parents only spoke Spanish:

I just got off the phone with an irate parent. The long and short of it is that his daughter accused another girl of stealing her jumper and then the accused parents came up to the school to throw their weight around. Anyway, in the midst of all this anger, I phoned the accuser’s father and tried to explain the situation. After a few moments, he said to me in Spanish “in this country we speak Spanish. I cannot understand a word that you are saying.” Fair enough! God, just writing this down makes me giggle again. Ah well, yo pienso que necesito mejorar mi español, no?

Journal Entry 2005

The attainment of English fluency was expected by high school graduation and both students and parents cited English as the number one reason for enrolling in Colegio Americano. When asked why parents chose to enrol their children in the school, the following responses were typical:

La razón más importante es la educación en el idioma ingles. (The most important reason is an education in the English language.)

Because they want their children to learn English [as it] is a very important language that now is expanding more and more.

... So that their children learn English which is a worldwide language.

Nowadays a second language is required to get any job. English is the most common universal language [so] it is essential for a person’s learning.
Mimicking the USA: Americanisms on Campus

The school mirrored a USA school calendar; that is, school began in August and finished in early June. This was in direct contrast to the pattern of schooling followed in the Bolivia, which begins its school year in February and ends in late November.

It also mimicked the USA in its choice of holiday traditions and school cultural celebrations. Thus, the school planned Halloween and Thanksgiving activities and took time off during ‘Spring Break’ even though this occurred during the Bolivia’s autumn months. The school had a cheerleading squad and an NHS (National Honor Society) chapter. On a daily basis grade seven monitors raised the stars and stripes on the school flag pole and at weekly assemblies everyone was expected to sing the ‘Star Spangled Banner.’

…the assembly might have gone smoothly but wow is it an explicit example of pro-USA indoctrinations. The Cuban music teacher had spent the week practising the Bolivian and US anthems in her classes and so the whole school let rip with full voice in both songs. Then there was the director with his hand on his heart respecting his flag front and centre. This year he wants us to commemorate both US and Bolivian special days each month, but when I said that August didn’t have any American holidays, he suggested we drop it until September. This was despite the fact that August hosts Bolivia’s Independence Day!!!!

Journal Entry 2005

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the reader with a description of Colegio Americano and its place within Bolivian society. I have done this by skimming through my personal-professional journal and choosing vignettes that help to describe both the breadth and minutiae of the school. As I close this chapter, I hope I have succeeded in painting a vivid picture so that the reader now has a pretty good ‘feel’ for what type of a school is Colegio Americano.
This description stage of Critically Reflective practice is only the first of a four step process. Now that I have gathered together enough information to set the scene, as it were, I can move beyond the superficiality of description and the revelations of “habitual actions, patterns, contradictions and regularities within my daily routinised work” (Street, 1990: 13). In the next chapter I will choose a focus of my practice and examine it more thoroughly, in an attempt to search for meanings that will help me to engage in theory-building.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONTESTING ASSUMPTIONS THAT INFORM PRACTICE

The school is not a neutral objective arena; it is an institution which has the goal of changing people’s values, skills and knowledge bases.  
Heath, 1983

As we participate in writing freely and descriptively about ourselves and our work we can uncover the ‘autopilot’ which guides much of our day… The discovery of the autopilot leads to the recognition of taken-for-granted assumptions implicit in our understandings of our socio-cultural world.  
Street, 1990: 10-11
Introduction

In the previous chapter I outlined the context and setting of the Bolivian international school, *Colegio Americano*, that is the case study of this research. Through my personal-professional journal I was able to provide a sense of the school’s location, purpose, culture, ethos and people. I now turn to the second stage of the Critically Reflective Practice (CRP) model proposed by Smyth (1999a) - informing. According to Smyth (1999a) this is the stage where the practitioner begins to explore what is happening within their school by using an investigative phrase, “it looks as if…” as a means of illuminating experience. Whereas the first stage of CRP provided a largely descriptive and superficial reading of what was happening, the second stage begins the task of narrowing and deepening the analytical focus by theorising some dominant themes, issues and questions emerging from everyday practice.

Informing necessitates the use of opinion and the phrase “it looks as if” shows the subjective nature of this stage of the CRP process. Nonetheless, as an insider in the school my opinions were those of an informed expert and as Smyth reminds us, “unless we can construct stories based on real occurrences about what is happening in our [work] then we will find it difficult to be analytical of those experiences” (1999a: 12).

In *Becoming Critically Reflective*, Brookfield also acknowledges that while some will dismiss and demean personal experience as merely anecdotal and therefore hopelessly subjective and impressionistic he argues that they are important and accessible sources of insight (1995: 31).

Choosing a Theme to Focus and Inform

The purpose of the informing stage in the CRP process is to build theory with the intention of bringing about change. Thus, when choosing a focus theme I wanted to
pursue something that I believed needed improving but was also practical and prudent within the constraints of the school’s culture. The point of the exercise is to ultimately create change by interrupting existing practices and trying new approaches that are hopefully better than the original form. When I was deciding a theme on which to focus, it had to be one that I knew was not immovable because of cultural or political obstacles.

In my initial reading of journal entries, there were numerous emergent issues, themes, questions and concerns. In the diagram below I map some of my preliminary brainstorming of possible themes worthy of further in-depth investigation. All of the topics revolved around interesting ethical dilemmas that I faced as a teacher and principal at Colegio Americano and each one of them developed as a recurring theme in my journaling process.

![Diagram of Possible Themes]

*Table Two: Possible Themes to Investigate*

The theme of English immersion interested me because I felt that the school’s ethos of ‘English first, Spanish second’ illustrated the cultural imperialism, rampant but
unquestioned, at *Colegio Americano*. I eventually decided not to focus on this because I felt that critical linguistic studies in the area of teaching English as Second Language (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999; Crystal, 2003; Norton and Toohey, 2004) had already covered linguistic imperialism more than adequately.

*Colegio Americano*’s ‘culture of entitlement’ touched upon the themes of elitism and privilege within the competitive market of modern schooling. I was both intrigued and disgusted by this theme and wrote about it extensively in my journal entries. Eventually, though I came to realise that the obviousness of all American International Schools being schools of privilege might mean that change-making would not be possible.

The disparity of wages and benefits between foreign and local staff at *Colegio Americano* showed the way *Colegio Americano*’s international school status allowed discrimination to be practised legally. While the unfairness of the theme merited greater discussion, the subject matter had already been critiqued in editorial pages of international schools magazines, at regional accreditation conferences and by union delegations in various countries. I also felt that choosing a theme that only covered a staffing issue at *Colegio Americano* would be too narrow to highlight the inner-workings of the school.

Teaching the privileged, or the oppressors as Freire inspires me to think of them, challenged every fibre of my professional being and to this day still makes me feel like a ‘sell out’ to the ideals of critical theory. Given that I made a pragmatic decision to earn a good wage at *Colegio Americano* rather than opt for a voluntary teaching assignment in an impoverished school site in Bolivia perhaps reveals a lot about me and the hypocrisy of my lived experiences. If I had stayed a teacher, I might have
concentrated my CRP on this theme, but as my career evolved into educational administration roles I crossed out this theme as a viable choice as I did not feel it would capture issues of leadership and whole-school practices.

Personal, institutional and societal racism within Colegio Americano and Bolivian society was another theme I would have liked to explore further. However, it was one that looking back through my journal entries I did not feel I had enough information to explore in this thesis. I also thought that since Aurolyn Luykx’s (1999) research in Bolivia, culminating in her gripping text, Citizen Factory: Schooling and Cultural Production in Bolivia handled the themes of racism and classism comprehensively, my own contribution would not have added too much more insight to the topic.

Colegio Americano was a for-profit school and I felt that exploring this theme might have been an interesting case-study of neo-liberal market forces in the growth of a globally hegemonic schooling phenomenon. Nevertheless, the school’s for-profit status was a very closely guarded issue at Colegio Americano and as much as I searched, I could not uncover documentary proof of the school’s exact legal status. To write a thesis based on hear-say and anecdotal evidence was not something on which I was willing to stake my academic career.

Eventually I decided to pursue the one aspect of Colegio Americano’s culture that appeared to not only be manageable but symptomatic of most of the other themes that I had discarded. I narrowed my choice to unethical practices in reporting and grading at Colegio Americano. I sensed that this theme might uncover many issues surrounding elitism and privilege; educational imperialism; racism, discrimination and entitlement. Grading and reporting are key functions of any school institution and the way that
schools facilitate these two practices says a lot about the school’s underlying assumptions and philosophies. At Colegio Americano all students received grades and reports; all teachers assigned grades and wrote reports; the administrative team managed grading and reporting practices; even the Board was involved in settling any internal disputes involving grading and reporting. The comprehensiveness of stakeholder involvement in this theme suggested to me that it would be a good topic to analyse further in order to build theory about whole school practices in Colegio Americano.

In any event, as I began to critically reflect on my journal writings after its completion, I began to see that without great conscious thought my writing topics had been narrowing as the months and years progressed. By the end of my four years at the school I can see now that my journal topics had constricted mainly to stories that focused on various grading and reporting activities that were going on in the school. With this awareness I believed my choice was inevitable if I was to listen to where my writing had been trying to take me.

To “begin the process of recapturing the pedagogic principles” of this theme by “unpacking… the largely tacit knowledge” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 20) that undergird a school’s practice, I will endeavour to articulate the complex and idiosyncratic nature of the grading and reporting procedures practised at Colegio Americano in the following section of this chapter. Each subsection begins with an upfront statement starting with “it looked as if…” because I want the reader to be able to easily follow my theorising position within each narrative analysis.
It looked as if... there was a complex mishmash of systems.

Colegio Americano used an American curriculum and assessment model but was actually a dual-diploma granting school. This meant that students graduating from the school were able to have their qualifications recognised as fulfilling the requirements of graduation by both Bolivia and the USA. It also meant that those students exiting the school at any other grade level gained automatic course credit transferability to other schools in the USA; any other American accredited international school around the globe; and all Bolivian schools as well. While a dual-diploma certification function has obvious advantages for students and was a key marketing asset for the school, how the school actually integrated the requirements of two nations’ education regulations into one cohesive system was extremely problematic and ambiguous.

The first problematic aspect centred on the weak accountability structures the two nation’s education authorities had over Colegio Americano. In Bolivia the unitary nature of national government system meant that its education department was a national level entity that exercised regulatory authority over all schools in the nation, including Colegio Americano. Even so, the Bolivian Education Department did not conduct inspections of the school or utilise any other form of oversight strategies to monitor what was going on in Colegio Americano and so the school was left to follow the host-nation’s rules in a self-regulated manner. In regard to the ‘American’ half of the equation, the federal nature of the United States of America’s systems of government created fifty separate and sovereign state-based education departments. As an ‘American International School’ not located within the USA’s homeland territory, Colegio Americano was free to cherry-pick the regulations the school would adhere to from whichever and however many state education departments it chose.
The result of this complicated regulatory reality was that Colegio Americano operated in an accountability loophole where the school did not in actuality answer to any government authority. To fill this accountability vacuum the school justified its situation by pointing to its membership in the USA based education accreditation agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Council on Accreditation and School Improvement, or SACS-CASI. However, all of the American accreditation agencies are organisations that function as “voluntary, non-government” entities that use “self-evaluation and self-improvement… and informal, but elaborate ‘systems’ of self-regulation” (Young et al., 1983: x). In essence the school was using the circuitous argument that their accreditation credentials bestowed self-authority upon the school.

As a self-authorising institution, Colegio Americano was left to its own devices to decide what education regulations to adopt. From my observations and investigations, it seemed that the decisions taken by the school created a complex mishmash of practices and policies that had evolved over time. Based on my professional experiences at the school I suspect this was a result of convenience and complacency. These policies had become what Brookfield terms as hegemonic assumptions, “whereby ideas and structures and actions come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, preordained, and working for their own good, when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves those interests” (1995: 15).

The decisions that were made by the school generally favoured the regulations commonly found in a US-type school, which were then overlayed onto the Bolivian requirements. The decisions that had to be made involved a multitude of issues and as each one was added to the mix, the organisational structure became more and more
complex and confusing. I believe that Colegio Americano, at every stage, had the best of intentions in the actions it took to translate student achievement into student reports that were acceptable for both the Bolivian and the USA education systems. Yet despite good intentions, the uniqueness of the dual-diploma certification policy in the school meant that the school was enacting policies without precedent or external guidance. Therefore, because of the incompatible aspects of the two countries instruction, grading and reporting regulations the school was inevitably placed in an ethically precarious situation.

The ethically precarious nature of the school’s balancing act continually came back to the question of how the school could offer English-immersion instruction modelled on “US-type curriculum which may include international and host country perspectives” (SACS-CASI, 2005: 17) and at the same time fulfil the requirements of the host nation’s education regulations.

It looked as if... the school was trying to enact authentic assessment practices.

At the classroom level, Colegio Americano utilised an “authentic assessment” model as defined by Valerie Janesick (2006) and advocated by Alfie Kohn (2004). As prescribed by SACS-CASI the school was supposed to be always seeking self-improvement and authentic assessment encapsulated all the pedagogy goals Colegio Americano’s staff hoped to enact in their classrooms:

Because teachers deal with assessment issues constantly, educators in every area want to find a realistic, workable and authentic system of assessment… An authentic assessment task is designed to provide a richer, stronger, and more complex approach to understanding student progress. The actual performance or production usually tells us about what the student has been learning. When authentic assessment is used, the student must provide evidence of some growth and improvement.  

Janesick, 2006: 5-6
Extensive professional development was given to the staff during my four years in the school on the latest research in assessment practices, including Wiggins and McTighe’s (2001) *Backward Design*; *Student-led Parent Conferencing* (Kinney, Munroe and Sessions, 2000); and *Curriculum Mapping*. (Hayes Jacobs, 1997 and 2004) The school even paid for a lecturer from the State University of New York to come to Bolivia and conduct a week long college-credited unit for all staff on the latest pedagogic innovations.

We built an ethos within the school’s staff based on best-practice teaching through research based learning and inquiry. At weekly staff meetings we used the language of constructivist pedagogy and endorsed the ideas of student-centred learning:

> [We] propose an approach to curriculum and instruction designed to engage students in inquiry, promote transfer of learning, provide a conceptual framework for helping students make sense of discrete facts and skills, and uncover the big ideas of content.
>  
> *Wiggins, 2005: 4*

Across the K-12 grades teachers utilised rubrics and showcase portfolios; implemented regular self-peer-teacher marking and moderation sessions; and continually strove to align their assessment techniques with theories of multiple intelligence, criterion referencing and differentiation.

*Colegio Americano* was not completely overtaken by new ways of evaluating student progress, as standardised tests from the United States were also used in the school. Unlike schools in the States subject to the “No Child Left Behind” legislation that mandated standardised testing in all schools, in *Colegio Americano* we accepted the usefulness of standardised tests as one tool of assessment, but they did not drive curriculum. The tests were used as data for school improvement reports and to save money the same set of tests were used every year and then locked away again. Students
were also able to sit the internationally recognised Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL); both of the USA College Board university entry exams (SAT1+2) and Colegio Americano was licensed to run Advanced Placement (AP) courses and exams at the school. None of these were mandated tests for Colegio Americano students but they were offered to better facilitate international college applications.

In such a progressive environment, it looked as if the school was successful in its aim of providing challenging and research-based curricula where teachers could develop pedagogy that catered for student-centred, life-long learning. At the micro-level I believe the school was successful. In fact, these realities are what made working in the school so rewarding and hopeful for me. In my first two years as a teacher at Colegio Americano I felt liberated in my teaching and trusted as a professional.

If the school had respected what happened inside each of our classrooms, then Colegio Americano could have been a model American International School. Unfortunately, the longer I stayed in the school the more I realised that the ethos of authentic assessment stopped as soon as our assessments and evaluations were translated into end of semester grades. When teachers handed over their evaluation forms to the school’s administration for processing and reporting, it looked as if authentic assessment practices that provided “measurable improvement in student performance in the targeted areas” (Hayes Jacob, 2004: 2) were not enough to determine whether a student ultimately passed or failed a subject.

**It looked as if... grading processes were unworkable.**

At the classroom level, teachers graded students using a US-type grading format. Students received both a number grade out of 100 and a corresponding letter grade from
A-F was also assigned. Students were graded in quarterly intervals and two quarter grading periods were combined with an exam grade to create a final semester grade. At the end of the year the two semester final grades were averaged and that score became the ultimate grade for the year.

To add some sophistry to the 0-100 scale, during the four years that I worked at the school the director implemented an actual 50-100 grading system. This 50-100 grading scale was implemented to assure fairness, as explained by the work of Douglas B Reeves’ (2004) *The Case Against the Zero* and Rick Wormeli’s (2006) *Fair Isn’t Always Equal*. The 50-100 grading system was argued for because if each letter grade from D through to A have an interval of 10 points, (i.e. a D is 60 to 69, a C is 70 to 79, a B is 80 to 89 and an A 90 to 100) so an F grade should also only be for 10 points as well, i.e. 50 to 59. This logic follows that an F grade which encompasses 59 points, (i.e. 0 to 59) unfairly and severely penalises a student.

The 50-100 grading scale seemed to me counter-intuitive and perplexed other teachers and students in the school. As an Australian I could envision adopting what I perceived as a simpler alternative - using the Canadian grading scale of 20 points for each letter grade (F = 0-19, D = 20-39, C = 40-59, B = 60-79, and A = 80-100). This suggestion was vetoed with the argument that as an American International School we should only adopt a US-type grading scale. It also revealed to me how embedded the administration’s thinking was in the US-type paradigm of schooling.

The US-type grades were allocated only on the basis of academic achievement. Again, based on the philosophy of authentic assessment, reported grades were created only using the scores given to students in summative evaluations based on criterion-
referred articulated standards. Extensive professional development had been given to teachers to counter a culture of grade-inflation and against grading for motivation and punishment. In sum, as a teaching staff we were thoroughly versed in the theory of grading.

The US-type grades (50-100 with A to F) were the primary grading instrument in the school in all K-12 grades. The host-nation grading system was the secondary grading instrument in the school because the US-type grades were the original grades assigned by teachers and they were then converted into host-nation grades using a scale designed by the school. The school-designed scale was a very simple translation of the 100 point grade into a 70 point grade scale. The table below shows the translations, which was taken directly from the Colegio Americano’s student handbook:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grades</th>
<th>Percents</th>
<th>Bolivian Equivalents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>90-100</td>
<td>64 – 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>80 – 89</td>
<td>55 – 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>70 – 79</td>
<td>46 – 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>60 – 69</td>
<td>36 – 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>50 - 59</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table Three: American and Bolivian Grade Comparisons

The simplicity of the 100 to 70 translation belied the actual administrative complexity of decision making that underpinned the dual grading system. The Bolivian 70 point grading scale was actually two separate grading systems collated together. The first 60 points were allocated to a student’s academic achievement. The extra 10 points were allocated to personal development. The idea of personal development encompassed a range of behaviours including discipline, responsibility, civic-mindedness, attendance and morality. In a Bolivian school the personal development grade was left to the discretion of teachers but a relative consensus on the grade would be reached for each
student through staff meetings where teachers of the same cohort of students would get
together to strategise on the focus area of development for students in each grading
period.

At *Colegio Americano* the international teachers, and the directors, were not familiar
with the breakdown of the 70 point system and were left to independently allocate the
60/10 scores with only vague guidance. In my case, I followed the advice of longer
employed staff and used the most common approach - assign randomly. For example, if
a student in the US-type grading system had achieved a 92 (A) then using the above
table I decided the students grade translated to a 65 and then broke that grade into the
most mathematically simple division - a 60 and a 5. This breakdown actually
symbolised that the student had achieved perfect academic attainment but only achieved
average personal development. Sadly, I used this system for the first two and a half
years of my time at *Colegio Americano* until I came to understand what my simplistic
breakdowns were really signifying. This meant that for many students I assigned wildly
relative grades that in reality did not correspond in any way to an accurate interpretation
of their academic achievements or their personal development.

Another complication with translating US-type grades into Bolivian grades came from
trying to assign grades for the Bolivian trimester reporting system while actually using a
four term/two semester format. The school chose a pragmatic route - opting to assign
the first semester grade (i.e. terms one and two) as the first trimester grade; the third
quarter grade as the second trimester grade and then the fourth quarter grade and end-of-
year exam as the third trimester grade. Of course, what this meant was that the
weighting of the grades for each instructional period varied between the two systems.
In the Bolivian system the three trimester grades were added together and then divided by three to assign an ultimate overall year grade. So in Colegio Americano a much higher weighting was given to the second half of the school year’s grades than the first half of the year. For many students this unbalanced weighting of instruction periods may not have disadvantaged them particularly because they achieved fairly consistently over the whole year. But for other students this system would distort their overall grade because, for a multitude of reasons, the students’ achievement varied significantly over the course of the year.

It looked as if the school was using a far more complex system of grading than the school was acknowledging to its stakeholders. On the surface the school seemed to be following rigorous curriculum, assessment and grading policies that fulfilled requirements for both U.S. and Bolivian high school graduation diplomas. However, the school had to force two incompatible grading processes together and it looked as if the technical way the school was assigning grades was unfair and no-one in the school had the know-how to question the logic of the practice.

**It looked as if... Colegio Americano ‘created’ reports that contradicted teachers’ evaluation decisions.**

Once the US-type grades were formulated and the Bolivian grades were manufactured from the US-type grades, two reports were produced to cater for both nations’ systems which further complicated an already highly complex system. The school generated its own US-type report card document which was sanctioned only at the school level via the Director’s authorising signature. For the Bolivian report cards the school had to use the official reporting documents from the Bolivian Education Department that, once signed off at the school level, were then checked and authorised at the departmental level.
One of the major problems for the reporting protocols at Colegio Americano was that the two school systems that were merged together at the school operated on different school calendars: the US-type system generally starting in August and finishing in late May or early June and the Bolivian system starting in February and ending in late November or early December. This caused countless headaches for the secretaries in the school’s front office who never seemed to have a month free from collating reports for one of the systems. It was especially hard in regard to the Bolivian reporting requirements because the school was always trying to acquire official Bolivian reporting documents at the ‘wrong’ times of the year.

Another complication in the reporting process ensued because many of the actual subjects taught in the school did not directly correspond to the mandatory Bolivian subjects; as the table below demonstrates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>USA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Catholic country requiring religion taught at every grade level.</td>
<td>Constitutional separation of church and state: no religion taught in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>Spanish Literature</td>
<td>English Literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>Combined course of trigonometry, geometry and algebra taught each year in high school grades.</td>
<td>Separate year-long courses in algebra (yr 9), geometry (yr 10), trigonometry (yr11) and calculus elective (yr 12).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Combined course of biology, chemistry and physics taught each year in high school grades.</td>
<td>Separate year-long courses in biology, physics and chemistry in the high school grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology and Philosophy</td>
<td>Taught in the final grade of secondary school.</td>
<td>Not offered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>Bolivian Social Studies</td>
<td>USA and Western history; AP Government.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table Four: American and Bolivian Subject Comparisons*
Despite a concerted and long-term effort to present a message of unproblematic binational course requirement fulfilment at Colegio Americano, in actuality every year the administration had to make-up grades to ‘best’ fit the requirements of the Bolivian report. What best fit was sometimes quite logical: for example, in the Bolivian subject termed ‘literature’ the administration used the grade from the US-type course called ‘Spanish’ and the Bolivian subject termed ‘Foreign Language’ used the grade from the US-type course known as ‘English.’ In other categories the best-fit was less easy to recognise: in the Bolivian subject ‘Religious Education’ the administration asked the teachers of Social Studies and English subjects to search through their unit topics and find assignments that might relate to religion (e.g. a short answer test on the causes of the 11th to 13th century Crusades, a debate on Israel’s right to exist, or an essay on Arthur Miller’s The Crucible) and use those marks as the grade assigned for Religious Education.

For some subjects where no parallel US-type courses were offered, such as psychology and philosophy, there was a history of quite simply fabricating grades for the Bolivian reports. When I worked in the school as a teacher, the then director attempted to rectify this blatantly unethical practice by introducing ‘Theory of Knowledge’ as a compulsory course for all Senior students. There was a two-fold rationale for its introduction: firstly its title mirrored a course offered by American International Schools using the International Baccalaureate and it was hoped that the Baccalaureate’s credentials would ‘rub off’ onto the student’s transcripts; and secondly, the Theory of Knowledge course was marketed as fulfilling the requirements of the host-nation’s psychology and philosophy courses though this assertion was school-based and was not submitted officially to the Bolivian education authorities.
Once again, at this level of administrative practice in the school, it looked as if Colegio Americano was using any and all pretexts to justify dubious reporting practices. No-one thought to go to the Bolivian education department and seek an exemption for the school to the department’s mandatory reporting requirements. In turn, the Bolivian education department never attempted to audit the school so it looked as if they were unaware of the fabrications and false reporting.

**It looked as if... grades were manipulated to ensure student promotion by age.**

Colegio Americano did not have an official policy regarding retention and promotion of students. It looked as if this was a deliberate oversight because the US-type schooling philosophy and Bolivian laws clearly clashed when a student faced the prospect of failing one subject or multiple subjects.

The Bolivian system decreed that if a student fails one subject in a year (that is receives an overall year grade in a subject of 35 or less) then they fail the entire school year and are held down at the same grade level for the following school year. What on the surface seems a rather draconian regulation was a last resort measure preceded by extensive interventions for students at risk. Bolivian schools were expected to utilise many aggressive student-support mechanisms including compulsory small group teacher-mentored intensive study periods held at the end of each trimester known as ‘recuperation’ periods. It was explained to me by local staff that the Bolivian system enforced the ‘one strike and you stay down’ regulation because retention sends a message to all students that feeble effort and weak performance is unacceptable.

In contrast, US-type schools have shifted away from grade retention policies in favour of social promotion policies due to highly influential research (Jackson, 1975;
Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber, 1994; Jimerson, 2001). The research argued that grade retention can cause serious psychological harm to students by making students who are already unmotivated and lacking confidence feel even more alienated and labelled as a failure in front of their age-group peers. Despite acknowledgement that there has been a plethora of research and advocates contrasting this stance (e.g. Shepard and Smith, 1986; Roderick et al., 2005) it looked as if in Colegio Americano social promotion was the unwritten policy. I wrote about this in a journal entry late in the first year of my principalship:

I learned that passing the Senior year at our school is almost totally arbitrary! I thought that there are absolute graduate requirements but it seems that we as a school have been extremely reluctant to hold back a student no matter how little work they have done. …

Journal Entry 2005

My own assumptions and values regarding social promotion erred towards discomfort with the practice. I think I was especially concerned with the furtive way Colegio Americano ensured that all students were promoted and the fact that the school actually changed grades rather than promoted students with F grades. I felt the furtive nature of the change making of grades was an affront to teachers’ professional judgements and I recorded in my journal several experiences at Colegio Americano when teachers who had failed students in a subject, found those students’ report cards did not record failing grades:

At the end of last year… we had four grade 9 students who had failed several subjects. Bolivian law requires them to take a recuperation exam to try and rectify the problem. Today, I got started on preparing the logistics for the exam, only to discover that somehow between mid-June and now, all four boys have passed all of their subjects.

Journal Entry 2005

Sometimes the failing grade in the US-type report became a passing grade when it was converted to a Bolivian grade and sometimes both the US-type report and the Bolivian report recorded altered grades. It looked as if this manipulation of grades occurred at the administration level in Colegio Americano by having the mathematical equations for an
ultimate grade be massaged in various ways so as to achieve an ultimately passing grade. It looked as if the ways in which these students’ grades were massaged depended on the amount of teacher coercion that was needed to achieve the aim. If a teacher was willing to go along with what the administration believed was in the best interest of the student, then the administration would quietly and independently alter the weighting of semester grades. When staff members were uncomfortable with the special treatment of some students’ grades, then the administration would still pass the students but would take the time to justify the practice to the staff.

As my journal entries started to repeatedly focus on this theme, I began to actively investigate specific cases. What I discovered did not converge with my initial ideas about sound education administration practices:

I have started to investigate about 7 Seniors who now have a two semester record of failing several subjects. I went and saw the director and we ended up discussing the issue for about an hour. I have been extremely concerned, as are many of the teachers, that we have allowed students who shouldn’t be able to graduate to receive their Bolivian and US diplomas by basically boosting their grades via dodgy mathematics. The director said our school is very different even from the best Spanish speaking schools in the city - because we serve the elite families ... I have to conclude from this conversation that the director was implying that as our families are ‘elite’ we twist and turn rules to accommodate our special, spoilt students…

Journal Entry 2005

It looked as if... school transcripts were ‘enhanced’ to help students get into college.

In the United States, every university requires a school-to-college transcript from each student who applies to their institution. This transcript is an official school record of a student’s entire secondary (grades 9-12) academic history. It is prepared at a school’s administration level, usually by the college counsellor and common practice holds that

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3 Note that the Australian spelling of counsellor uses the double ll, whereas, the American spelling of counselor omits one of the l’s. As I use Australian spelling in this thesis, I do so for counsellor except when quoting from US sources.
the school’s college counsellor prepares each transcript quite autonomously. Nonetheless, he or she is expected to work under a code of ethics such as the American Counseling Association’s code which calls for counsellors to “take reasonable steps to ensure that documentation in records accurately reflects client progress and services provided. If errors are made in client records, counselors take steps to properly note the correction of such errors according to agency or institutional policies” (ACA Code of Ethics, 2005).

The formats of school-to-college transcripts vary enormously and reflect the diversity of secondary schooling and home-schooling arrangements that are in the United States of America. Transcripts are created for the huge, market-regulated college community by secondary institutions and because there are different prerequisites for acceptance/enrolment into each and every college in the United States, it is perhaps no wonder that the school-to-college transcript formulation is extremely laissez-faire. Having said that, school-to-college transcripts usually contain information about a student’s education history, including: courses taken and the teachers who taught each course; credits earned for each unit; grades and explanation of scale; grade point average (GPA); standardised tests scores; student’s co-curricular highlights; school description and accreditation information; and previous schools attended.

At Colegio Americano, the college counsellor was solely responsible for the creation of school-to-college transcripts and prepared transcripts that contained similar information to the list I provided in the previous paragraph. School-to-college transcripts were supplied to all senior students in the school and were actively used when students sought admission into tertiary institutions in countries other than Bolivia.
Records of transcripts were kept in files of students who had graduated and were kept in
the school office for at least seven years after a student completed their secondary
schooling. As the school principal, and later as director, I had access to all of those files.
Over time, I grew suspicious that some students’ records were not accurate but I could
never get a straight answer from the counsellor about my suspicions. Eventually, in the
early months of 2006 I spent a couple of hours reading through the archived files.
Through this I learned that some school-to-college transcripts were not accurate
reflections of students’ academic achievement and that failing grades in year-end report
cards had been altered to those of passing grades (Appendix I). It looked as if transcripts
were being enhanced to get students into college. This was done in more than a few
instances by various college counsellors over various years at the school when they had
recorded units on the college transcript that students had not actually taken but in the
place where a teacher’s name had to be inserted they had recorded their own name as
the teacher of the unit (Appendix J). The following is a journal entry dated from this
period that summarises my conclusions:

For the past few years the counsellor has been altering report cards. Most of
the alterations have been creating subjects and assigning himself as the
teacher. Others have been altering year results so that students’ pass them and
justifying it by saying that the average of the two semesters equals a pass.
The counsellor has said as much for more than a year now, but I have just
looked over this year’s 12s and last year’s 12s and I have proof – copies of
the original reports and the reports that have been altered. On top of that, and
this is what I should have figured out before and is what I think of as the
missing piece, is that counsellor has created his own Word file to generate
official school transcripts that are only authorized by him! Imagine that, he
has the authority to override everyone’s grades! I have also discovered that
the counsellor didn’t start the grade fixing. I went back to the school year
before he came and found evidence of the previous counsellor doing the
same modifications to grades and creating fake courses on college transcripts.
Maybe the previous counsellor taught our current one to do these practices?
Journal Entry 2006

So it looked as if the school-to-college transcripts in Colegio Americano were being
created in a manner that enhanced students’ opportunities to be accepted into
international colleges. It looked as if the extent of the assistance crossed over into a

129
realm that was ethically questionable. I could understand that the counsellor might justify his actions in terms of being client-focused in a competitive education environment, but it did not seem right to me for a school counsellor to use unique mathematical formulations to equate ultimate grades for each student. Furthermore, I couldn’t accept that Colegio Americano’s counsellor fabricated courses of study on official transcripts.

My uncovering of the counsellor’s practices caused great inner turmoil for me and I was starting to believe that being an administrator created contradictions in my work as a teaching professional committed to fairness and social justice. By the time I took over as director of Colegio Americano in March 2006, I knew I was working in a school that seemed to me to be functioning very, very close to an ethical precipice. I had to decide what to do about my findings and theorising. It was at this point, that Usher’s (2003) warnings about forcing issues out into the open and the ethical dilemmas I would face by doing so really began to resonate with me. Also, Stephen Brookfield’s work in the field acknowledged that what I was thinking about doing would be difficult:

> Asking awkward questions about the nature of power and control sometimes means calling powerful people to account for their ideas and actions.  
> Brookfield, 1999: 229

To make the decision on what to do about my theorising, I decided to look at the implications of the grading and reporting practices in the school and ask, how did the flexibilities and the manipulations affect the student-body, the staff and the reputation of Colegio Americano? I felt that now I was Colegio Americano’s director, I had the opportunity and the responsibility to act. I just didn’t know what sort of action would be best.
It looked as if... students understood the sorting in the system.

The students were the least transient stakeholders in the school and as a result were the main holders of Colegio Americano’s institutional knowledge. They were the stakeholders who first alerted me to the grading and reporting practices in the school. It looked as if many of the students, particularly those in the secondary grades, had a keen awareness of the flexible nature of the reporting of grades in the school. They were also aware that school-to-college transcripts were manufactured by the college counsellor with information that was decided upon according to his discretion and with acceptance from Board members:

School Boards should not be afraid of failing students. They give too many opportunities to lazy people who shouldn’t deserve a second chance because they get used to it and they don’t work.

Student Questionnaire Feedback

The treatment of specific students in relation to their grades and behaviour were topics of conversation that various students raised with me in private over the years that I worked at Colegio Americano. During those conversations I came to understand that many students could see that some students were being treated more favourably than others. I particularly remember an excruciating conversation I had with the student-government president as we waited to rehearse for the following week’s graduation ceremony. He asked me if all of his fellow classmates were going to graduate the following week. When I replied affirmatively, he asked if it was true that some students whom he knew had not taken any art or music classes in high school and instead had taken physical education electives each year were going to receive their diploma too. He clearly knew that these students had not gained all of the appropriate credits necessary to fulfil what the student handbook stated were needed for graduation. I hated myself at that moment, but was very proud that the student was assertive enough to ask a difficult
question. When I again had to reply that ‘yes’ they would be receiving their diploma he asked me rhetorically, “That doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

Like all children, the students in Colegio Americano felt keenly the desire to be treated fairly. Yet, the school had an embedded culture of entitlement where some students didn’t have to follow the rules. Many of the students had their parents push the school into accommodating special requests, as typified in the following vignette:

One of our students is failing badly in most subjects. We have had many unsuccessful intervention meetings previously and in this final meeting of the term with the parents we wanted to advise them that we believed their son would be better off at a different school… Dad responded as if he hadn’t heard us by asking if his son could skip the exams so he could go to a golf tournament!

A few days later we received the formal letter about the golf tournament and the student was indeed going to miss the first two days of exams. After reading it, I went to the student and asked him if he would be back for the last two days of exams because the golf tournament would then be over. The student explained that his dad had told him not to study for the exams because golf is very important and that as he was not ready to sit the exams, the school should be flexible and understanding and let him take the exams in January.

Journal Entry 2005

It seemed to me that the effects of the school’s flexible grading and reporting policies were profoundly negative on the student body because they were being taught that everything is negotiable, including the rules; and at Colegio Americano some students are more equal than others. In fact, I would go so far as to theorise that it looked as if students leaned to accept the inequality and unfairness in Bolivian society because it was modelled in the school’s unfair and unequal grading and reporting practices.

**It looked as if... wealthier parents were buying educational advantage in a competitive education market.**

It also looked as if, in general, parents had a firm understanding of Bolivian education regulations but very few solid facts about a US-type school’s policies and procedures. It
is my belief that many parents enrolled their children at *Colegio Americano* because they felt that a US-type school could shield their children from what they saw as the draconian policies mandated in their nation’s schools. For example, parents informed me that Bolivian schools should not be able to hold back a student in the same year level if the student failed only one or two subjects; and local teaching staff complained that their own children who were attending Bolivian public schools were not able to pass difficult end of year exams because they had missed too many classes because of union protests and strike-days. Despite their lack of knowledge about specifics, all of *Colegio Americano*’s parents seemed certain that the school was in a special position which enabled their children to be treated uniquely:

> Today was Student Led Conferences and I spent most of the day being bribed or threatened by parents to have their children’s grades changed! One of the fathers came in again with a threatening legal letter and went round to all of his daughter’s teachers and threatened each one individually. Then I had another parent come in offering me a present for my baby and then mentioned that her son’s grades were very low so could I please write a strong letter of recommendation for him to go to college in the USA?

Journal Entry 2005

It looked as if parents at *Colegio Americano* lived by the motto that money can buy you anything, including education qualifications. I think that students saw their parents try tactics akin to bullying of the teachers and bribery of administrators to gain favourable outcomes for their offspring. Therefore, the school’s flexible grading and reporting policies played right into the hands of parental expectations of system manipulability.

**It looked as if... teachers were complicit in unethical practices.**

It was my experience that teachers at *Colegio Americano* held strong opinions about the school’s assessment, grading and reporting policies - none of which were particularly positive. So, it looked as if the teachers faced serious dilemmas and tensions in their daily practice.
For the teachers who had either worked in the school for a long time, or had been working in the American International School circuit for a long time, cynicism and apathy were common reactions to the unique events at Colegio Americano. For these teachers, it looked as if they were prepared to be complicit in the face of unethical behaviour. In fact, one long-timer in the world of international schools said to me with a shrug of his shoulders:

Christine, it is illegal and unethical but it’s Latino and it happens all the time.
Journal Entry 2005

For the young and still idealistic teachers working at Colegio Americano, anger and disgust were two emotions commonly brought to the surface when faced with the unethical grading practices in the school and other examples of the school’s culture of entitlement. I think these teachers found it very difficult to reconcile all the professional, ethical work they were attempting to achieve at the classroom level only to see it undone at the administration level. In some cases, teachers’ anger twisted into quite nasty behaviour directed at the students. I noted this in one journal entry written in the middle of the 2005 school year:

I don’t think the new teachers are adjusting well to the school. I sense meanness in some of their attitudes and one teacher is getting even more out of control. He is worried that his professional reputation will lower if his AP kids don’t do well in the exams and he is frustrated by their lack of academic rigour. This week he has punished the kids for their weaknesses by refusing to teach. Apparently, he has just sat at the front of his class, assigned work on the board and then ignored them. When I broached the subject with him he laughed evilly and told me not to worry because his punishment was only going to be a week long. Today at lunch time when some kids were running down the hill to the canteen, I overheard the same teacher saying to another staff member “wouldn’t it be good if just one of them fell flat on their face?”
Journal Entry 2006

It looked as if teachers felt powerless at Colegio Americano. Powerlessness was a trait I originally shared with many of the staff, especially when I was employed as a teacher at Colegio Americano but also in the early months in my job as a new principal. At that point in time I observed what was going on at Colegio Americano in terms of grading manipulations and the enhancing of report cards, but felt I could not do anything:
It is official, the most horrible thing has happened - grades have been doctored and reports altered to pass [a student] for the year in exchange for her leaving our school and going to a different one. I don't think there is anything I could have done but I still feel like a sell-out on this one.

Journal Entry 2005

I think the main reason I and other foreign staff felt powerless was because we were intimidated by working in a school where we were ignorant of Bolivian laws and our rights within Bolivian employment structures. For local staff I think they also felt intimidated because they fully understood their lack of rights and the fact that many of the parents in the school were extremely powerful.

Parent power manifested in many ways at Colegio Americano. The following is a small section of vignette about an American father who took a dislike to one of his children's teachers and often came to my office to complain and threaten:

The teacher stands accused of screwing up the grades of the director of the Drug Enforcement Authority’s child. The D.E.A boss has made it clear that if unsatisfied by the actions I take to 'reprimand' the teacher he will have to go and speak to his colleagues at the American Embassy. He is implying that the Embassy has the authority to intervene at the school.

Journal Entry 2006

It wasn’t just the teaching staff who felt intimidated by the power of the school. It went all the way up through the ranks, even to the director. Despite SACS accreditation standards stating that all school authority rests in the hands of the school director, at Colegio Americano the director’s authority seemed always to be weak. In the following journal entry I wrote about a situation in the school when a powerful parent wanted his daughter’s failing grades to be changed by the director:

The director had a meeting with a Board member, who also happens to be a lawyer, today. The director thinks that giving Fs to the student will lead to a law suit that we will not win and the target of the suit will include the director. It also seems that if the father does take this legal path then the director could be prohibited from leaving the country because they would put a hold on her passport. The director said she would like to leave school with her head held high but with this over her head she may just have to skulk out the back door of Bolivia.

Journal Entry 2005
When even the director was intimidated, it was natural for all the staff to follow that lead. It looked as if the staff were immobilised in the face of unethical practices. This is what perplexed me the most: despite all our best intentions and irrespective of how many professional development days we spent on authentic assessment theory, if the leader of the school showed weakness then the staff could not really put theories into practice. This immobility was evident in a staff meeting I facilitated in late 2004 where I tried to broach the subject of grade inflation in our marking:

Everyone looked uncomfortable at the idea of being a bit more honest about the marks. I assured them that if we have lots of data to back up our judgments then we the teachers can stand by our evaluation methods. I didn't directly say, in the face of parent hostility… After my opening speech, some of the teachers were comfortable enough in the meeting to half voice the truth - that every long-term teacher in this school boosts marks. Journal Entry 2004

Emerging Theories

As a result of working through the informing stage of Critically Reflective Practice I have developed a set of speculative hunches that are the beginning tools for my theorising. In order to theory-build I have named assumptions that I plan to contest in the following stages of Critically Reflective Practice. These assumptions I articulated by the phrase, ‘it looked as if’:

1. It looked as if the school was practically self-authorising and in this weakly regulated environment Colegio Americano students’ bought advantage and privilege.

2. It looked as if Colegio Americano utilised a flexible grading and reporting system to manipulate the requirements of graduation for both the USA and Bolivia in ways that were problematic in the least and unethical or corrupt at worst.

3. It looked as if the various stakeholders in the school had historically been complicit believing that cheating and rorting is okay so long as the students and the school benefits.

This problem posing made me consider my own agency and when I was promoted to the role of school’s director I had to decide if I was prepared to continue practices that I
considered unacceptable. Once I fully understood what informed the policies of grading and reporting in the school, that knowledge was power. If I didn’t seek to change the policies then I was condoning what had been going on during my tenure at Colegio Americano.

Spurred on by my theorising, Critically Reflective Practice invites me to confront these hunches in the third step of the process and unpack them guided by the literature of critical education theory. So in the following chapter, I return to the wisdom of Smyth and Brookfield and let their understandings help me organise my ideas in a way that intellectually expose the cultural and political influences that operated in Colegio Americano.
One way to think about theory building, which is really what this stage is about, is to see it as a process of reframing your practice in more appropriate ways... It is a process of seeing the situation differently ... [and asking] what is going on here?

Smyth et al., 1999a: 34-5

To [confront is to] understand how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort educational processes and interactions.

Brookfield, 1995: 8
The Story So Far

My critical reflection process began with describing the scene – in this case a small, K-12 American International School, which I refer to with the pseudonym Colegio Americano, located in a small city in Bolivia. In the chapter dedicated to the description process I described Colegio Americano’s community as a microcosm of the city’s elite: rich, local families whose wealth was underpinned by massive land holdings (latifundios), politics and the corrupt benefits that flow from government employment and businesses supported by oligarch connections. Expensive tuition fees made up the lion’s share of funding for the for-profit school so only those who could afford to pay the fees could enrol their children at Colegio Americano. This financial gate-keeping mechanism ensured only the wealthy and privileged attended the school. This included a small group of children from the privileged expatriate community whose mainly American parents resided in Bolivia for aide, missionary or military reasons. Enrolment at Colegio Americano was sought after because the school offered intensive English language instruction and immersion in a US-type schooling environment. These two characteristics were seen as advantageous for the local and expatriate students when compared with Bolivia’s Spanish language schooling environment. Most importantly, because the school was accredited by a globally reaching but USA-based education accreditation organisation, then known as SACS-CASI, this allowed course credits gained in Colegio Americano to be recognised and thus be transferable to other American International Schools and US-homeland schools or colleges. Colegio Americano was an example of the modern American International School brand. It was not an “American Overseas School”, like those described by educational researchers such as Paul Orr in the 1970s where the schools were basically a replica of a typical K-

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4 The regional accreditation organisation, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools’ Council on Accreditation and School Improvement or SACS-CASI, was subsumed into the newly instituted global accreditation organisation AdvancED in 2006.
12 school in the United States, Colegio Americano was a hybrid institution. It offered a dual-diploma curriculum where the school certified its graduating students with an American-type high school diploma and an official high school diploma (bachillera) from Bolivia’s department of education.

The second step in my process of Critically Reflective Practice, or CRP, involved problem-posing. That is, analysing an issue that seemed problematic in Colegio Americano and generating an argument or theory about what informed the practice, in other words, how it was perpetuated. I focused on the grading and reporting practices in Colegio Americano and I opined that the practices were both arbitrary and unethical. To defend my assumptions, I explained the practices in depth and showed how the school had had to recreate two incompatible grading and reporting types (one based on Bolivian requirements and the other from the USA) into a functioning, coherent system. I uncovered how the school’s grading regulations did not actually conform to Bolivia’s education laws despite advertising itself as in complete compliance. Then I showed how the school used US-type assessment, grading and reporting standards as their normal practice and subsequently transferred those results onto the official Bolivian grading and reporting documents in a ‘best-fit’ scenario.

Once I had outlined these practices, I developed the theory that the school’s hybrid nature informed its grading and reporting practices because the dualistic system was unworkable without unethical manipulations to both systems. I demonstrated this theory by providing examples of when the school’s administration failed-to-fail students whose teachers had assigned F grades to them. Afterwards, I outlined the school counsellors’ long-term practice of doctoring school-to-college transcripts to allow students who had
not gained all the credit necessary for high school graduation to graduate by adding fake courses and credits to their official transcripts.

During the first two stages of my critical reflective process, I not only examined how the problematic practices were occurring in Colegio Americano but also considered how those practices affected the school. In my descriptions chapter, I gave an overall observation that Colegio Americano was a troubled school, with low staff morale and hostile relationships between various stakeholders. In my informing chapter, I went on to assert that many students at Colegio Americano were aware of the ethically questionable grading and reporting practices in the school. Then I asserted that this meant that students were having inappropriate lessons modelled to them. I argued that the students were learning a hidden curriculum of sorts and that these covert messages included: that rules are negotiable if you have money or influence; that secrecy and lies are the truth hidden under the veneer of fairness; and that the grades you receive rather than what you have achieved academically really matter.

**Isolation and Exhaustion**

Both Stephen Brookfield and John Smyth argue that at the informing and confronting stages of critical reflection the process should involve “dialogic conversation” with colleagues (Smyth et al., 1999a: 30) because reflection “is an irreducibly social process” (Brookfield, 1995: 141). I found, however, that the controversial nature of my problem-posing, plus the isolated nature of the position I held at Colegio Americano as principal and then director, conspired to deny me the opportunity to seek out collegial support. Brookfield and Smyth directed their suggestions for CRP towards teachers and in adult-education settings; because of this their guiding advice sometimes seemed less pertinent to me and my situation. In fact, going into the confronting stage of this intellectual
journey I began to feel that that the entire process of critical reflection as a principal is an all-together different process to that experienced by teachers. It is my understanding that CRP by principals has not yet been well researched or commonly performed. This may be because the duties that school principals perform on a daily basis are often very solitary and complex endeavours. I found that the problems facing me as a school leader were far more controversial and ethically challenging than any of the chalk-face issues I had read about written by teachers in published critical reflective papers (Progoff, 1992; Sweeney, 1998; Janesick, 2004).

As I started to immerse myself in stage three of CRP I found that when I went to the ‘how-to manuals,’ which are all aimed at the teaching professional, the suggested dialogic processes were not satisfactory for my study. At least Brookfield (1994) also wrote about the “dark side” of CRP and I took some comfort in his acknowledgement that reflective practice can lead to feelings of isolation, self-doubt and uncertainty. Eventually though, I found that what allowed my critical reflection as a school leader to move forward was to continue my solitary journey through the process, but also to allow time and distance to bring about new perspectives.

When I began writing this chapter, it was eighteen months after I had left Colegio Americano and Bolivia and returned to Australia to begin analysing my experiences via the writing of this thesis. While I was writing my journal, my feelings and words were raw and emotional. I was consumed by the story; angry with what was going on in the school and driven to find ways to change it. I was also stressed and physically exhausted by the workload I had inherited when I became director while retaining the principal duties as well. In that pressure cooker environment all I could do was vent - pour out my
feelings in the journal at night and struggle through each day trying to do the best and most I could to lead the school in a more ethical direction:

**Vignette One**: It’s been a few days since I have written as I have been so busy I haven’t had time to write. I am writing this while I am at work because by the time I get home I am exhausted and looking after [my baby] etc. is just as much as I can handle before I flake out each night.

Journal Entry 2006

**Vignette Two**: Work goes on and on, but my thoughts have turned to the end now. I am working each day on the policy manual and the strategic plan and preparing for [the new director’s] arrival. I keep replying to candidates for principal, but nothing concrete yet. I look forward to leaving here and keep day dreaming of time just for me with my baby. However, the next few weeks are still going to be very eventful so it’s more slog before I can actually get out of here.

Journal Entry 2006

Now my life has moved on and I have finally gained the distance and hence perspective needed to reflect on what happened in Colegio Americano during my tenure there with a cooler, more analytical eye. For a long time, I was too close to the data - too emotionally vested in the narrative - to be able to reframe the messages in the stories I was telling in a manner that would shed light on the institutional and cultural forces that were influential in the school:

**Vignette One**: I do not know how much of an effect my tightening up of regulations and grading has had, but I would love to have a way to find out. The pressure from the counsellor, squirming Board members and parents of failed students has been constant and stressful. On Friday, one mum came in to explain that she was not asking me to change her son’s grades, but in reality that is exactly what she was asking. I am prepared to double check all calculations, but that’s it. I wonder what [the new director] will do when he takes over?

Journal Entry 2006

**Vignette Two**: Our school has been in crisis mode for months, I guess, ever since [the last director] left. Ironically, because of that crisis I have been able to work on better aligning Colegio Americano with Bolivian law. This puts the school in a reasonable position. But from all the alarm being raised in the elite community generally, I am suspecting that many of the schools these kids go to are also not in full compliance with the law. In the last couple of weeks, I have felt strong pressure from the Board and the parents to get all grades finished and send them in to [the Bolivian Ministry of Education] as early as possible so as to avoid potential bogey’s that may come up for the school soon.

Journal Entry 2006
When my time at Colegio Americano was in the past, I was in a better ‘head-space’ to subject my theories and assumptions to the interrogation and questioning needed to confront the values that shaped Colegio Americano’s practices without having my own part in the story interfere too blatantly with my process of analysis. Still, I knew I should not do this process completely on my own or, as Lather (1991) argues, I would be in danger of succumbing to a weakness of “praxis-oriented empirical work: imposition and reification on the part of the researcher.” To guard against this she, like Smyth and Brookfield, urges a dialogic enterprise which requires an “interactive approach to research that invites reciprocal reflexivity and critique” (1991: 59). To help me do this, I transformed Smyth and Brookfield’s suggested collegial model of CRP, to a different dialogic approach whereby my PhD supervisors became the “reflective surface” (Smyth, 1999a: 14) I needed to help me build my theorising in an intellectually honest way.

**Stage Three: Confronting**

After several meetings with my supervisors and much discussion and guided reading, I felt ready to begin again. The anthropologist Harry F Wolcott when asked this question at a conference: “What can we learn from a one-off case study?” is attributed with answering, “all you can get” (Wilde, 2006). I appreciate that response and its essence helped me begin the digging that is the confronting stage of CRP. In this stage I seek to understand what were the causes of the unethical grading and reporting practices at Colegio Americano? To answer this question I have had to dig deeply into the meanings of my journal entries and the assumptions I already unearthed during the informing stage of CRP. For me, it is the step where I dig for the why questions: for example; why was the school able to pass failing students? And; why hadn’t anyone put a stop to the school’s fabrication practices?
In asking these questions I move from the surface layer of analysis to a more profound level of theorising. I may have started with the very specific question, “How was Colegio Americano changing grades and fabricating transcripts?” but in this phase, I confront the reasons for the school’s unethical and arbitrary grading and reporting practices. The reasons emerge within complex education theory that I have to unlock over the course of this chapter. In doing this I re-learned that grading is not “an accidental or mindless practice – it has regularities and idiosyncrasies that have to be checked out with others who have produced narrative accounts in the educational literature” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 12).

The confronting stage of CRP crosses the practice/theory divide. By this I mean that having recorded my practice and begun constructing theories about the assumptions that underpinned grading and reporting practice at Colegio Americano, now I subject those theories to examination and questioning to establish their legitimacy (Smyth et al., 1999a: 21). This stage is a highly sophisticated one, and the pages ahead are filled with dense reading about the minutiae of grading theory. Looking back on my completed chapter, I remain staggered at just how technical grading is and how unaware I was of the complexity of the set of causal assumptions I used when practising grading and reporting at Colegio Americano. I admit it has not been a chapter I enjoyed writing but it was worth it. For all the work I had to put in to make the theory coherent and readable I now feel that I have moved another step closer to reflexivity by “penetrating the false consciousness” of my teaching and administration practices (Smyth et al., 1999a: 24).
Corruption

To start this examination, I want to look at the ‘bigger picture’ to see if the theme I have chosen to use, grading and reporting, gets to the heart of the critique I wish to truly highlight about Colegio Americano: its corruption.

When I use the term corruption I realise that the term is a culturally specific one and how I understand the term will differ from others. My definition of corruption evolved through my experiences working at Colegio Americano. In Chapter Five, through a thematic investigation of how the school was actually operating its grading and reporting procedures, I showed that school had not been following what was articulated in its regulations. At the time it seemed quite obvious to me that regulations are written to be followed and when a school does not abide by its own policies it is acting unprofessionally and unethically. The acts I described as unethical were: the changing of failing grades into passing grades; the inclusion of courses not studied in students’ college transcripts; and the social promotion of students in a country that did not condone the practice. All these acts plus the administrations attempts to keep these acts secret led me to a strong conviction that Colegio Americano was corrupt because it was deliberately not following the rules it had created for itself.

The definition of corruption is most commonly as a political or legal term and while I am not a politician or a lawyer but rather a teacher and an academic I stand firm in my use of this political word. When I use the term corruption in my theory-building for the situation at Colegio Americano I enhance my own perception of corruption by identifying with Girling’s (1997) definition of corruption as the mediation of contradictory forces in illegitimate ways. This definition ‘clicked’ with my understanding of how the grading and reporting contradictions I had observed at
Colegio Americano functioned within the school. I had noted that it looked as if the school was trying to incorporate both Bolivian and American education systems together in what I termed a ‘complex mishmash.’ Far more elegantly worded, Girling uses the term ‘contradictory forces’ but the idea is the same: Colegio Americano mediated two education systems that contradicted each other and did so by using unethical and illegitimate practices. In short, the school acted corruptly.

To accuse a school of being corrupt is something that perhaps gives graphic meaning to the CRP term, ‘confronting.’ Despite its provocative possibilities, I believe the following chapter mounts a thorough and evidence based theory that will legitimise my contention.

**Plutocratic Dominance at Colegio America**

Corruption developed in Colegio Americano when staff members chose to take actions that mediated between deeply entrenched pragmatic norms that clashed with altruistic education philosophies. I asked myself why the school’s grading policies were not being followed in practice, that is, why school policy was being corrupted. My answer kept coming down to the choice between the pragmatic realities of each situation versus the meritocratic values embodied in the school’s regulations. The school’s regulations were based on education philosophies grounded in meritocracy: an idealistic notion that in the context of schooling would suggest a school stimulates individual talents and intelligences through hard work and diligence and where the rewards of academic success are merited because they are earned. In contrast to this idea of meritocracy the school also seemed to utilise values based on plutocracy: a pragmatic notion that in the context of schooling where students gain advantage in life from attending a particular school rather than what they learned through the conduits of schooling.
Harris suggests that generally meritocracy works in schools in a flawed manner and this makes me think it may not actually more equitable than the plutocratic alternative:

In more fleshed out form, it claims that children differ in general mental ability or intellectual merit, that the relevant differences can be measured by standardized tests or cognitive or mental ability, and that the demands of school work increase in direct proportion to this particular merit such that the more able one is the longer one can stay on at school mastering increasing difficult and more demanding content. It is then taken to follow that this intellectual merit is a reliable indicator of a person’s productive value, and that schooling thus fairly and properly selects the more able people for the more intellectually demanding jobs: jobs which in turn bring with them high social status, economic and other privileges, and increased life chance along many dimensions. The end result of the merit, as measured by school performance, tends to become indicative of personal merit in a far wider sense, such that a large range of opportunities open up for those who have demonstrated particular capabilities at school.

1982: 106

Given a choice between the two flawed concepts, I and many of the teaching staff, would have preferred Colegio Americano tried to function through the vision of a meritocracy. Yet Colegio Americano was an elite and privileged enclave and so I would argue it was the embodiment of a plutocracy. Plutocracy literally means ‘rule by the rich’ and the term is used to “denote a wide range of situations where a group of individuals are able to exert disproportionate power and influence in society and social institutions because of their wealth” (Drislane & Parkinson, 2008). In specific relation to Colegio Americano I use the term plutocracy to contrast meritocracy and thus to mean that in the school a student’s class, race, gender and wealth dictated opportunity and advantage far more so than their ability, intellect and effort.

It is my argument that meritocracy and plutocracy are oppositional value systems that cannot function together in the one school without them being forced to do so. I think Colegio Americano forced together meritocracy and plutocracy in illegitimate ways and this was the essence of the school’s corruption. Colegio Americano tried to mediate between the concepts of meritocracy and plutocracy, by forcing stakeholders who
functioned in a world of plutocracy to work with stakeholders who believed they were supposed to uphold a meritocratic philosophy in the school.

Power politics ran rampant within the walls of Colegio Americano and various stakeholders’ particular personalities and pedagogic viewpoints had a strong effect on the activities in the school. For example, how long stakeholders have been involved with the school; their levels of English and Spanish language competency; their nationality and familiarity with Bolivian education policy; and other on-the-ground demographics all factored in to who held the most power in Colegio Americano.

For the decade in the school that I had informational access to, it was clearly evident that the people in the roles of Board of Governors, bursar and the school counsellor had much deeper institutional knowledge than the more transient teachers, principals and directors. I believe that the former’s perspectives and priorities were plutocratic in nature because for them business factors held greater influence than educational concerns. In contrast, the teaching staff and principals/directors philosophies of education leaned heavily towards meritocracy. The result of this institutional knowledge power imbalance was that plutocratic values dominated in the school.

For the bursar it was understandable why market forces would hold sway over her approach to school regulations. A bursar is in-charge of finances in a school and in Colegio Americano tuition fees underpinned the school’s survival so the bottom-line in decision making would always come down to a monetary equation. The clientele of the school included many of the city’s oligarchy and one of the bursar’s jobs was to keep the school’s clientele satisfied. To accommodate these clientele expectations the bursar saw Colegio Americano as a place where the rules of the market lead decision making.
To illustrate, take the example that the school offered an English immersion learning environment. In school regulations it was recommended that Spanish as first language students had a functional level of English before coming to the school so that they could integrate quickly and keep up with their age group peers in all academic areas. Irrespective of these educational rationalisations however, if a middle school or high school student was to all intents and purposes functionally illiterate in English but the family was willing to pay the tuition fees then an exception to this recommendation was made every time. Once we understand that profit and market share are dominant forces in the school, it makes sense that the bursar would want to have the school administrators accept any family who could pay to enrol their children in the school irrespective of their English language abilities. Of course, allowing students into the school without the capacity to study at the expected level had enormous repercussions for assessment and grading, and helped to contribute to the flexible criteria for passing students in the school. However, in a plutocracy it doesn’t matter whether an individual is capable, it matters whether they can pay for the privilege of being seen as capable. As far as the bursar was concerned, the school should only consider failing a student if the family ceased to be a good customer, that is, stopped paying fees in a timely manner.

The bursar’s perspective of schooling accords with capitalists’ world view of education. According to Brown and Lauder the market approach to schooling fosters the mentality of the ‘survival of the fittest,’ based on parental choice and competition. Underpinning this world view is the assumption that choice, competition and accountability will raise standards and consumers (students and parents) will pick schools, subjects and courses where there is demand for labour, thus addressing the problem of skill shortages (1997: 176-7).
Now, I may have been horrified by that neo-Darwinian philosophy, as this journal entry illustrates:

Today I had to ask a grade 12 student to go home and not come back until her fees are paid in full. It was horrible and I really, really like the student. She fought back tears as she left and I hated the notion of our snobby, private school for a while…

Journal Entry 2004

Nevertheless, I could afford to be noble in my perspective and align with the philosophy of meritocracy without interrogating the assumptions upon which that alignment was based. I was paid my salary each month no matter how many students were enrolled in the school and irrespective of whether they were paying their tuition fees on time. Noble sentiments do not always align well with business practicalities and with Colegio Americano being a for-profit business, this tension continually forced the balance of decision-making to the side of capital.

For the Board of Governors plutocracy was also an understandable position for them to advocate. The Board of Governors were also the owners of the school and I believe that the fundamental reasons they were involved with Colegio Americano was so that they could increase their wealth by steering the school to expand its market share by enhancing the school’s reputation and prestige. It is irrefutable that in Colegio Americano, the Board of Governors were reluctant to endorse the failure of a student if that meant the parents of the failing student were likely to leave the school and/or publicly disparage the school’s reputation. For the owners/Board of Governors, the school was for-profit so it functioned as a business and its goals were financial efficiency and monetary gain. The owners accepted that the school had regulations which were based on best-practice in education, but they also secretly and quietly made exceptions whenever money could be made in ignoring policy. This meant that in certain circumstances grades were considered commodities to be bought and sold in the
school. Akin to a commercial environment where secrecy and deal-making are normal ways of doing business, I believe that for the Board making a deal to give good grades to children of potentially litigious families was considered an acceptable cost of doing business.

I think Bourdieu (1998a) explains the perspective of the Board of Governors quite well. He views their plutocratic vision as a new kind of neo-Darwinism where it is ‘the brightest and best’ who come out on top. From a Board member’s perspective, the type of students who can afford Colegio Americano deserve their place and this can be explained by a “philosophy of competence according to which it is the most competent who govern and have jobs, which implies those who do not have jobs are not competent.” The fact that there are ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (Bourdieu, 1998a: 42) in Bolivian society is natural and acceptable and conforms to Board members’ class and racial biases.

That the counsellor was also a supporter of plutocracy was less understandable to me at first. During my years working at Colegio Americano I was most frustrated and angry at the school counsellor who seemed to me to be the most immediate agent of the corrupt actions that were going on in the school. Upon reflection, I realise that unconsciously I had thought that the counsellor would align with meritocratic values and be an advocate for student equity. This was a naïve discernment on my part. A school-to-college counsellor is charged with helping students gain entry into college. His/her focus is about advocating for each student by any means necessary to assist that student to get into university. While I may have personally found that willingness to assist students by going as far as manipulating grading and altering reports intolerable, from a dispassionate distance I can also now see why the counsellor at Colegio Americano may
have felt compelled to act that way. I believe that the counsellor understood far better
than I how our school was operating and accepted that passing grades and the granting
of graduation diplomas were all an expected part of the high tuition fees each family
paid.

The acts done by the counsellor were necessary in the standoff between meritocracy and
plutocracy that was going on in the school. His position and years of experience in the
school, and his forceful personality made him a powerful human agent. At Colegio
Americano, the school-to-college counsellor had a great deal of autonomy in his
position. His line manager was the director of the college and his was a position of trust
and authority. What the counsellor did behind his closed office door was protected by
an ethic of confidentiality. He did not need any authorisation to send off college
applications on behalf of students and the specific design and information put down in
transcripts were his responsibility alone. Under these conditions it is easy to see how the
counsellor was able to act corruptly. Furthermore, in the plutocratic climate it is also
understandable why he was able to act in the manner that he did - with the endorsement
of the bursar and Board of Governors.

A Gentleperson’s D

The acts of corruption that the counsellor enacted were the illegitimate attempts to
mediate between plutocracy and meritocracy. Nevertheless, I do not think that the
counsellor was an evil aberration who masterminded unethical actions on his/her own.
The school was an American international school and I think the counsellor looked to
the American school system to learn what schools in the USA do to mediate between
meritocracy and plutocracy.
I believe that the counsellor imported an upper class education ‘tradition’ commonly known as the “gentleman’s C” into Colegio Americano. This tradition emerged over a hundred years ago in the USA’s Ivy League colleges where unwritten policy allowed, in extraordinary circumstances, wealthy students to be passed with a C grade rather than fail the sons of powerful alumni and risk their ire. In that environment of wealth and privilege, “the cultivation of gentility… was pursued to the exclusion of virtually all other values (and) the prevailing attitude toward scholarship was at best one of indifference, as symbolized by the concept and reality of the “gentleman’s C” (Steinberg, 1974: 14). This tradition seems to be still in use in contemporary America as evidenced by President George W Bush when he proudly stated at the 2001 Yale commencement address, “And to the C students, I say, you too can become president of the United States.” I believe therefore that the gentleman’s C reflected common practice in the system upon which the school modelled itself and realising this it is little wonder the counsellor felt comfortable advocating a “gentleperson’s D” for students at Colegio Americano.

**Meritocracy: Advocating a Myth**

Corruption can only occur when two value systems clash. If the school’s plutocratic ideals had not only held sway with the above mentioned stakeholders, but had also been accepted by the teaching staff then the school could have written into their regulations a grading and reporting policy acceptable to the plutocracy. I can imagine an evaluation standard that might be stated something like this:

> The school uses a comprehensive assessment system to evaluate student learning and to ensure all students gain the necessary passing grades needed to move on to the next level of education.  
> In fulfilment of this standard, the school:  
> 1. Employs a letter grading system A-D; and assigns those grades based on a student’s level of learning from exceptional (A) to emerging (D).  
> 2. Imparts assessment results in a timely manner for all students after the Bursar has signed off on tuition form B indicating all fees have been paid in full for the school year.
If the above imaginary standard seems facetious, I think that is because it contradicts so well the common assumption that schools are bastions of meritocracy. Meritocracy is not something that is often consciously enunciated in official school documents and yet its ideals are there permeating every aspect of the school’s regulations. The idea is strong but the reality is warped as a pseudo-meritocracy masquerades as equality of opportunity for students (Sacks, 2000).

I believe the essential nature of meritocracy is embodied in the role of a teacher; so much so, that I do not believe any teacher would ever accept an assessment and evaluation regulation like the one I created above. This is a reflection I have had to confront in trying to untangle the web of deceit that Colegio Americano tried to get teachers to accept, and which they unreservedly would not endorse. This is because I have come to believe that most teachers consciously or unconsciously work as meritocrats: advocates of a meritocratic system.

The concept of meritocracy has been around for a long time and has influenced philosophers, politicians and social commentators from across the world. For example, Confucius (551-479 BC) held that “in teaching there should be no distinction of classes” (Analects XV. 39. tr. Legge) and the phrase “la carrière ouverte aux talents” (careers open to talent) is attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte. In American politics meritocracy has been a central tenet of governance from pre-revolutionary times. In John Locke’s The Second Treatise on Civil Government (1690) he argued that society was acceptably stratified only if this hierarchy came about through men’s individual labouring and John Adams and Thomas Jefferson championed a similar view of how a democracy should
rest on the shoulders of a “natural Aristocracy among men; the grounds of which are Talent and Virtue” (document 62, 1813).

Meritocracy has not been so long entrenched in education. In fact for many centuries scholarly pursuits were only accessible to rich and powerful males. Nevertheless, since at least the mid twentieth century K-12 education became not only open to, but compulsory for, all children almost universally. So the idea of schools as defenders of fair competition and anti-discriminatory opportunity has become so accepted that teachers impart this myth to students without hesitation. They underpin their pedagogic practices on the belief that they are providing equality of opportunity for all students. I acknowledge that teachers and education administrators operate within a perhaps unrealistic but noble ivory tower mind-set. Many of us choose to work in the profession for altruistic motivations, believing we contribute to the promotion of civic-minded, well rounded individuals who are holistically educated in a manner that promotes lifelong learning. Still, this mind-set is so intrinsic that when it comes to grading and reporting practices in a school, I believe teachers and educational administrator expect that the system will ‘naturally’ be of a meritocratic type. In fact, I cannot imagine a scenario where teachers accept that meritocratic ideals are indispensable for some school types but not others.

My theory is that teachers accept that they are expected to assign grades to all students as a part of their job and in doing so have to continually switch between being a coach and facilitator of learning to an examiner of acquired knowledge. Assigning grades is emotionally stressful to do but ultimately, to be able to grade students, teachers must have faith in the grading system they are using. I do not believe that any teacher is ever comfortable assigning F grades to a student who does not meet the standards set down
in criteria. I also believe that teachers dislike assigning a fail to a student because it means giving up on a student’s potential and perhaps also reflects failure on the teacher’s ability to teach that student. Nonetheless, if a teacher has gone out of their way to support and mentor a struggling student but the student has still not been able to achieve to the standards expected, then the teacher will ultimately accept that an F is the professionally appropriate mark to assign to the student. When a teacher knows that they did everything professionally possible to get the student to the standard, but forces outside of their influence (e.g. excessive absences or illness) meant that the student failed to achieve the intended learning outcome satisfactorily, then the arguments supporting a meritocratic system makes it imperative that the student be scored accurately and that a teacher is allowed to utilise all of the possible grades – passing and failing grades.

I believe in Colegio Americano the teaching staff and educational administrators accepted their roles with the above expectations in mind. In teacher education classes at universities worldwide, teaching professionals are taught to value grading and reporting practices that uphold scrupulous academic integrity. To do this, grading procedures need to have: probity; be communicable; and effectively relay information about student learning. I also think expectations and values remain the same for teachers in whichever education system they find themselves working. It seems ludicrous to imagine teachers accepting that in public education grading must adhere to high ethical principles but in a for-profit institution they can judge students in less professional ways. At Colegio Americano the teachers were expected to grade students meritocratically, but were also expected to stand by and silently accept when exceptions were made for some students. Teachers may have felt helpless to do anything about it, but they were not silent about their opposition to the practice.
**Human Agency**

The reflections so far have really been about human agency. Aronowitz and Giroux in *Education Under Siege* argue that human agency is a powerful factor in understanding “whether there is a substantial difference between the existence of various structural and ideological modes of domination and their actual unfolding and effects” (1985: 71). Certainly, within *Colegio Americano* I saw two opposing ideological modes of domination; one guided by plutocracy and the other meritocracy. While the written regulations adopted in the school may have been embedded with the values of meritocracy, because the power, or agency, of the group who advocated plutocracy was stronger in the school, what actually unfolded at *Colegio Americano* was that when the regulations could not accommodate privileged students’ needs the regulations were subverted.

This subversion was directly performed by human agents who knew they were choosing to act illegitimately (corruptly) because they considered it necessary. In agreement with resistance theory that considers the “perceived legitimacy of [a] school and its teachers and the development of oppositional culture” (Erickson, 1987: 335), I believe that human agency was an important part of the reason why *Colegio Americano*’s administrators acted unethically when grading and reporting some students. I can imagine, for example, if the counsellor had had a weaker personality or if the teachers had advised the director more forcefully about their knowledge of the corrupt practices, then the situation in the school may not have led to grade fabrications and report falsifications. Faced with the combined power of the backers of plutocracy in the school, the only local human agent who could have done something to challenge the school’s modus operandi was the director of *Colegio Americano*. However, over the decade of records that I had access to, none of the people in that role ever interfered.
I think there were several reasons for this. Firstly, Colegio Americano had a long history of very short-term tenures for directors and principals and this helped to enhance the real power of the counsellor whose tenure was traditionally far longer. As the longer serving staff member, the counsellor was most often the confidant and advisor to each new director and directors quickly placed their trust in him or her. As the corrupt acts had been carefully hidden, though oft repeated, directors would have needed to be specifically looking for a trail of grade and transcript alterations to uncover the corruption. But they remained ignorant because the only way for a new director to be advised of such a need would have had to come from a trusted advisor, such as the counsellor.

The second reason why I believe the directors did not interfere with the plutocratic influences in the grading and reporting policies in Colegio Americano was because as the educational leader of a school frequently in crisis mode, his or her energy was spent on other areas such as hiring staff, maintaining accreditation compliance and chasing up school resources delayed or lost en route to the school. When I read back over my own journal entries I notice that when I was a principal and then the director of the school my days were filled with a multiplicity of tasks and meetings. The workload was so intense that I normally could only focus on the immediate priorities in the school to do with maintaining a smoothly functioning school on a day to day basis.

My experiences as an administrator in Colegio Americano were very similar to all those directors and principals who came before me in the school going back at least a decade. They too worked as crisis managers and often found themselves without a second administrator to share duties. In reading through ten years worth of directors’ reports to
the Board, I repeatedly read of the same problems with staffing, resources and many other issues that kept all of my predecessors firmly focused on their present. Thus they were unable to take the time to focus on changing school culture or delve into carefully hidden unethical practices. When other examples of problematic grading or reporting for students arose, and there was a surprisingly long history of examples of students facing failure who ended up not failing, I found no follow up action documented in later reports. From this, I discern that my predecessors excused the corrupt dealings as aberrations and rarities not worth spending further time investigating.

In a seminal article written some twenty years ago, Giroux and McLaren (1986) discussed transformative intellectuals and the avowedly political and social functions of intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971). They set out a case for reconstituting teachers’ work in more socially critical and democratic ways and I believe implicitly argued for a style of teaching derived from principles that meritocratic supporters also aim towards. The flaws in meritocracy emerge from a lack of human agency due to a naive understanding that fairness and equality can emerge from a teaching style that does not include critique. In their words teachers are:

... bearers of critical knowledge, rules and values through which they consciously articulate and problematize their relationship to each other, to students, to subject matter, and to the wider community. This view of authority exposes and challenges the dominant view of teachers as primarily technicians or public servants whose role is to implement rather than to conceptualize pedagogical practice. Moreover, the category of emancipatory authority dignifies teachers’ work by viewing it as an intellectual practice with respect to both its formal characteristics and the nature of the content discussed. Teachers’ work becomes a form of intellectual labor opposed to the pedagogical division between conception and practice, and production and implementation, that are currently celebrated in a number of educational reforms. The concept of teacher as intellectual carries with it the political and ethical imperatives to judge, critique and reject those approaches to authority that reinforce the technical and social division of labour that silences and disempowers both teachers and students. In other words, emancipatory authority is a concept which demands that teachers and others critically confront the ideological and practical conditions which enable or constrain them in their capacity as transformative intellectuals.

Culture of Grading

While the clash between the plutocratic and meritocratic values of the human agents in Colegio Americano certainly contributed to the corruption that occurred in the school’s grading and reporting, I started to discern that a dialectic comparison between plutocracy and meritocracy was too simplistic an explanation to fully account for the school’s modus operandi. I began to think about the systems within the school and the concept of ‘structural reproduction’ argued by Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) as a factor to be considered when confronting education outcomes. I wondered if perhaps the corruption in grading and reporting that I had highlighted for analysis in Colegio Americano were symptomatic of deeper structural problems in the school rather than being rare examples of corrupt action for a few students each year.

Reading back again through my journal entries, this time with an eye on the regulations rather than exceptions to them, I noticed how more so than in any school I had worked, I found that parents in Colegio Americano placed extreme emphasis on the grades their children received in their reports. The following vignette is but one example from many encounters I had as principal:

I had a mother come in and harangue me for a good 20 minutes about her son’s math grade and how his 94% was unfair and how I should change it to 100%. I refused to do so, as I had already investigated the issue and found myself completely siding with the teacher’s record book. She left my office still angry and stating that my decision was unjust and the teacher was incompetent and in error.

Journal Entry 2005

From my own classroom teaching experience I had also found that the majority of students I had taught mirrored their parents’ preoccupation with grades, their grade-point-average and their percentile rank in their year group. From these observations, I wanted to find out why grading was such a vital issue for students and parents? And also find out if it was true that students’ grades were viewed as negotiable by parents?
I began to delve into the structures underpinning the system of grading in the school to try and understand if the grading system at Colegio Americano was also contributing to a climate of acceptance of ‘flexible’ practices. It had seemed obvious to me that because plutocracy makes a mockery of a teacher’s capacity to legitimately attempt to have all students earn their credentials through scholarship, in contrast meritocracy would facilitate scholarship in a school. If this was not true, then I had to wonder if the corrupt practices in the school were being facilitated not only because plutocracy and a utopian vision of meritocracy were clashing in the school, but also because an inconsistent grading regime was so embedded.

Colegio Americano was pervasively a norm referencing environment and the school was steeped in a culture of grading. It constantly ranked and sorted the students and made judgements about which students were better than others. For example, in each year level, the top three students in academic ranking received 10% off their tuition for the following year; at the high school level students with a GPA of 3.2 or higher were invited to join the school’s chapter of the National Honor Society; and at graduation ceremonies the valedictorian and salutatorian positions were greatly anticipated and fought for by the high achieving students. These examples are hardly extraordinary and particularly in an American International School, “no matter how an education system is organised, some people will always want to make comparisons between the achievements of learners. In some situations this is almost impossible to avoid” (Killen, 2005, 138). By concentrating on the grades the students and parents in Colegio Americano were responding appropriately to the system as a whole. They had “been trained to think that the point of going to school is to get A’s” (Kohn, 2002, B7) and
pursuing A’s fit right into Colegio Americano’s culture of privilege and entitlement because “the essence of grading is exclusiveness” (Scocca, 1998).

As an educator I was dismayed at the intensive grade focus that was the pervading culture of each classroom in Colegio Americano. I believed it went against the ethos the teachers were using to justifying their grading practices. I thought the primary purpose of grading was as a tool to measure learning; it wasn’t supposed to be the tool that students and parents fixated on. In hindsight, I think I assumed then that if I could stop students and parents focusing on grades, the school would be a better institution. The actions I focused on in my first year as a principal reflected my desire to change the grading culture in the school – but cultural change did not come to the school as resistance from stakeholders remained intransigent.

For me, grading was an objectionable pedagogic practice but as it was such an entrenched reality of schooling per se I had not considered its complexities. Nor had I made much distinction between grading and assessment. I can now see that I had assumed that the processes of assessment and grading were pretty straightforward and interchangeable. I thought grading should be reliable, valid, fair and measurable and I thought authentic assessment would lead to a grading system that embodied those four characteristics. Yet I had never interrogated those terms and even as I tried to get other staff to follow my lead, I never stopped to consider whether reliability, validity and measurability – let alone fairness – were even possible to achieve at Colegio Americano.

**Standards-Based Assessment**

Looking back into where my assumptions had been generated, I found that they emerged from my work on curriculum coordination at Colegio Americano and in the
tasks the director had set me to improve the school’s assessment practices in the second month of my principalship. While I have mentioned the following vignettes in previous chapters, I want to go back over this area in more detail to analyse why my own struggles against the prevailing forces of grading in the school was so flawed. In my earliest journal entries, in September 2004, I recorded the following observations:

I am … investigating the school’s assessment practices and next week the director and I will work on evaluation guidelines for the whole school.

In the afternoon, the director and I started discussing the first month of curriculum mapping and questions of evaluation and assessment. After a while, we realised we both don’t yet have a clear idea of HOW we can get what we want implemented. So we eventually decided to do some individual thinking and research and will re-meet on the issue on Wednesday.

Journal Entries 2004

In my personal study into curriculum coordination, I became convinced that the latest theories and best-practice pedagogy around the globe advocated standards in assessment (Sadler, 1987; Wiggins 1991; Killen, 2003). I became convinced that standards-based assessment would be more suitable for Colegio Americano than the hodgepodge of evaluation techniques the staff had been utilising up to that point. At the next meeting I found that the director concurred with my position:

After class I had a meeting with the director to finalise the plan for this afternoon's staff development session on assessment and grading. I like the opportunities to do these staff workshops, but am wary of going into the dangerous territory of grading practices. We decided that the director would do a spiel about accreditation requirements on school improvement and how the process includes putting recommendations into practice. She wanted to use a heavy-ish tone on the topic and step in on the discussion if the topic bogged down in a circular discussion about the symbols rather than the descriptors of grades. We decided that if our teachers are going to grade without fear of censure by the parents, we need to stick together and support each other by having a solid set of standards to follow.

Journal Entry 2004

The above journal entry clearly shows how I did not separate out grading from assessment and how I assumed standards would impact on grades and vice-versa. Colegio Americano went on to adopt a type of standards-based assessment system that used curriculum standards as criteria in each subject taught. It included year-level
descriptors that we believed were concise, specific and measurable. The unique, school based system was created in consultation with the whole faculty by choosing eclectically from what was considered the best standards or benchmarks used throughout the world. At no point in our staff development did we discuss how the standards, or end of year descriptors, would gel with the grading systems we were using in the school’s reports.

I had believed that in a standards referenced environment students would be judged on their individual learning. But teacher judgements happened within a system that still translated meeting a standard into a grade from A-F and therefore teachers could not just decide whether their students had met a standard, they had to also compare each student’s achievement with other students. As a result, a grade oriented, norm-referencing environment continued in the school.

I had felt comfortable setting up a framework that used standards as the criteria upon which we assessed the students because Outcomes Based Education, or OBE, (Willis and Kissane, 1997) had been the dominant philosophy in K-12 schools for over a decade in Australia and therefore a system I was comfortable with. Likewise, as an American, the then director was also comfortable with the use of standards, as many school districts in the USA had also been using a similar methodology to OBE known as competency-based training, since at least the 1980s (Hodge, 2007: 180) and then its 1990s refinement commonly coined as the ‘standards movement’ (Alderson & Martin, 2007: 165). However, I see now that neither of us had the expertise in, or familiarity with, grade theory to have asked the ‘right’ questions that were needed at that point to complement our new curriculum and assessment policy with a grading system to match it.
In adopting a standards-based approach to curriculum and assessment improvement at Colegio Americano, I believed that those areas in the school’s operation would be improved because criteria for the work judged would be made explicit and transparent. With such openness, I thought teachers would feel secure changing over to a standards-based system on the understanding that this kind of assessment would show the extent to which students had achieved intended learning outcomes. I also made, what I thought was a logical leap – that the new standards based-assessment would be a robust defence if needed when parents questioned grading decisions at the school.

The flaw in my logic extended to professional development sessions that I ran for the staff, where I actually argued that using standards-based referencing in assessment would translate into grading and reporting that was now better aligned with my four aspirational characteristic: fairness, reliability, validity and measurability! In earlier faculty workshops I had uncovered a wide variance in judgements that individual teachers held of what a high grade equalled. Some teachers included behaviour and attendance in their overall grading calculations; others insisted only academic considerations were factored in to their grading practices; and yet even with those teachers who had narrowed their grading measurement to academic factors there were still variances in many areas including weighting, decisions on whether to include formative and summative assessments in the calculations; scaling and the use of bell-curves. I presented my arguments forcefully to the staff, confidently asserting that changing to a standards-based assessment policy would resolve teachers’ grading inconsistencies. I did this because even the literature I had studies assured me that:

“Having clear criteria and standards can
• Save time in the grading process
• Allow you to make the process consistent and fair…
• Save you from having to explain your criteria to students after they have handed in their work, as a way of justifying the grades they are contesting…”
• Help team teachers or teaching assistants grade student papers consistently


Backed up by these academics’ justifications, I did not question their assertions that grading would become a simple process if we implemented a standards-based approach to grading. When I was tasked with unifying the whole staff’s grading practices into one coherent process, I workshopped the teachers in the so-called ‘authentic assessment toolbox’ (Mueller, 2006) which detailed the use of rubrics and descriptors; growth, progress and evaluation portfolios; differentiated assessment methods; and, backward design curriculum planning. With the unwavering support and guidance from the director, I had become convinced of the merit all of these assessment tools and was again swayed by the literature that argued these techniques “give better access to the truth about what’s happening in classrooms” (Hayes-Jacobs, 2004: 2) and are “for educators interested in enhancing student understanding and in designing more effective curriculums and assessments to promote thinking” (McTighe & Wiggins, 2001: 3).

The literature was convincing but what I had failed to discern, and what these advocates of standards had also not argued clearly in their findings, was that assessment and grading are separate entities in the pedagogy of evaluation. Their arguments advocating standards and authentic assessment focus on assessment. That is, the systematic scrutiny of student generated assignments, projects and tests and its benefits for teachers, such as making “appropriate instructional decisions” (Killen, 2005: 118). The impact of standards and authentic assessment on actual grading, that is, reporting the result of a teacher’s evaluation of a student’s performance in the form of a mark, was largely overlooked in the literature.
As I focused on what seemed to be an omission in the arguments for standards-based evaluation, I read through the literature and looked for explicit information about grading procedures in standards-based assessment. I came across the following statement in Walvoord and Johnson Anderson’s text, *Effective Grading: a tool for learning and assessment* that seemed to me to reflect the general consensus view amongst researchers in this field regarding assessment of versus assessment for learning:

> When we speak of grading, we are not referring to a process of merely bestowing isolated artifacts or final course marks. Rather, we are referring to the process by which a teacher assesses student learning through classroom tests and assignments, the context in which good teachers establish that process, and the dialogue that surrounds grades and defines their meaning to various audiences. Grading then, includes tailoring the test or assignment to the learning goals of the course, establishing criteria and standards, helping students acquire the skills and knowledge they need, assessing students learning over time, shaping student motivation, feeding back results so students can learn from their mistakes, communicating about students’ learning to the students and other audiences, and using results to plan future teaching methods. When we are talking grading, we have student learning most in mind.

1998: 1

While the authors’ justifications are compelling and ‘feel good’ in tone (who wouldn’t want student learning to be most in mind?), I believe that the dismissive nature of the first sentence I quoted is actually a significant and common oversight in this field. The reason I believe this, is because even when the change to standards-based assessment was incorporated into Colegio Americano’s grading practices, the students and their parents did not start focusing on learning experiences; they continued focusing on grades as isolated artefacts.

This phenomenon has been studied by academics who critique the measurement/testing industry and question its affects learning in schools, such as Bracey (2002) and Meier (2002). As an educator I might have wanted a standards-based assessment system to move the school in a direction that meant all the stakeholders would focus more
strongly on student learning, but I had confused terminology and purposes. I think Jonathon Warren explained it clearly in his paper, *The Continuing Controversy over Grades*: 

\[
\text{…evaluating the student’s work and discussing it with her - the parts of the grading process that are so important to learning - can take place without any concern for grading at all. This confusion between evaluation and grading is the source of many vehement assertions in the literature that grading is essential to student learning. Evaluation is essential; grading is not.}
\]

1975: 8

I believe Warren was arguing that evaluation is the verb in assessment because evaluation encompasses the entire process of diagnostic, formative and summative testing, marking, giving feedback and reporting progress. In contrast, grading is only one part of that process and its function is not justified by the ones used by standards-based assessment advocates. That is, to enhance learning. Another academic who summarises this revelation skillfully is Alfie Kohn when he states a “grade orientation and a learning orientation on the part of students tend to be inversely related” (2002: B7).

It is at this point in my search for understanding of why *Colegio Americano* had been failing to fail students and fabricating transcript credits, when I started to realise just how complex and confusing grading can be. I was still certain that the blatant grade fabrication and transcript falsification that had gone on in the school was obviously wrong because it condoned the message that some children could be treated advantageously without deserving or earning their achievements. Nevertheless, I could now appreciate that those incidents might have been the result of pragmatism in the school. The grading system at *Colegio Americano* was conceptually pluralised and thus subject to varied, and even antithetical, interpretations. While I don’t empathise with *Colegio Americano’s* culture of avoidance, I can imagine that many previous directors,
aware of the grading quagmire at the school did not want to be the “whistle blowers on
the culture of stasis – the collective agreement not to rock the boat by asking awkward
questions or doing things differently” (Brookfield, 2006: 97).

Grading Theory Complexity

At Colegio Americano grading was filled with complexities that were interwoven in the
school’s grading system but were not obviously apparent when reading the written
policy. I do not have the space or ability to provide a comprehensive examination of all
the grading issues that arose when trying to integrate standards-based assessment tools
into a system that utilises A-F grades, but I want share a final list of examples here that
solidified my understanding that while grades are well-known, convenient and almost
universally accepted they can also be highly complex mathematical aggregations that
require “more discrimination than can be reliably made by most teachers” (Terwilliger,

One problem of overlaying a standards based assessment system on top of an A-F
grading system is that Outcomes Based Education (OBE) supposedly “eliminates the
concept of failure” (Donnelly, 2007: 190) because “the idea that some students can learn
well and others cannot is alien to the philosophy of outcome based education” (Killen,
2005: 138). The literature advocates “all students can achieve learning outcomes of
significance so long as the conditions necessary for their success are met” (Willis &
Kissane, 1995: 3). Without getting too embroiled in the merits of the above assertions, it
does seem clear that in Colegio Americano we were trying to overlay this potentially
non-failing system on the top of an A-F grading structure that allowed failure. It is not
hard for me to see why this inevitably resulted in the need for collusionary tactics to be
used in Colegio Americano to meld the two incompatible philosophies together.
Even if the school could have reconciled a non-failing and failing regime into a consistent system, the problems continue because:

In outcomes-based assessment it is often said that the principal reason for assessment is so that we will know whether or not learners have achieved the outcomes we wanted them to achieve. This view of assessment is unfortunate because it can mislead teachers into thinking it is possible to make clear distinctions between those learners who have achieved certain outcomes and those who have not. It becomes obvious there is no clear cut-off between achieving and not achieving the outcome.

Killen, 2005: 115

This argument made me realise that while there are ways to enable a standards based assessment system to be calibrated in ways that provides measurements with numerical cut-offs that represent letter grades this “relies on relatively sophisticated statistical and technological solutions to the problem of grading students according to their actual achievements” (Sadler, 1987: 192). To delineate a cut-off between passing and failing to meet a standard, Colegio Americano would have had to decide on an arbitrary measure that all staff could agree on. However, to achieve homogeneity in a cut-off point, a school would need many resources to which Colegio Americano did not have access. These include (but are not limited to), a bank of exemplars for each standard; a highly stable workforce; on-going teacher moderation sessions; extensive practical training from expert assessors; and reliable technology and technological support. Since the school did not have these support resources, Colegio Americano’s teachers individually decided on where their cut-off point was in each of their classes. This individualised treatment was a major weakness that various stakeholders exploited.

Another issue pertinent to the grading situation at Colegio Americano emerged from my reading of Killen who argued that “when students from one culture are assessed by teachers from another culture there is a possibility that the assessment will be inappropriately culturally biased and the conclusion drawn by the teacher will be unfair” (2005: 122). Research in this area is convincing and covers cultural bias in regards to
gender, language proficiency, prior knowledge and experience, being test-wise, meta-cognitive skills, areas of intelligence strengths, cognitive styles and personality factors (Poortinga, 1995; Van de Vijver & Tanzer, 1997; Constantino et al., 2007). When I understood how multifaceted bias can be, it again helped explain to me why I was naive in my assumption that translating assessments into grades would be straightforward in Colegio Americano. Furthermore, I believe that the issue of bias in grading was yet another reason why parents felt that grades could be negotiated at Colegio Americano.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this chapter I argued that corruption can only occur when incompatible systems attempt to function together. Throughout this chapter I have been making the case that corruption at Colegio Americano developed as a result of the clash between the philosophy of meritocracy and plutocracy at the school. The specific theme I analysed to reveal this fight was about standards-based assessment not being compatible with the school’s inconsistent and complex grading philosophies.

In this chapter I have started to understand why the school accommodated dubious grading and reporting practices from the perspective of human agency, school-based power politics and technical procedures of assessment and grading. But this chapter’s confrontation with grading complexity is only a preliminary step in truly uncovering the nature of Colegio Americano’s corruption. In chapter seven I continue my confrontation stage of Critically Reflective Practice. I want to dig deeper and step back from the immediacy of Colegio Americano’s vignettes and explore the education and social context at the national level. I want to discover why the school was allowed to operate with very little Bolivian government oversight and understand why Colegio Americano ‘got away with’ its action year in and year out. After that I want to confront any issues
that the international schooling system may have that might help to explain why
Colegio Americano’s corrupt practices were accommodated. Only after all that is
achieved will I have completed this phase of theory-building.
Seeking to locate or situate teaching in a broader cultural, social and political context amounts to engaging in critical reflection... [as] less of an isolated set of technical procedures and more of a historical expression of shaped values about what is considered important about the nature of the educative act.

Smyth, 1989: 491

As some see it, privilege is obscene. It bears the stain of advantage and superiority that is unconscionable... and thus the heightened probability of its possessors attaining disproportionate opportunity, power, resources and the like.

Peshkin, 2001: 92
Introduction

In chapter six I interrogated the local, or institutional–level, factors that helped locate the grading and reporting practices at Colegio Americano within a broader theoretical context. I argued that the reasons why Colegio Americano failed to fail students and also fabricated course credits on students’ school-to-college transcripts emerged as a result of pragmatic decisions to utilise collusionary practices to try and get clashing value systems to work together in the school. I looked at the clash between meritocracy and plutocracy on campus and suggested that the teachers’ faith in meritocracy that underpinned their assessment and grading practices was a myth that was continually challenged by the more pervasive plutocratic ideals held by all other stakeholders.

In looking at these school-level reasons why Colegio Americano functioned the way it did, I realised that “considerations of power undergird, frame and distort educational processes and interactions” (Brookfield, 1995: 8). I argued that the most powerful stakeholders at Colegio Americano were the Board of Governors, the school bursar and the school counsellor. Together, this group endorsed plutocratic values and were largely successful in distorting education regulations to the extent of granting unfair advantage for the wealthy, upper-class students at Colegio Americano.

Then I delved into the complexities of grading and confronted my own naivety in fallaciously assuming that a standards-based assessment policy could motivate a learning orientation in a school that was pervasively grade oriented. In taking account of the complexity of institutional practices within Colegio Americano, I was able to untangle the entrenched assumptions and misconceptions that I had made about what underpinned the school’s grading and reporting practices. By doing this, I was able to show that because I had not clearly understood grading theory while I tried to lead the
school in a more meritocratic direction, this flaw in understanding conspired against my attempts to change entrenched school practices.

The content covered in chapter six was only the beginning step in the confronting stage of critical reflection. I argued that what I observed as corrupt grading and reporting practices at Colegio Americano occurred because of my interaction with “situated, languaged practices, which influence not only how we think, but how we act and the kind of world we enact through these action, mainly in a non-reflective dynamic” (Traverso-Yepez, 2008: 158).

Mezirow calls for perspective transformation via critical reflection through the integration of experience (1996: 163). At this stage of CRP, I intend to integrate more than just my school based experiences into my theorising, so that “problematic frames of reference” (Mezirow, 2003: 58), in this case the corrupt grading and reporting practices at Colegio Americano, can be re-framed from a thorough understanding of the interlocking relations of power and socio-cultural factors that asserted influence on the school. In other words, the confronting stage of Critically Reflective Practice, or CRP, cannot end at the school-level of analysis, since Colegio Americano functioned within and was accountable to larger education and socio-political systems and authorities.

**Racism and Privilege**

Despite Colegio Americano’s attempts to be seen as quite separate from its surroundings, I want to show here that the school was in fact enculturated in Bolivian norms and values. I have theorised that plutocracy dominated in Colegio Americano, and I have learned now that plutocracy reflected an enshrined value in Bolivia that emerged far back in its history. Racism and the privilege it bestows on some at the
expense of others underpin plutocratic values. Racism is endemic in Bolivian society and historians have traced this to the fact that Bolivia became a colony of the Spanish empire more than five hundred years ago (Webber, 2005; Gilly, 2008). Colonial practices “dictated the land, civil and political rights of individuals in New Spain on the basis of their skin color, race, ethnicity and national origin” (MacDonald & Nilles, 2007: 202).

Spanish racial attitudes left an indelible mark on Bolivia’s cultural identity and after independence was won in the early 1800s racism and classism continued and in fact became even more entrenched. Criollos (people of Spanish descent but born in Latin America) exploited the Indigenous “with even freer rein than before” (Luykx, 1999: 21) by using Indigenous labour to accumulate great family riches of land and raw materials. Despite Simon Bolívar’s vision (1819) of modern republics founded on Enlightenment and liberal principles, a small oligarch of families strengthened their control in Bolivia through inherited wealth, extreme coercion, legal manipulation and violent confrontation when necessary.

Throughout the following two centuries, Bolivia’s wealth distribution remained extremely polarised and institutional racism was manifest throughout society. From my own observations, and those of researchers who have come before me, I would argue that racism and privilege in Bolivia have changed little since the days of colonial disparity:

> When the Spanish Empire closed up shop there in 1825, the Europeans who stayed on didn’t seem to notice – and still don’t. Even within Latin America, the region with the greatest wealth inequality in the world, according to the World Bank, “is considered one of the most corrupt… [and] it’s also divided along a razor sharp racial edge.”

Powers, 2005: A13
Bolivia contains a variety of sub-cultures separated by language and skin colour distinctions. As Webber argued, there is a “wickedly steep social hierarchy that whitens in accordance with class privilege” (2005: 34). Despite a tumultuous and bloody history in Bolivia, that has included war, a social revolution, military dictatorships and a recent period of neoliberal domination, class inequities have been unrelenting and even in the twenty-first century a “pigmentocracy of power continues” (Powers, 2005: A13).

Colegio Americano reflected this pigmentocracy and valued whiteness quite blatantly, for example, when it came to hiring staff members:

Today I spent from 11:00-1:00 with the Board president and Board treasurer. We spent an hour with a potential counsellor candidate, for the next school year. Her name is ____ and I think she is from [another Bolivian city]. She is fully qualified and very experienced and she would be a bargain, because she is willing to accept an incredibly low salary, internationally speaking. I think she could be an excellent addition because of her local knowledge base and proficiency in Spanish and English, but the Board members were openly uncomfortable hiring a local person for the counsellor’s job and were quite hostile during the meeting. When she left the room after the interview was finished the first thing the treasurer commented on was her skin colour – which is dark. I didn’t catch the exact meaning of the Spanish phrase she used, but it was clear to me it was condescending.

Journal Entry 2006

The extremely hierarchical nature of Bolivian society was from the beginning sanctioned by an education system that “reflected the Spanish culture’s close association of education with religion (Catholicism) and its perception of education as a privilege for the elite” (MacDonald & Nilles, 2007: 203). This perception, though centuries old, has remained a dominant belief in Bolivia and education has played a significant reproductory role as “schools remain a principal site where children are exposed to and internalise racist ideas” (Canessa, 2004: 199).

As a consequence of this historical racism and elitism, it is not hard to understand why Colegio Americano’s elite felt that their privileged status was an almost natural right
when plutocratic education values have been entrenched in Bolivia for centuries. Therefore, I think these historical values helped validate parents’ decisions to enrol their children in Colegio Americano when they knew overtly that the school was a defender of advantage which would afford their off-spring an opportunity to continue and even improve their auspicious position in Bolivian society.

**Bolivian Schooling History**

To better understand Colegio Americano in its socio-cultural context, it is important to weigh it against the wider schooling situation in Bolivia generally. In this section therefore, I will contrast Colegio Americano’s conditions with that of public education in Bolivia and also briefly compare it to Bolivia’s other private schools. In order to understand why the Colegio Americano school community was largely uncritical of the school’s corrupt practices and plutocratic values, an understanding of the alternative choices in schooling in Bolivia needs to be examined. I will show here that if there had been many good schooling options available to Bolivian parents they may have been more discerning, but because the options were extremely limited and inadequate, parents and other stakeholders accepted things at Colegio Americano over which they may have otherwise made an outcry.

For the first century of Bolivia’s republican era, education was denied to virtually all ‘peasant’ children whose families made up the vast majority of the Bolivian population. The rich were able to pay for private schooling in their homes or abroad. Yet the “indigenous demands for schools and literacy met with strong resistance from the landowner elites” (Regalsky & Laurie, 2007: 235) who understood that knowledge equals power and wanted to keep their advantageous position secure. Economic pressure forced the elite’s perceptions to slowly change when large quantities of their
wealth and lands were lost during disastrous military campaigns, partly because Spanish speaking officers were unable to communicate with their Indigenous troops who spoke a multiplicity of native languages. So the Bolivian military started to teach its conscript soldiers how to read and write in Spanish (Luykx, 1999: 45) and the idea of **castellanización** (enforced learning of Spanish) began to take hold.

Change came slowly and Bolivar’s dream of universal public education (MacDonald and Nilles, 2007) in Bolivia remained unrealised until basic public schooling was established in the larger cities in the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1955 universal education for all citizens became a declared goal in Bolivia (Aikman, 2000: 3), and rural communities also began to have rudimentary school buildings built in their villages (Regalsky and Laurie, 2007: 235). Since its modest beginnings, public schooling in Bolivia has always catered predominantly to schooling for the poor and has been very inexpensive to attend. However, even in 2002 Bolivia’s Ministry of Education estimated that fourteen percent of 5-15 years were not attending school (Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 67).

During most of the twentieth century, public schooling in Bolivia was designed to ‘civilise’ the Indigenous population’s children by having them learn Spanish and be indoctrinated in bourgeois norms. These two areas of learning reflected the strong assimilationist policies of successive governments in Bolivia that attempted to create an “ethically homogenous nation where all would be mestizos,” that is, of mixed descent (Canessa, 2004: 189-190). It was the responsibility of schools to turn the ethnically diverse Indigenous groups into one unified, patriotic citizenry. Thus schooling in Bolivia’s public schools was less about “the teaching of literacy and numeracy, (and
more) about the teaching of citizenship, about engendering a sense of national consciousness” (Canessa, 2004: 190).

To obtain this national consciousness schools were designed to instil obedience and were “organized around principles of regimentation and conformity” (Luykx, 1999: 49). Schooling was compulsory and corporal punishment common place and sometimes extreme. The situation over the following decades has changed, but only incrementally, and in a report commissioned in 2002 the researchers noted there has been “no deep cultural transformation” in discipline practices in public schools in Bolivia (Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 3). Change in rural schooling creeps slowly but slightly faster change has happened amongst urban teachers:

Previously the ‘stick symbolized discipline,’ and corporal punishment and verbal abuse were rampant. The emphasis was on control. There are now other strategies that promote self-discipline,’ and there is greater freedom in the classroom. Teachers note, ‘I now no longer use the ruler, and I am sensitive to student’s (sic) feelings.’

Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 35

Public school pedagogy in Bolivia had been “teacher-centred and based on rote-learning” (Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 1) and in contemporary times the “rigid memoristic models of the past [continues to be] deeply entrenched in teachers’ classroom practices” (Luykx, 1999: 41). There have been attempts at modernising the pedagogy but change is only very slowly altering the dominance of “masculine militarism” (Canessa, 2004: 197) in public schools. Schools are places of nationalistic indoctrination as evidenced in schools’ weekly horas cívicos (civic hours); with whole school participation in elaborate and frequent street parades/marches; and, this indoctrination is then enhanced with compulsory pre-military service for all teenage boys.
In contrast to the public schools’ civilisatory and nationalist programmes, *Colegio Americano* offered a starkly alternative school experience with its pro-Western, elitist perspective. Students were entitled and this meant that corporal punishment of any kind was unacceptable in the school:

Today, one of my students entered the classroom with dog poo on his shoe. He didn’t seem to notice and spread the doggy poo all over the carpet as he went around to his mates greeting them with his customary kiss to both cheeks and elaborate handshake with shoulder gripping added in. When I smelt the offending material, I yelled out for everyone to stand still and check their shoes. When [the student] figured out he had on the offending shoes he yelped in disgust and caused everyone else to crack up. After I got some calm restored, I asked him to remove his shoe and take it outside and then go and find something to clean the floor with and come back and clean up his path of poo. He looked incredulous and melodramatically hopped out of the room rather than touch his shoe. He didn’t reappear for some time and when he did he had the counsellor in tow. The counsellor knocked on the classroom door and asked if he could speak with me outside. Once outside he let me know that the student was not going to clean the carpet — because in this culture only maids do that — and that I should understand and perhaps even apologise to the student for demeaning him.

*Journal Entry 2004*

The school avoided or minimised involvement in most Ministry organised school parades:

On Thursday, the grades 5 and 6 classes marched in the Schools Association parade for Bolivia’s Independence Day commemoration. I accompanied the three classes along with their teachers, the Director and the Bolivian Social Studies teacher. It was a bit weird – all the other schools had their entire student body marching and all of their teaching staff marched as well in pristine suits with Bolivian insignias and flags and emblems emblazoned proudly on their uniforms. We were all very ad hoc – having trussed up some fake uniforms for the day for the students and us teachers in whatever we thought was appropriate. We were number 20 in the parade and so we started marching at 9 am and finished just after 10 am. Then we went back to school and continued the day as normal. Many students were grumbling about being in lessons because Bolivian school groups all marched and then watched the rest of the day’s ceremony with their families. The school groups numbered into the 100+ mark and the parade continued all day and evening long. I went back after school and was amazed that such a huge carnival-like event was going on downtown while our school acted as if we were too good to join in.

*Journal Entry 2004*

Moreover, the overwhelming majority of male students in the school paid a bribe to avoid pre-military service:

[One of the year 12 students] returned to school today, two weeks late from his Christmas vacation. He is sporting a shaved head and is walking more soldier-like than when he left for break. He’s been doing compulsory military
training with the Bolivian army and his dad asked that I help him catch up on the work he missed while he was away. I affirmed that I would, but can’t help but wonder out of a year 12 class group that numbers more than 32 boys, why did only one of them go to ‘compulsory’ military service this summer?

Journal Entry 2005

Bolivian Ministry of Education

Education in Bolivia is regulated by its Ministry of Education that has official control over all schools and other education institutions that function in the nation. Legally, Colegio Americano is obligated to follow the regulations dictated by the Education Ministry. However, the Ministry has been described by many as overly bureaucratised; lacking fundamental institutional capacities to establish policies and execute projects and burdened by inadequate management and communication capabilities. It is run ineffectively and is rife with top-down corruption (Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003).

Education unions in Bolivia are extremely powerful and even have influence over the Ministry of Education. For example, the CEO position is a political appointment and many other executive level positions are controlled by the teachers’ union leadership. The Ministry of Education’s structural inefficiencies and continuing struggles with the sector’s unions translates into a failure to provide sufficient administrative support to schools. This has meant that under-resourcing has been a chronic problem in public schools for generations. I think the following statistic might help the reader visualise the pitiable conditions: “it was in the 1990s that for the first time ever public schools were equipped with classroom libraries, teaching materials and sports equipment” (Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 53). Also, consider that by 2000, only thirty eight percent of public school buildings in Bolivia had electricity and only nineteen percent of those buildings were hooked up to running water (World Bank Bolivia Country Office, 2003).
The teacher unions also asserted great influence in Bolivian schools and for all public school teachers it was compulsory to be a member of either the rural or urban sindicato de profesores (teachers unions). As a result, compulsory unionism helped to produce “working-class militancy” (Luykx, 1999: 137) in the teaching profession.

During my time working in Bolivia, it was a common occurrence for teachers to be on-strike a few days a semester – every single semester. Yet despite ongoing political actions by the unions, public school teachers remained poorly paid and according to the 2003 World Bank report compiled by Contreras and Talavera Simoni, there were “very low levels of teacher competence and training” (2003: 11). Luykx highlights this in a case study of adults entering a government sponsored teacher-training college in Bolivia who had “passed through their entire primary and secondary education without ever having to research a topic on their own, express their thought in essay form, or write anything longer than a single page” (1999: 186).

The contrasts in Colegio Americano were again distinctive. Teachers in the school were not allowed to be a member of education unions – because Colegio Americano was not linked to any Bolivian teacher’s union and the international school system does not have a union body representing staff working in these schools. Only four year university trained teaching staff were employed at Colegio Americano and the wages of even the lowest paid teaching staff were higher than Ministry teachers, as the following reproduction of the “Initial Pay Scale for Locally Hired Teachers for the Year 2005-6” at Colegio Americano as compared to the salary of Bolivian Ministry teachers attests:
Finally, and most importantly, the school maintained a barely visible presence in the overburdened Ministry’s purview. As a result of this Colegio Americano operated as if it were outside the jurisdiction of the Ministry, safe in the understanding that the lack of accountability allowed them *autonomía*, which is a term used in Bolivia to mean autonomy verging on quasi-independence (Von Vacano, 2006; Garcia Linera, 2008).

When I became Director at *Colegio Americano* in March 2006, I began to investigate just how non-compliant the school was with the Ministry of Education:

> After the Board meeting I called my own meeting with the secretaries and one of the Bolivian teachers who understands the national education system well. As I have long suspected, this school is running completely illegally and in contravention of so many laws it is ridiculous. They answered all my questions bluntly and seemed to feel relieved at being able to tell the truth to a foreigner who might just listen. They explained that *Colegio Americano* ignores many [if not all] directives sent by the Ministry of Education. The Bolivian teacher told me that even though the school claims it is a cooperative structure this is in blatant disregard of the fact that for-profit entities cannot claim cooperative status. I could go on and on about all the information they conveyed, but instead I will accumulate evidence of the facts and keep copies of pertinent documents for my own records. This journal is not the place to opine about the repercussions of such illegalities, but I am yet again dumbfounded as to the rose-coloured glasses the previous directors chose to wear when it came to complying with national laws.

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**Journal Entry 2006**

**Education Reform Law**

The Bolivian Ministry of Education attempted several modernisation reforms for public schooling in the twentieth century but institutionalised corruption and widespread incompetence thwarted every attempt. Bolivian political intentions for school improvement may have been forward looking and aspirational, but “political instability
made program continuity difficulty [and] programs begun by one administration were often discontinued by the next” (Luykx, 1999: 48). For example, in the 1950s the government established laws to enforce a “national pedagogy despite the fact [it] had no pedagogical or curricular proposals” (Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 59) and so this Education Code that was designed to “provide schooling for the masses” (Aikman, 2000: 25) did not achieve its goals. Another reform initiative began in 1968 that was designed to improve teacher-training and in 1975 President Banzer separated schooling into two types: regular and technical schools (Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 22). The ‘regular’ schools were primary and secondary schools in the public and private sectors, while ‘technical’ schools were public sector only secondary schools that catered for vocational studies.

After decades of instability and schooling stagnation, a period of relative calm occurred in Bolivia in the mid-1980s. A major education reform initiative was negotiated between the World Bank and a national team of educators (Equipo Técnico de Apoyo a la Reforma Educativa, or ETARE) which evolved into the 1994 Bolivian government Education Reform Law “based on the axiom that education should be intercultural, bilingual and participatory” (Aikman, 2000: 23). The law was thrust on to the Ministry of Education in an attempt to modernise primary schooling curricula and pedagogy. It was supposed to be rolled out by 2002 to all primary schools and by 2009 to all high schools in the nation (Nagata, 2007:14).

Despite its noble ambition, the top-down reform was fatally flawed from the beginning. The teachers’ unions rejected its implementation immediately because there was “no national consultation process to acquaint teachers as a group with the new proposals” (Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 27). It also faltered because the reforms were
introduced into various classrooms (rather than whole schools) before resources had been developed to teach the new material. The reforms were supposed to be mandated law but political strife and chaotic presidential successions, from 2001-2005, hindered the Education Reform Law from being rolled out to schools across the nation.

As the Ministry and unions clashed over implementation procedures for the new Education Reform Law, Colegio Americano ignored the new act. The school continued to follow the SACS-CASI standards and made no attempt to introduce the law’s parameters to the teaching staff. I first became aware of the Education Reform Law in the third year of my work at Colegio Americano and only sought out a copy of the law when I became director of the college:

The secretaries told me that they have a copy of the Education Reform Law in their files and that we are bound by its regulations. When I asked them they said they would translate it into English for me so I can understand its regulations clearly.

Journal Entry 2006

At no time in the four years that I worked at Colegio Americano did the school have any direct problem with the Ministry of Education about its lack of implementation of the reforms. This lack of interference is now understandable in the light of the fact that many public schools stalled, hindered and even halted the implementation of reforms in their schools:

…these education reforms also caused no small confusion. Decentralisation… has been passed down to local levels at a single stroke. One of the greatest concerns is that the central government has begun to devolve its authority to regions even though the regions have not yet built up their own capacity for dealing with such authority. As a result, there is confusion at the locus of educational practice in every part of the country.

Nagata, 2007: 14
Language Education

The issue of language and which ones are taught in Bolivian schools has been a contentious issue for many years in the nation, and played an important role in parents’ determination to enrol their students in Colegio Americano.

As mentioned earlier, Spanish was the only language used in Bolivian public schooling for decades in a deliberate effort to ‘castilianise’ the population. During this era, it was also common for schools to teach English as a foreign language – though not very effectively. With the introduction of the Education Reform Law in the 1990s the Ministry of Education attempted to “shift policy away from an assimilationist model to a multicultural one” (Canessa, 2004: 185) by mandating a bilingual, or plurilingual, approach to pedagogy. Bilingualism refers in this case to the use of Spanish and the predominant Indigenous language of the region in Bolivia where each school is located – be that Quechua, Aymara, Guarani or any of the other multitudes of local languages throughout Bolivia’s multicultural population.

The logic of this new approach arose from recognition that for the majority of children in Bolivia, Spanish was not their mother tongue and illiteracy rates were still high at the turn of the twenty-first century:

Education statistics indicate that 20 percent of the population are absolute illiterates, never having attended school, while 35 percent more are functionally illiterate, that is after 1-2 years of schooling they cannot read a simple letter. Only 11 percent of children who begin school continue after Grade 5 and only 1 percent of children in rural areas go on to secondary school.

Aikman, 2000: 23

In order to start improving those statistics, the Education Reform Law argued that if children were taught in their first language they would have a better linguistic grounding to later transition to a second language, such as Spanish. They based these
arguments on UNICEF research that argued that Indigenous students taught in their
mother tongue had improved self-esteem and proficiency in language and maths
acquisition (PEIB, 1990). The philosophy behind the initiative was also supported in
Bolivia by the rural teacher’s union and the Peasant’s Labor Organisation because these
groups wanted the country’s multicultural and plurilingual nature to be recognised
(Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 37).

Unfortunately, like the rest of the policy proposals incorporated into the Education
Reform Law, bilingualism was not marketed well to the population. As a result, this
new policy was not received positively at first by many Indigenous communities who
continued to view schooling as a site of ‘otherness’ where ‘civilisatory’ practices were
supposed to help their children advance:

> We want to understand the knowledge from outside, the power of the Spanish
nation; we want to learn their language.

Regalsky and Laurie, 2007: 237

This negative attitude was not helped by “significant challenges in developing
appropriate education materials and training teachers” (Contreras and Talavera Simoni,
2003: 37) and so the bilingual reform initiatives were not only perceived as bad policy
by Indigenous families who were not given time to be made aware of its intentions, but
became ill-planned practice too.

The adoption of a multilingual policy in public schooling was even more thoroughly
rejected by many middle and upper class parents in Bolivia who could not see the
pedagogic or cultural value of teaching their children an Indigenous language. English
was the only language that these Spanish speaking parents valued more than their
mother tongue. Their attitudes were sustained by the prevailing negative opinions of
urban elites, politicians and public servants as witnessed by the ongoing outcry in
newspaper articles, opinion pieces and letters to the editor, in the Bolivian press and even the international press - such as the following partisan report:

Promoting indigenous languages to the exclusion of people who speak Spanish is going to collapse an already bleeding Bolivian economy. How does an economy work when motivated educated workers are replaced by uneducated workers for the sake of National Identity and Inclusion? If you don’t think this is happening think again. My family is from La Paz and my wife has plenty of peers that are now unemployed because they can’t find jobs. Not only that, workers are regularly accosted on the streets for wearing business attire, such as ties, because they are a symbol of Imperialism. This quaint little experiment sounds more like exclusion to me at the expense of the hard-working middle class that studied hard to get out of poverty and now have no place to go because of discriminatory Government practices.

The Washington Times, 2007

In Colegio Americano, parents were offered a clear contrast to the Reform Law’s Indigenous bilingual policy by instead offering an ‘elite bilingualism’ environment of English and Spanish. As the urban elites grew more vocal in their opposition to the Ministry’s bilingual policy, Colegio Americano parents voiced strong support for their children to study in an English immersion environment that ignored the Education Reform Law’s call for Indigenous language learning:

With the opportunity of learning English here, our children can have a better future and contacts since nowadays most of the things are in English.

We want our sons to learn English not Quechua – they won’t need to speak Quechua to run our family business and it won’t help them when they are in college in America. English will.

Parent Questionnaire Feedback

Bolivian Private Schools

At this point I want to turn my attention away from Bolivia’s public school system and take some time to examine Bolivia’s private school system. I think the previous section has clearly enunciated the disparity of conditions between Colegio Americano and Bolivian public schooling and provided ample evidence why upper-class parents would not even consider government schooling as an option for their children. If public schooling was the only alternative to Colegio Americano then this might justify why the
school felt able to practise corrupt grading and reporting without fear of stakeholder sanction; but Bolivian families did have the option to pay to send their children to other private schools in the nation.

Throughout Bolivia there is a hierarchy of schools with classroom conditions being quite diverse. By far the worst conditions occur in public schools in rural settings, followed by public schools in towns and then cities. Private schools are also hierarchical with Colegio Americano a member of a very small elite of well resourced and internationally accredited schools. Conditions in Colegio Americano were so different to even the next level down of private schools in the city where I worked that I was shocked when I went to visit a well-known neighbouring private school with a solid reputation. Here is how I described the experience in a journal entry:

For the last three days the Director and I have been off presenting workshops at a conference which was held at another private school in the city, and boy has it been an eye opener. This school looks good from the outside with well kept gardens and imposing building facades in a Mediterranean style. But the inside of the classrooms are as primitive as the ones I was used to in post-war East Timor! There were newspapers covering broken windows; graffiti everywhere; absolutely no student work on the walls and the walls themselves were chipped and in great need of a fresh paint job. Some of the classrooms had one electric socket but most of them didn’t; the only teaching resource in each classroom was an ancient blackboard and there were really old chairs and desks to cater for at least 45 students in each room.

Journal Entry 2005

The Ministry of Education is by law responsible for overseeing all schools operating in Bolivia – public and private. Yet because the Ministry lacks basic institutional capacities there are no effective monitoring system developed (Contreras and Talavera Simoni, 2003: 2-3) to oversee public schooling, let alone make private schools accountable to the government. Still, private schools in Bolivia that were not internationally accredited, as Colegio Americano was, had less operational autonomy to discount the authority of the Ministry regulations. Therefore, many private schools in Bolivia adhered to the regulations imposed by the 1994 Education Reform Law even
though they were less subject to the political campaigns and strikes that were ordered by their militant union leadership.

Many private schools in Bolivia were run by the Catholic Church and their schooling philosophy encouraged obedience, passivity and conformity. Their schools were inexpensive and so many working class Bolivians who could not afford much, but were willing to pay something to get their children out of public schools, enrolled in Catholic schools. As an official organ of the state in Bolivia, the Catholic schools steered an absolute line of conformity when it came to Ministry of Education compliance.

With no union influence or religious affiliation and SACS-CASI accreditation to shield it, Colegio Americano was left to operate very differently to most other private schools. As the work of Anyon (1981) and Finn (1999) confirms, Colegio Americano was able to serve elite purposes and its affluent students learned sophisticated analytical skills that developed personality traits such as self-reliance, problem-solving, flexibility and leadership. I believe parents in Colegio Americano were well aware of the differences Colegio Americano offered and it was my experience that parents wanted Colegio Americano to ‘cheat the system’ because they knew their children were getting favourable treatment. With such a contrast to both public and other private schools in Bolivia, parents were determined to keep their children enrolled in Colegio Americano.

The following excerpts from a translated letter I sent to the Board about a meeting I had with a disgruntled parent, shows the depth of feeling on this issue:

This morning I had a meeting with ___ regarding his son. In the current reporting period the student has failed 6 out of 8 subjects. To compound the problem, in the first semester of SY2005-6 he failed 7 out of 8 subjects because of chronic absenteeism. Due to the combination of first semester failing grades and now third quarter failing grades, it is mathematically impossible for him to pass this year.

When I explained this situation to ___ he became very angry and stated the he is going to sue the school and all the individual teachers who instruct his
son. He went on to say that under no circumstances would he consider dis-enrolling his son from our school and that even if he does fail grade 10, he will force the school to take back his son for the next school year.

Cited in Journal Entry 2006

I believe that faced with few viable alternative schooling options in Bolivia, wealthy parents were eager to enrol and retain their children in Colegio Americano and local professionals wanted to teach at the school. With so few competitive schooling options, it becomes more evident why parents and teachers would have been willing to silently accept Colegio Americano corruption because of, as Brookfield called it, “a culture of stasis – the collective agreement not to rock the boat by asking awkward questions or doing things differently” (2006: 97).

Yet another factor that pushed elite parents towards Colegio Americano was its ability to subvert the Bolivian Ministry of Education’s policy of grade retention for students who failed even one subject. The World Bank commissioned a series of research projects looking into private education in poor countries during the 1990s. Bolivia was the subject of one of these reports titled, Private Education in a Poor Country: the case of urban Bolivia and it concluded that:

There is a remarkable willingness of households in Bolivia to pay for private education for their children and that the flourishing of private schools stems from the repetition rates within the public school system.

Psacharopoulos et al., 1997: 404

The report comes to this conclusion by asserting that “one measure of school quality is repetition rates” and as Bolivia “has had a history of high illiteracy and grade repetition in the public schools” and private schools have “half the repetition rate of the public schools” then “on the whole it can be said that private schools do seem to provide a higher quality of schooling” (Psacharopoulos et al., 1997: 397-398).
I find the report’s assertions and conclusion disputable. In chapter five of this thesis I explained that Bolivian public schools had a ‘one strike and you stay down’ grade retention policy whereby any student with a failing grade in any subject at the end of the year was made to repeat the grade level the following school year. I also showed that while this policy is supposed to be followed in private schools as well, the lack of oversight abilities within the Ministry of Education has meant that at least in Colegio Americano this policy has not been put into practice. Knowing these determining factors, I therefore question whether lower repetition rates in private schools do, in fact, equate to a better quality of education.

Irrespective of my critiques of the report, I believe many parents held similar beliefs about the superiority of private schooling to those held by the researchers. Nevertheless, it is my view that parents may have enrolled their children in Colegio Americano more so because they knew that the school was willing to ignore the Ministry’s mandates in this area and knew that the school endorsed an unwritten policy of social promotion rather than promotion based on merit.

**Severe State Crises**

A final factor to consider when comparing the educational opportunities offered in the public and private school systems in Bolivia against Colegio Americano relates to the broader issue of political instability in the Bolivian state and its repercussions on the education sectors.

Bolivia has always been politically unstable and during my time in the country the nation went from one severe crisis to the next. Political crises in Bolivia have frequently erupted as a result of the continuing disparity between the rich and powerful elite and progressive social movements representing the poor and vulnerable majority. The
progressive social movements have been led by union groups – including the teachers’ unions and as a result almost every political upheaval has been accompanied by a school strike. During the years of this study, public schools were repeatedly shut down for days and even weeks, and even when public schools were open, teachers frequently curtailed their duties in protest at conditions. The following vignettes illustrate the conditions:

**Vignette One:** The situation in Bolivia is getting worse. Schools across the country will start vacation tomorrow, three weeks early. The president has offered his resignation but that seems to have only fuelled the protesters more. Today there have been violent clashes between the police, who are using tear gas, and the protesters, who are using dynamite. In the stores, essential goods are starting to run out and prices are beginning to go up.

*Journal Entry 2005*

**Vignette Two:** I have to say that the political situation in Bolivia has recently got a lot worse. On Friday they cancelled the elections which were due December 4. The US embassy people came to the school to ask if we would be willing to be a safety-zone if trouble erupts and asked if we could store supplies here too. The left-wing Indigenous leader, Evo Morales, looks set to win the presidency and the USA seems very perturbed by this.

*Journal Entry 2005*

**Vignette Three:** Our poor Friendship Game teams! This morning, disgruntled airline employees shut down the city’s airport and over the course of the day have taken over two other national airports as well. Most our team has been stranded at the airport all day. Supposedly at 11am, then 3pm, then 6pm and now at 8:30pm the plane is meant to be cleared for take-off. Already, we have lost a day of the tournament and I will be sad if the team can’t get there by tomorrow morning. But there is nothing they can do when the police and protesters are clashing on the runway. I also feel bad for our librarian. She agreed to go to the games as a chaperone, but she is a lefty, an activist and supports the union strikes and she had to cross a picket line this morning to get to the airport. This situation must be killing her.

*Journal Entry 2006*

**Vignette Four:** School was cancelled today due to continued unrest over the ongoing transport strike. It looks like we will have to cancel classes for tomorrow too. Still, public schools have been out since last week, so I guess we can’t complain.

*Journal Entry 2006*

By the final year of my study the Indigenous populations in the country were becoming successful in “standing up to the light-skinned, European elite and its corruption fuelled relationships with the world” (Powers, 2005: A13). Faced with the possibility of political plutocracy ending for the first time in Bolivian history, the elite tried hard to
maintain their control over other areas in society – including private schooling. One of my journal entries recorded the concern of Colegio Americano’s elites:

There is a lot of fright in the circles of power at what the new president seems to be suggesting he wants to do with education. There is talk that he will abolish private schools all together and that pagan religions will have to be taught. I think it is all scare-talk but I do notice that the Board has rushed through its decision to erect a very robust new gate and wall with a security guard post at the bottom of the campus entry road.

Journal Entry 2006

The polarisation of class-identity in Bolivia has grown even more extreme since my time in the nation ended in mid 2006. While there is no scope in this study to outline all the tumultuous politics that have developed in Bolivia since Evo Morales’ MAS party has consolidated its power in Congress and the elite opposition parties have reacted with clandestine militia violence and calls for autonomía in the east of the country, there were certainly the beginnings of this polarisation emerging during the final year of my work at Colegio Americano.

As the political situation in Bolivia became an overt clash between the Indigenous and the elite, I believe Colegio Americano became even more important to wealthy parents as a place where their money could still buy their children advantage and future opportunity. This, together with the dismal situation that has been and remains the situation in public and nation-based private schooling in Bolivia, I think makes it obvious why parents who could afford to do so, preferred to send their children to Colegio Americano and also why parents felt they had few other choices of schooling if they were unhappy with the way Colegio Americano operated.

This is supported by the statistics that private schools account for ten percent of primary and thirty percent of secondary and higher education in the Bolivia (Classen-Bauer, 1988). According to Luykx, “many parents have grown frustrated with the difficulties of
educating their children within the public system” (1999: 62). Frustration, of course, does not necessarily lead to action and extreme poverty in Bolivia means that private school enrolment is only affordable to eight percent of the population (Reimers, 2000). This also means that those families who are fortunate enough to be able to afford to send their children to private school are very aware of what a privilege it is to be able to do so.

The exclusivity of private schooling in Bolivia and especially at the highest echelon of private schooling - where *Colegio Americano* is positioned - created conditions that silenced those involved. Faced with few alternative schooling choices students’ families realised that *Colegio Americano* might not be a perfect institution but could guarantee superior opportunities for all of the students’ futures than almost any other school in the nation. In the case of locally born school teachers working at *Colegio Americano*, they too would have felt lucky to gain employment in the school and would have been keenly aware of their privileged pay and conditions when compared with almost all other school teachers in Bolivia. With these understandings in mind, it is no longer hard for me to realise why families and local teachers were silent about, and sometimes even complicit in, the corrupt practices in the school. While not condoning the silence of both groups, it is understandable why neither parents nor teachers spoke up about the advantageous treatment that some students received in *Colegio Americano*. Both groups would have been aware that if they didn’t like what was going on in the school they were virtually powerless to change the situation and the cost of whistle-blowing may have been being fired or having their child dis-enrolled.
Monitoring and Oversight

The above sections outlining the public school system in Bolivia have been an exercise in contrasting the conditions of education opportunity between what the government and Colegio Americano could offer. I showed that Colegio Americano presented a better-quality of schooling on so many levels that the disparity was obscene. In *Permissible Advantage? The Moral Consequences of Elite Schooling*, Alan Peshkin asks if it is morally acceptable that graduates from an elite school gain “enhanced life opportunities compared to most students in the country?” (2001: 2) He answers in the affirmative arguing that in an unfair, capitalist dominated world it is “virtuous to accumulate education wealth” (2001: 122). I believe this argument would resonate with the stakeholders in Colegio Americano and in confronting this attitude I am more able to relate to their acceptance of Colegio Americano’s plutocratic arrangements.

I want to re-emphasise that Colegio Americano was authorised to practise as a private school in Bolivia by the Ministry of Education through a ministerial resolution that sanctioned its establishment. That ministerial resolution was a legal document that ensured Colegio Americano operated in compliance with the laws of Bolivia. Previous and current Bolivian constitutions are extremely clear that all schools in Bolivia, public and private, are under the control of the State through the Ministry of Education. It is even more explicit that private schools must follow the same regulations as public schools:

*Las escuelas de carácter particular estarán sometidas a las mismas autoridades que las públicas y se regirán por los planes, programas y reglamentos oficialmente aprobados.* Private schools are under the control of the same public authorities and must follow the plans, programs and rules officially approved. (*Artículo 181º*)

Colegio Americano flouted these laws brazenly by failing to fail students who did not pass all of their subjects in a year and by using an alternative curriculum based on
American methodology that was not officially approved as an alternative pathway to Bolivian high school graduation. After careful study of Bolivia’s constitution and education codes I am even more surprised to realise that the school flouted the rules in many other areas as well, such as:

- Adopting an alternative school-year calendar;
- Not adapting any of the new education reform codes into the school;
- Failing to protect local teachers from unfair dismissal;
- Failing to apply for a new ministerial resolution whenever a new director was hired;
- Failing to reapply every five years for reauthorisation by the Ministry.

I have checked and re-checked if there were any special dispensation to disregard the laws made to the school (or any other international schools in Bolivia for that matter) and have failed to find any applicable loopholes. What this suggests to me is that Colegio Americano was comfortable flouting the laws because they had no history of getting caught. For education laws to be effective there must be effective oversight mechanisms in the system to monitor compliance.

The 2003 World Bank report authored by Contreras and Talavera Simoni which looked into the state of education in Bolivia noted that the Ministry was ineffective in some areas of compliance monitoring:

- The Ministry had never conducted a systematic inquiry into how students are learning or not learning in public schools; and there had been no surveying instruments created to examine how public schools are working regarding the teaching and learning process (52).

- In 2002 the Ministry “had only just started to work in turning data and information systems into decision making tools to improve accountability of education results at the district and school levels” (4).
This is the only report I could find that looked into the weaknesses of Bolivia’s Ministry of Education’s oversight capacities. While it does not directly imply that private school accountability was deficient, together with all the other evidence I have presented about the Ministry’s ineptitudes, I think it is reasonable to conclude that a further reason the Colegio Americano got away with acting autonomously from Bolivian laws was due to a lack of monitoring and oversight capacities in the Ministry of Education.

**The Illicit Grade Trade**

An additional dimension of understanding why Colegio Americano was not held accountable at the national level for its unethical actions is highlighted by comparing Colegio Americano’s action with the observed occurrences in a government sponsored teacher-training school and a rural K-6 school that were the subjects of ethnographic studies conducted by Aurelia Luykx in 1999 and Samantha Punch in 2004. I have to say here that the findings I uncovered by reading these two researchers surprised and flabbergasted me. During the years I worked at Colegio Americano I thought the school’s corrupted practices in grading and reporting were unique and therefore outrageous. To learn that grading practices were corrupted in two other documented cases in Bolivian schools really cemented my understanding of how the confronting stage of CRP can reveal the “historical expression of shaped values” (Smyth et al., 1999a: 21).

Luykx uncovered an endemic culture of failing to fail at a Bolivian Normal School for Aymaran pre-service teachers. She noted that:

> The tacit pact by which obedience is exchanged for leniency is not the only one engaged in by students and teachers. Also at work is a complicity of misunderstanding – the mutual agreement to pretend that teaching and learning have in fact taken place. This arrangement has advantages for both parties: students received passing grades while avoiding the difficulty of decoding a discourse that is largely opaque to them; teachers’ workload is reduced, and the authority of their discourse goes unchallenged. Luykx, 1999: 187
Luykx was not mounting a case for corruption so much as suggesting that the school practised minimal compliance with institutional expectations. Still, she showed that cheating was an endemic practice in the school and that this arose from the use of outdated, rigid pedagogic practices:

Cheating – cheating reflects the centrality of copying and memorization to Bolivian schooling. It was common practice in the normal school, mainly via crib notes and covert collaboration between students. This was defined as illicit only during tests; on other assignments, verbatim copying from books or notes and collaboration between students was allowed, even encouraged.

Luykx, 1999: 243

Most disturbing was the “illicit trade in academic commodities” a term Luykx cleverly used for the blatant and prevalent practice of teachers selling passing grades:

Most teachers based their grades on academic performance, but there were enough willing to ‘cut deals’ that such exchanges formed a decisive part of several students’ academic careers… Teachers were not the only ones to initiate such arrangements; students and even parents sometimes sought it out themselves. Given the frequency of such exchanges, parents may feel that their children will be at a disadvantage relative to others if they rely solely on academic skills to get good grades.

Luykx, 1999: 244-5

After documenting these in-house transgressions, Luykx argued convincingly that:

The network of corruption does not end at the school gate; the illicit economy students discovered in the normal school was in effect… preparing them for situations they would encounter after graduation. In Bolivia’s educational hierarchy, the amount of bureaucracy is high and accountability is low. Progress through the system depends on a series of gate-keeping encounters, each of which holds the potential for graft.

Luykx, 1999: 251

In Samantha Punch’s case study of a K-6 school in an impoverished rural village in Bolivia she addressed grading pressures specifically:

Assessment tended to only occur at the end of the year when each child had to receive grades and a school report. Teachers were also under pressure to achieve a 75% pass rate or they would lose their holiday pay.

Punch, 2004: 167

She also wrote about reporting fabrications by the teachers in the school:
Apart from the main subjects, marks were given for hygiene, music, manual activities, religion, health, agriculture, craft and home education. These additional activities rarely formed part of the curriculum, yet they still had to be assessed… [An interviewed teacher explained that,] “You calculate more or less even if they haven’t done this subject: you still have to give them a mark.” The teachers said that such arbitrary marking wasted their time and merely filled bureaucratic requirements.

Punch, 2004: 168

In many ways Luykx’s and Punch’s ethnographic studies corroborate my own theory that Colegio Americano’s practices of granting unmerited passing grades and enhancing college transcripts by including credit for courses never taken were reflections of Bolivian cultural norms. While two case studies are not conclusive evidence to prove parity of conduct, the remarkable similarities in the vignettes of the two studies do suggest that educational malpractice was quite systematic in Bolivia. If this was true, then I believe it goes a long way to understanding why Colegio Americano felt little compunction in acting corruptly and why various stakeholders silently accepted that the worst Colegio Americano could do was perhaps better than the best practices offered in other schools in Bolivia.

**Cultural Imperialism**

That Colegio Americano mirrored Bolivian cultural norms is an area of confronting that I wish to extend further. In this section I focus again and look at the school from the distance of Bolivia’s perception of its national identity.

What I witnessed during my time in Bolivia was Bolivians’ deep-seated feelings of racial inferiority. Sociologists have theorised that there is an omnipresent awareness of Bolivia’s “third world status, as central to [its] identity as membership in the first world is that to the United States… From this perspective all things foreign are superior to anything produced locally” (Luykx, 1999: 35). This includes schooling.
Colegio Americano catered to this identity of shame by offering an American-styled school experience to any family who could afford it. This, of course, excluded the great majority of Bolivian families and reinforced racism in the upper-class. This attitude of Bolivian inferiority helps to explain why Colegio Americano, while offering bi-national high school graduation qualifications concentrated almost exclusively on the foreign diploma and effectively excluded Bolivian curriculum considerations from the school’s planning processes.

The converse to Bolivia’s purported inferiority is the United States’ well documented belief in its own superiority – and that includes its belief in its educational quality, as the United States’ Office of Overseas Schools enunciates on its website:

> The mission of the Office of Overseas Schools is to promote quality educational opportunities at the elementary and secondary level for dependents of American citizens carrying out our programs and interests of the U.S. Government abroad. Our efforts are to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by upgrading educational institutions which serve to demonstrate American educational principles and methods employed in the United States.

http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/ January 2008

The Office of Overseas Schools is a powerful and very well resourced organ of the United States government and I can understand how Colegio Americano would have felt secure in its violations of Bolivian education laws when it was supported with such powerful backing. While I have shown why Bolivia’s Ministry of Education was unable to challenge the practices of Colegio Americano due to the inefficiencies and ineptitudes within its organisational structure, I can imagine nevertheless, that Colegio Americano was prepared for any Ministry interference by calling on its US embassy endorsement to support any challenge it might have faced.
I believe that Colegio Americano worked strategically to align itself completely with the USA part of its identity for this very reason. As a part of the American International school brand, Colegio Americano had carefully constructed its ‘otherness’ credentials and wanted to widen the cultural distance between itself and the community within which it existed (Allen, 2002). In fact, Colegio Americano emulated its foreign links to such an extent that, irrespective of legal inapplicability, the school acted as if it had the right to be designated as an independent school, in the way some elite schools in homeland USA are categorised. That is, “distanced from the sources of political, educational and financial control that apply to public schools” so that “the independent school stands apart from community and state control, as far apart as it can, in order to be free to shape a school in the interest of a particular constituency” (Peshkin, 2001: 10).

In turn, the United States government endorsed Colegio Americano in a manner that I would suggest was culturally imperialistic. As an American International School, Colegio Americano provided positive experiences of American values and norms for upper-class families in a poor nation, and it quite deliberately enculturated the students with pro-USA sentiments. In the same way that many Bolivian teenagers thought that a trip to Burger King was the height of dining experience in the city, many families in Colegio Americano thought that an “American education” was the height of schooling experience available. As I see it, both the United States and Colegio Americano benefitted from their alliance: the former gained allegiance from each generation of graduates who then stepped into positions of power in Bolivia and the latter gained a silently loyal group of powerful families ready to accept any way the school operated because they believed it was the ‘American way.’
Accreditation Agency

Extending my focus again to the international level of analysis again, I wish now to confront the American based accreditation agency that Colegio Americano was a member of: the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Council on Accreditation and School Improvement, or SACS-CASI. This professional association was supposed to ensure that the school was held accountable for its practices and that this was the generally held view of Bolivian education professionals who perceived American accreditation membership as a highly sought-after and prestigious body with which to be associated.

In its own words, the accrediting agency stated that the purpose of accreditation for American international schools in Latin America was to “raise the bar for schools that deserve recognition through accreditation.” The agency also asserted that any school that is accredited “(a) meet standards, (b) engage in continuous improvement, and (c) provide for quality assurance” (2005: 6). In common with the other regional education accreditation agencies in the United States, SACS-CASI used an in-house ranking procedure of several distinct levels (called statuses) to award each member school according to its level of quality and standards compliance. The hierarchical statuses, from highest to lowest were: full compliance, warning, probation, dropped/removed. Every few years SACS-CASI American International Schools were judged by representatives of the accreditation body and assigned a status level but each member school had its levels of standards compliance and quality kept from public record. The secretive nature of status assignation meant that the public, and most school stakeholders, were not given access to information about school compliance and this allowed schools who were not doing well to hide the fact.
When I became the director of Colegio Americano I gained access to the accreditation status information that had been kept secret. I discovered that for the entire twenty years that Colegio Americano had been accredited with SACS-CASI it had been ‘yo-yoing’ in status from warning to probation and back to warning again. The school had never reached full compliance with SACS-CASI accreditation standards! In annual reports filed each year to the accreditation agency by each school director, the documentation showed that the reasons for Colegio Americano’s low status awards remained similar throughout its history – mainly to do with failure to comply with standards of governance and leadership. The school had been threatened repeatedly with having its accreditation status removed but this had never happened; despite the fact that the governance and leadership issues in the school were never resolved.

As the new director of Colegio Americano it was my turn to write the annual report to the accreditation agency, so I duly informed them of the corrupt practices that had been going on under previous leaders. I had decided to ‘come clean’ to our USA accrediting agency, hoping they would help me change the ethos and practices in the school by creating a better and workable new system. Even though I was now the school’s CEO, rightly or wrongly, I did not feel able to go ahead with radical changes (such as setting up a process to fire the counsellor for instance) without backup.

I wrote a lengthy report on my evaluation of our school’s standards compliance and was very honest in the details:

While we are doing well with research based curriculum generally, we walk a crooked path in terms of compliance with host-nation curriculum requirements. Bolivian education regulations are very specific about what subjects should be taught every year. There are seventeen subjects expected to be taught each year and we do not teach several of these: religion and morals, philosophy, psychology and health education. We also only teach one area of science and social studies per grade, but Bolivian regulations require that all students in 9-12 are taught natural sciences, physics, chemistry, social studies, history, geography and civics each year for four years.
In order to comply with Bolivian standards we “fudge” report card grades. Some of our fudging is quasi-legitimate, as we create grades for subjects not taught by searching the content of the subjects we do teach to find assignments that could be considered acceptable for other subjects. For example, in grade 10 history we can pull out “religion and morals” grades from assignments given on the rise of monotheistic religions or a bibliography on Confucius. Some of our “fudging” cannot be spun in any way to make it look legitimate. At the end of the year, our secretaries quite simply make up grades for the subjects we have not covered. In fact, due to some recent changes in Bolivian regulations our secretaries have rewritten all the Bolivian report cards for our graduates from 1990-2000 and totally invented grades to ensure compliance with the new regulations. I was recently informed of this, but I do not know who authorized it.

Cited in Journal Entry 2006

In response to my report, the “top-man” in the Latin American section of the accreditation agency sent me the following email:

Christine, you did a superb job with the Confidential Report. You captured so many profound essences. The substance will be discreetly shared with our Executive Director. It is realized that your role and current responsibilities are not easy. I applaud you for your sacrifices, integrity, and competencies. Sometimes life and our profession are not easy - in your case, I am stating the very least related of these facts. Warm regards, ______

Cited in Journal Entry 2006

After the Executive Director of SACS-CASI became involved I received a further email from the organisation:

On behalf of the SACS-CASI Latin American Leadership Community we thank you for your truly extraordinary tenaciousness in attempting to protect our mutual professional, accreditation, and humanistic ideals. In addition, we salute your additional efforts which have been directed to the preservation of the integrity element which so desperately is required to be integrated within the framework of each of our membership entities if we are to be truly successful. Without your special presence during the last few seriously troubled months in Bolivia at Colegio Americano, I strongly question what further serious deterioration could have evolved…. Again, we thank you for your extraordinary displays of professionalism and unique personal dedication which have been unselfishly directed to the continued complicated circumstances at Colegio Americano. We wish you much future happiness and success.

Cited in Journal Entry 2006

Over the following months, SACS-CASI did follow up on my report by sending a representative to investigate the situation in Colegio Americano. Her mission was clear and straightforward, as she noted in this email she sent to me prior to her visit:

207
The tentative schedule you sent is appropriate for a regular team visit. However, the purpose of my visit with your school is a different one. It is to review the atypical circumstances there, gather information on how these have been addressed, and then to report my findings to SACS. Once SACS has reviewed my findings they will decide on the school’s accreditation status, and then inform the school of their decision. I do not need to meet with all the groups included in the schedule, and no time needs to be scheduled for an exit report to staff. The Board invitation for dinner on Wednesday night is appreciated. However, I consider it best to limit my time there to the work I have to do and therefore must decline.

Cited in Journal Entry 2006

At the conclusion of her visit, the agency representative agreed that Colegio Americano was not operating in a quality manner and after offering me some suggestion at ways to improve the situation on-site, took back to the Latin American Leadership Community further observations and insights. During the last week of my tenure as director of Colegio Americano, I received an official letter from the accreditation agency. It stated:

That after careful consideration and because of your recent strong professional contributions during the past three months, the school has been granted a six month extension of its probationary status despite some discussion for the invoking of a complete dropped/removed status.

What my direct experience with SACS-CASI highlighted to me was that the agency was extremely reluctant to dis-accredit a member school even when faced with stark facts about corrupt activities. It didn’t make sense to me until I came across the following paragraph in a chapter from a book titled, *International Education in Practice: dimensions for national and international schools*:

The process of accreditation by external agencies has become an increasingly widespread practice among schools offering an international education… Such approaches require a shift in the institutional culture-ideology of schools away from exclusively pedagogical issues towards the espousal of market-oriented values…. It may even be argued that these values may be indentified with the attributes of branded products, and the development of the globalizing current of international education may be viewed in terms of the transformation of international education a globally branded product.

Cambridge, 2002: 162
David Hill also writes some convincing ideas about the marketisation of education in his article, *Global Neo-Liberalism, the Deformation of Education and Resistance*. In it he argues that:

In Capitalism it is the insatiable demand for profit that is the motor for policy, not public or social or common weal, or good. With great power comes great irresponsibility. Thus privatised utilities, such as … education services … are run to maximise the shareholders’ profits, rather than to provide a public service.

2003: 1

In the light of these analyses, I would argue that American based accreditation agencies, such as SACS-CASI, are global multinationals that are in the education business to make a profit. I assert this, not only because of the lenient way that *Colegio Americano* was treated by SACS-CASI in the face of what they termed as ‘atypical circumstances’ but also because membership costs thousands of dollars annually. It is hard to understand why SACS-CASI would allow *Colegio Americano* to continue to represent their organisation, unless we take into account the amount of money the accreditation agency had been making from its twenty plus year relationship with the school.

SACS-CASI is typical in fact of what McLaren and Farahmandpur disparage. In their words, “schools become increasingly financed by corporations that function as service industries for transnational capitalism” (2004: 240). There are huge education corporations endorsed by the accreditation agency that get access to their clientele in the form of corporate sponsorship for workshops and conferences, text-books and teaching materials, hiring fairs and recruitment consultancies and all other manner of educational products and services. This is clearly elucidated by the following small section of a marketing letter the accreditation agency launched on their website regarding sponsorship and exhibit opportunities for an annual conference to see the thinking behind their operation:
As a Sponsor, you support the collaboration between SACS-CASI and NSSE [US school survey agency] to bring enhanced services to accredited schools. Through this package, you will reach more than 23,000 schools in 30 states. Benefits:

• Table top exhibit booths at SACS-CASI’s Annual Conference in Orlando, FL and NSSE’s Annual Meeting in Chicago, IL
• Two complimentary registrations to both meetings
• Recognition from the podium at general assemblies
• Company name and logo listed in both organization’s conference programs and annual meeting Web sites
• Full-page recognition in both organizations’ conference programs
• Flyer distributed at registration

When an accreditation provider is a part of a market form of education this creates what Plant terms a “culture of self-interest” (1992: 87). Then consider that the nature of an agency that is peer-reviewing, voluntary and advocates self-improvement is in itself “highly vulnerable to misuse and abuse by those who wish to turn it to other purposes” (Young et al, 1993: x). Couple these attributes with transnational capitalism and I believe what results, is an agency far more interested in keeping its clientele than accounting for their activities.

Perhaps in confronting SACS-CASI my analysis reads as particularly harsh. Undoubtedly, the accreditation agency tried to keep to its stated mission of helping schools improve student learning through accreditation in its dealing with Colegio Americano. Nonetheless, I remain unrepentant in my tone because Colegio Americano already had so many avenues to avoid being accountable at the local and national levels, that the accrediting agency’s repeated examples of letting the school ‘off the hook’ for innumerable standards violations reinforced a belief at Colegio Americano that it could get away with anything.

Secondly, during the timing of the incidents I describe in this thesis, SACS-CASI was undergoing amalgamation with the three other regionally based accreditation agencies.
in the USA. In the final weeks of my directorship at *Colegio Americano*, while the emails and letters were being sent to me granting extensions and conciliation processes for the school, SACS-CASI became officially subsumed into the globally reaching mega-agency, AdvancED. As the “the world's largest education community, representing 23,000 public and private schools and districts across the United States and in 65 countries worldwide and serving nearly 15 million students” I believe it is now even more important to critique and deconstruct this organisation’s motto that it is “advancing excellence in education worldwide” (www.advanc-ed.org/).

**In Summary**

Throughout chapters six and seven I have confronted the local, national and international reasons why *Colegio Americano* was able to conduct itself in a manner that favoured plutocratic considerations in its grading and reporting procedures. The Venn diagram I have attached after this paragraph I designed to summarise the major factors I have theorised in each category and also enunciate which factors impacted in two or more of the local, national and international locations.
As the diagram indicates, there were many factors that conspired together to create the unique conditions that affected how stakeholders in Colegio Americano acted. It is my belief that the central factors that supported corrupt grading and reporting practices at Colegio Americano came down to racism and plutocracy because these two components were in evidence in all the power levels I confronted. I have argued that plutocracy and the racism from which it derives was blatant at the school level, and at the national level its insidiousness permeated throughout the education system because of its longevity as a cultural norm in Bolivia. I theorise also that in a socio-cultural climate rife with racism and inherited advantage for Bolivian elites, SACS-CASI sanctioned these characteristics with an accreditation structure that functioned plutocratically. Despite its meritocratic marketing veneer (“improving educational quality and assuring the public that member institutions meet established standards” www.sacs-casi.org) – my experience at Colegio Americano indicated that, in fact, the payment of annual accreditation fees equalled SACS-CASI endorsement irrespective of standards compliance.
By critically confronting all levels of educational power that contributed to *Colegio Americano*’s corrupt acts, I have been able to show that the school was acting as an educational entity “which functions to legitimate a social order defined by extreme disparities of wealth, income, political power and oppression based on class, gender, ethnicity and cultural status” (Stanley, 2007: 371).

In locating the school’s actions within a complex environment of local, national and international power-plays I believe my analysis and emotions have shifted away from blame and outrage and towards a more detached, academic perspective. This is the nature of CRP and “is the hallmark of a teacher who has begun to act on the world” (Smyth et al., 1999a, 22). Nevertheless, it has been quite an arduous psychological journey to get to this place. This chapter of writing where I have criticised the corrupt practices at *Colegio Americano* and explained how the practices I judged as misconduct had become embedded and thus normalised in the school, has taken many months to complete because it has been so soul destroying to consider. I found that the complexity of social, cultural and political factors that pressured the school towards corruption overwhelmed my critical senses and depressed my enthusiasm for this topic to such an extent that on more than one occasion I seriously thought about giving up on this Critically Reflective journey.

While there is but one physical page between this chapter and the next, psychologically the step from the confronting stage to a reconstructing stage has been an immense one for me. In “dismantling oppressive structures and mechanisms” (Macedo, 1994: 175), these two chapters have achieved the first step in finding ways to become a change-maker, but, as I will explain more in chapter eight, it took a long time and a lot of internal reflection to be able to move forward.
CHAPTER EIGHT

SCHOOL RECONSTRUCTION?

You should write as if you were already dead. That is the only way to write with integrity.


If we have the courage to rise to this challenge to name what's happening within our schools, then we also need the courage to be activists and go out and fight like hell to change it.

Attributed to Jonathon Kozol at www.thinkexist.com
Moving from Critique to Action

In this penultimate chapter of my thesis I would like to try and focus on the reconstruction phase of Critically Reflective Practice, or CRP, with the intention of moving my analysis beyond critique and towards transformation. In reality, however, I have come to the conclusion that my experiences at Colegio Americano did not actually go through the cyclical step of reconstruction that Smyth proffered in his methodology.

Thus far, the three stages of CRP I have already completed - describing, informing and confronting - have enabled me to “see the nature of ideological domination” at Colegio Americano by investigating the historical conditions and contemporary forces that constrained and shaped practice at the school (Smyth, 1986: 24). Throughout these steps, my reflective technique has exposed my professional practice and the school’s education processes to critical scrutiny. In doing so, I have developed theory from my lived experience. This has allowed me to assimilate theory-making from practice and now the methodology suggests that I try to reconstruct the school’s practices, or at least my practices with it, by expressing the insights that have emerged from these reflections.

It is my understanding that the reconstruction stage of CRP is supposed to be the culmination of my theory-making and the place to “consider alternatives which might lead to more just social arrangements in the short and long term” (Brown, 1995: 6). So I thought about considering alternatives at Colegio Americano that might have changed the lived experience I had recorded. I had to bear in mind that my reconstruction insights would have to be tangible and theoretically possible. And, I realised I cannot offer concrete changes that keep in mind the limits of education in an untransformed society (Shor & Freire, 1987: 129).
This thesis embraces the radically critical and complex nature of CRP and as I mentioned in the last page of chapter seven, it has taken a long time to be able to begin writing this, what was intended to be, a reconstruction stage of CRP. It wasn’t easy getting to the point where I could actually write any insights down. This was largely because for a long while I was stuck and unable to imagine anything hopeful and for a frustrating period of months. I kept asking myself whether my two years as the leader at Colegio Americano had helped to produce significant or radical changes for the privileged students with whom I worked; or if my leadership had modelled what is possible in transformational education; or even if my time at Colegio Americano had helped me become a better critical theorist and critical practitioner. But I kept answering those questions negatively.

I think a part of me was really quite scared. Reading back over the middle chapters of this thesis reminded me how potent CRP can be. My lived experience at Colegio Americano, and the stories I have chosen to share with this audience, are vignettes of institutional corruption to advance and sustain elite privilege. These corrupt practices have been long suppressed from Bolivia’s education authorities and by allowing these stories to be told, I worried I was making myself professionally and perhaps even personally vulnerable. I was absorbed in all the implications of what I had already done and what finishing this thesis and publishing it for others to read might mean. After all, the fate of whistleblowers generally is not encouraging, and in writing what I hope is an honest and accurate critique I may have cut-off any chance of working in Bolivia again.

Over the two years (2007-2008) that it has taken me to write up to this point of my thesis, Bolivian politics and social relations have continued to lurch from one crisis to the next. The Indigenous leader of the country, Evo Morales and his Indigenous based
socialist political party Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement towards Socialism) or MAS, are hated by a large minority of elite Bolivians - including the elite families I have written about in this thesis. This hatred by some of the graduates of Colegio Americano and their families has been expressed in political hostilities and social confrontations that, thanks to the Internet’s user-generated video and blog sites, have openly reported on and shown their overtly racist and class-based vehemence:

On January 8, a march on the main plaza turned into a fight between local police and protesters, and part of the municipal council building was burnt. With a dozen people injured, the social movements began to march each day, demanding the resignation of [the city’s governor]. On January 11, violence erupted when [the governor’s] supporters, many of whom wore white shirts to identify themselves, and a group called Youth for Democracy broke through the police lines and began indiscriminately beating any indigenous person they could find. The “white shirts” then attempted to take the main plaza, but those in the plaza fought back. A long and violent battle that lasted well into the night resulted in two dead [one campesino and one member of Youth for Democracy] and more than 200 injured. The city was in shock as images in the media of the white elite fighting the brown-skinned working class graphically illustrated the clear class and race divisions within Bolivia.

Pfoeffer and Cridland, January 2007

Six of Bolivia’s nine provinces joined the 24-hour strike Tuesday, which was organized by civic leaders in ..., Bolivia’s largest city and the center of opposition to Mr. Morales. Opposition leaders, mainly from the urban middle class, called the strike because they fear a drift toward dictatorship by Mr. Morales, a militant socialist elected in late 2005 on promises to nationalize industries and redistribute wealth to poor Indian peasants. Since then, violence has swelled, illustrating Bolivia’s stark divide between its poorer Indian population in the western highlands and the mestizo and European-descended people of its more populous and wealthier eastern plains.

The Washington Times, August 2007

I am deeply troubled that people whom I taught have been proudly involved in horrible and brutal acts against their fellow citizens. Their miscreant actions add weight to my argument that Colegio Americano’s racist hidden curriculum combined with the plutocratic practices in the school endorsed imperialist values and helped to continue the deep divisions between rich and poor in Bolivia.
Despite Morales winning 54% of the popular vote in the 2005 presidential election which handed executive control of the nation into the hands of the Indigenous majority, Bolivian oligarchs have been fighting to hold on to their power in all manners they deem necessary. In the last months of journal writing in 2006, I noted that the elite were taking to the streets to protest against the changing political environment. Since I left the country, their actions have become more militant and hostile to the extent that some commentators believe a class war is now raging in Bolivia, as evidenced in the following media comments:

When Bolivians elected their first indigenous president… a year ago, the country's poor and marginalized could now claim a president as their own. It was also clear, however, that Bolivia's transformation would not end with an election, and that it would continue to provoke serious political conflict. On Thursday, that conflict turned into open battle on the streets of the nation's third-largest city… leaving two men dead and more than 150 people wounded.

Is Bolivia on the Brink of a Civil War?
New America Media, News Report, Jan 12, 2007

"We've arrived at a moment that we don't know exactly how to face…" says Carlos Valverde, "The fear I have is that one day we'll arrive at the cliff," he says, "and we'll arrive with such force that some will fall over the edge. And then it'll all go to hell."

Alarmed by change, Bolivia's elite mull civil war
Associated Press, October 1, 2007

While the above commentaries may be somewhat hyperbolic in their wording, there is no doubt that since Evo Morales’ stunning victory and “despite a broad mandate for change, the past two years have seen a return of social and political polarization” (Molina, 2008: 7). This polarization has occurred because Morales’ political agenda is based on returning the Indigenous majority to a place within the framework of the nation-state’s politics. MAS and its allies have rewritten the constitution and are working to replace Bolivia’s old constitution with one that respects the Pachamama (Mother Earth); values the people’s multi-ethnicity and embeds participatory democracy at the community level.
Such fundamental changes have been opposed and vilified by those who had held power for decades and the Bolivian elite remain powerful despite their loss of executive political power. I would argue that elite schools, such as Colegio Americano, have continued to play a vital role in the continuation of oligarch negativity towards the country’s political changes and their determination to subvert the changes in whatever way possible. I have shown that Colegio Americano was administered with a mindset of wealthy students’ first, official regulations second: thus if the school rules needed to be bent to help a student’s college prospects, the rules were ignored. Likewise, in Bolivian politics if the oligarchs are not happy with the new laws calling for hacienda land being returned to Indigenous owners or renegotiating the state’s share of the hydrocarbon industries’ profits then they have ignored the laws of the State and gone ahead with autonomy referendums and the creation of paramilitary youth groups.

In the face of such a hostile situation in Bolivia, and being acutely aware that many friends and all of my in-laws remain in Bolivia, I did not wish to take these Bolivian elite on by writing this thesis. And yet, the braver part of me has always hoped that by writing about how an elite school operates in Bolivia it will help to bring about change to education in the country and hopefully to its society as well. My two emotional reactions were, of course, incompatible and until one desire dominated the other I could not write with the surety of purpose needed for this chapter.

In trying to resolve my impasse, I was fortified in my re-reading of critical theory recently. It reminded me that I chose a relatively controversial topic to study because as a critical researcher I should take on issues in education that positivist and interpretivist research might shy away from:

Unlike traditional and liberal accounts of schooling, with their emphasis on historical continuities and historical development, critical theory points
educators towards a mode of analysis that stresses the breaks, discontinuities, and tensions in history, all of which become valuable in that they highlight the centrality of human agency and struggle while simultaneously revealing the gap between society as is presently exists and society as it might be.

Giroux, 1983a: 66

As an advocate of critical education theory I reminded myself that I should be prepared to try and do something about my beliefs irrespective of whether they are contrary to the prevailing realities in modern schooling. As Peter McLaren argues:

The education system still serves the interests of those with money and power. I agree with Kozol when he says that we still need today “a generation of hard-working, ethically motivated and effective rebels” (Kozol, 1981:116).

McLaren, 1989:193

Effective rebelliousness, in my case, necessitates being a whistleblower so that a story like the one I have told about Colegio Americano might stop being under the radar in its corrupt practices because no one outside of their school knows about what is happening. Again, critical theorists, such as Kincheloe, offer courage by reminding me that whistle blowing is not a new approach, even though for me it is the first time I have chosen to write in such a manner:

Critical pedagogy is dedicated to resisting the harmful effects of dominant power. Advocates of critical pedagogy work to expose and contest oppressive forms of power… The curriculum of critical pedagogy “name’s names” as it focuses its attention on corporate power wielders [and] agents of colonialism.

Kincheloe, 2004: 34-35

I was fortified by these ideals and reminders of why I began the process of CRP in the first place, but I was also aware that Kincheloe’s high level of commitment to disclosure by naming names was a bar too high for this thesis. I wondered if I could solve this contradiction but found it an area that remains troubling even as I write. Nevertheless, I did re-discover some confidence with the implications of finishing this journey even with contradictions unresolved but at least exposed:

Accept the ambivalence of participation and agency… it becomes an invitation or an obligation to act on the basis that the rules of the game can be
changed while it is being played, however rigged the game may be in favour of some players and against others.

Donald, 1992: 161

The confidence I found was to realise that critical theorist’s ideals are what I can try and uphold in my own work-practices but I have to decide within what type of school epistemology and school market I will try and do that. That school is not Colegio Americano. In moving through the first three stages of CRP and trying so hard to move to its fourth and final stage, I see now it is not possible to reconstruct Colegio Americano. Donald’s quotation above resonated because I finally understood that my thesis story cannot change basic rules of a rigged game. Once I discovered this I realised how to move forward in this chapter.

Ultimately, I absorbed these critical theorists’ ideals and decided to complete my thesis journey because I felt that my work could challenge the status quo:

Rightly or wrongly schools are generally viewed, even by their worst critics, as important instruments of social policy. More than that, they are highly visible, and highly costly, symbols of official policy aimed at shaping who we are and become as nations and peoples.

Paquette, 1991: 1

This finally ‘kick-started’ the writing of this chapter with a realisation that I could not walk away from this thesis because I knew and disapproved of the way that Colegio Americano was shaping the next generation of Bolivian leaders. It was up to me to report on what I had observed because if I did not do so, I would be complicit in perpetuating corrupt educational processes. Even more importantly, I decided it was time to have me face my own reckoning and begin to think about white privilege in this story and turn my critical lens on myself. In the following pages, I will examine if I was an unsuitable leader for Colegio Americano and consider what my journey from naivety to some awareness has taught me about leadership.
Learning Again from Critical Education Theorists

Once I knew I needed to persist with this thesis, I returned to the university library to hunt out more writings in Critical Education Theory with the understanding that as my lived experience has helped me build theory, I needed theory to guide my continuing reflection.

Schön (1983) fortified me first by showing me that my hesitation to begin the reconstruction stage of Critically Reflective Practice had actually been a productive pause. I had been doing a version of his reflection-in-action (1983: 56) which was an important step that I had to go through to move forward. Freire and Shor also comforted me in their shared dialogues about transforming education, when they empathised with my reflections:

* Shor: Fear comes from the dream you have about the society you want to make and unmake through teaching and other politics.
  * Freire: Yes! Fear exists precisely because you have a dream…
  * Shor: Making a dream of transformation concrete puts you in experiences that involve risk.

1987: 56

Putting fear behind me and accepting the positivity of taking time to reflect on my writings up to this point, I looked for a focus point to begin again. I decided to refocus on the conclusions I had developed by the end of chapter seven; namely, that plutocracy and racism were the central features confronting Colegio Americano. I thought, maybe, I could theorise a way out of plutocracy and racism and even went as far as writing an earlier draft of this chapter with the intent of showing the reader a perspective of how I thought Colegio Americano could be transformed if only other stakeholders would go through enough Critically Reflective Practice, like I had done! Critical friends pointed out the naivety and contradiction of that draft quite succinctly.
Nevertheless, I took from that draft some features of a perhaps idealistic vision of education that I had dreamed of for change in Colegio Americano and still use its inspiration in this final version of the chapter. I do so knowing that it is not realistic. I do this knowing I may be judged as utopian. But I have finally understood that Colegio Americano is antithetical to my vision of good education, so if I am to have any hope of inserting some transformative analysis into this stage of my version of CRP then I need a good vision to compare with Colegio Americano.

The vision of good education that I consider in this chapter comes from several works by an academic of Quechuan descent named Sandy Marie Anglás Grande. Her ideas helped me to come out of my funk. Her work spoke to me immediately and clicked in place a missing piece of insight I had previously been struggling to envision. Grande’s (2000a, 2000b, 2007) research was located mainly in North American Indian sites and explored the epistemology and, what I considered to be, the wisdoms of those cultures. I read her work with the greatest of respect as a non-Indigenous outsider, and through her words began to imagine a transformative path of schooling that made far more sense to me for a Bolivian context than the for-profit path used by the American International school I had led.

Grande’s research extended and challenged the ideas of critical pedagogy in a manner that I thought showed clearly why Colegio Americano could never be altered enough to be transformative. Her words spoke of extending critical education theory’s aspiration of radical democratisation, which Grande defined as, “the transformation of existing social and economic relations through the critique and transformation of capitalist social relations of production” (2007: 320) to include, and perhaps even give a position of privilege to, Red Pedagogy. This is a term she used to describe a shift of critical
pedagogy from its primary focus on capitalism and a re-centring of the education debate around the issue of sovereignty. That is, “the transformation of existing colonialist relations through critique and transformation of the exploitive relations of imperialism” (p 320). That re-centring of pedagogical focus to sovereignty pin pointed Colegio Americano’s rootedness in imperialist practices and made begin to think that the only way to move forward in transformative theorising was to recommend a Bolivia where a school like Colegio Americano does not exist.

Grande proposed a working definition for Red Pedagogy by delineating four key aspects:

(1) The quest for sovereignty and the dismantling of global capitalism as its political focus; (2) Indigenous knowledge as its epistemological foundation; (3) the Earth as its spiritual center; and (4) tribal and traditional ways of life as its sociocultural frame of reference.

Grande, 2000b: 355

These four aspects of Red Pedagogy are characteristics that resemble the philosophy underpinning Bolivia’s proposed new constitution and the articles within it as they relate to education. I believe Grande’s Red Pedagogy and Bolivia’s newest constitution have education values worth pursuing and I now believe Colegio Americano is the converse of these values.

Grande’s theories also helped expose to me my role as an imperialist in my thesis story. Grande’s papers (2000a, 2000b, 2007) are written from the perspective of integrating competing systems of thought rather than viewing problems as necessarily binary. At Colegio America, I had described various clashes of dualistic ideas: Western or Bolivian curriculum? Plutocracy or meritocracy? Grading for learning or privileging? Age-based or academic based promotion? What I interpreted Grande as offering was another way of viewing choice:
Red Pedagogy is, by definition, a space of engagement. It is the liminal and intellectual borderlands where indigenous and non-indigenous scholars encounter one another, working to remember, redefine and reverse the devastation of the original colonial encounter. 

2007: 331

Grande understood that artificial dialectics would not help reconstruct schools in a transformative manner and called for a new way of moving forward by Indigenous peoples knowing both their own culture and those of the oppressors so as to be able to contest and reconstruct knowledge (2007: 330). In short, Grande showed me that by working at Colegio Americano I was an oppressor too. By the time I was reading Grande I had been in Bolivia for four years and I could see how privileged my experiences were within society and, most especially, within Colegio Americano. The more I read of Grande, the more I turned my critique on me and asked myself what right did I have to be working in Colegio Americano in such a privileged position?

I returned to the second research question I articulated in chapter one and pondered the answer with this new insight:

- What was my role as a school principal and then director at Colegio Americano in perpetuating practices that advantaged the wealthy and privileged stakeholders and was I ethically culpable for being unable to transform the school?

In answering this question in the following pages, I will explain how I tried to transform the school and offer my vision of what the school could become if the world was a better place generally.

**Ending Corruption at Colegio Americano**

Firstly and fundamentally Colegio Americano needs to end its corrupt practices if it is to begin a path towards transformative reconstruction. I have argued that corruption
occurred at *Colegio Americano* because incompatible systems were forced to function side by side. These incompatible systems were administrative plutocratic reporting and grading practices clashing against teacher-driven meritocratic assessment methods. For teachers, assigning grades was about trying to fairly judge a student’s output in the classroom against the output of other students in the same class. For the administrators, assigning grades was about ensuring families remained enrolled in the school and that the reputation of the school continued to be privileged and influential.

Corruption in the school was normalised because patrons of *Colegio Americano* conspired together to allow the misconduct to continue or be ignored. The families in the school allowed the corruption to continue because it meant that their children would be able to access tertiary opportunities that other Bolivian families would never be able to access. The administrators in the school remained silent in the conspiracy because their jobs were vulnerable and their understanding of what was going on was superficial and cursory because they stayed employed at the school for such brief periods. The Board members and owners encouraged the corruption because their interest in the school was not about education but enrolment expansion. The Bolivian government failed to stop the corruption due to incompetence and the distractions of a State in constant crisis. And the accreditation agency, previously known as SACS-CASI and now as AdvancED, knowingly allowed the corruption to continue because even though they were aware of exactly what was going in the school their interest in the school was business not education.

If corruption continued when various layers of an education hierarchy collude, then corruption should be effectively weakened or eradicated if all levels of the education
power structure works against that collusion. Thus, I will try to explain how corruption was sustained at Colegio Americano even though I tried to stem that corruption.

My actions as director of Colegio Americano showed that leadership is crucial in enacting change in the school – but perhaps not sufficient on its own. Having witnessed the corruption first hand and then investigating how deeply the corruption went back through the history of the school, I then chose to try and initiate change. I did this by making myself familiar with Bolivian Education Reform Law regulations and then re-writing the school’s regulations to conform to its grading policies. I also closed down corruptible loopholes in the school’s regulations and made sure that at least during my watch as director of Colegio Americano no student would pass a class that a teacher had failed them in and no student would graduate if they had not completed all the required classes.

My convictions and reforms were soon tested when a student at Colegio Americano had his father advocate for special consideration:

Excerpt One: This week report cards are being disseminated to parents. Our normal procedure for students who are failing multiple subjects is for the parents to have a meeting with the principal or director to discuss the situation. This morning I had a meeting with Mr. _____ regarding his son ______ and I informed him that his son would not be able to pass the school year and would he like his son to undertake our newly initiated ‘reforzamiento’ programme?

Mr. _____ made several comments that I knew nothing about and then he bald faced lied to me! He asserted that the previous Director made a written agreement with Mr. _____ in December 2005 that would allow his son to take several first semester exams that his son had refused to sit at a later date. I have complete and total confidence in the staff who have been teaching _____ and am absolutely positive that the manner in which _____ has been assessed this year has been fair, accurate and educationally sound. I am also certain the previous Director did not make any agreement with Mr _____ because he would have told me to organise the new exams.

So here we go with another example of attempted corruption at our school. As the counsellor just said, when I asked him what he thought the father wants, “don’t be naive Christine, he wants you to pass his son.” It will be
interesting to see whether I get through this or have some of my ideals chipped away. I cannot imagine any circumstance where I will allow this man to get his way, but will I change my mind if he stops me from leaving the country?

Excerpt Two: Mr. _____ came in again with a threatening legal letter. It says he’s going to go to the Bolivian Ministry of Education and complain about the school not having complied with their regulations. He then went round to all the teachers of his son and threatened each one individually.

Excerpt Three: So the school’s lawyer comes and sees me before the Board meeting today to get a background on the case of ____. He is as slimy as I remember him and starts asking me about Mr. _____’s character and marital situation. Once I explained that Mr. _____ is in a horrible custody battle with his wife he immediately states that he understands the situation and goes on a for a while about his extensive experiences with difficult parents and how I have to handle this matter bravely.

So then we both headed up to the Board meeting and to make a long story (a three hour meeting) short the Board and the lawyer recommended that we give [the student] another chance to pass the year by doing another set of exams and basically negotiate the threats away. The counsellor was there too and he translated my response: that acquiescing would mean unprofessional conduct and would suggest that we have done something wrong. If I asked my staff to do it there would be open rebellion and that the issue is way too public and so if we did this all of our students and their families would know that we are powerless in the face of threats and that our regulations don’t mean anything. Thus, because we as a teaching staff have done nothing wrong, we should fight this action.

There was silence when my words were translated.

Then one Board member spoke up and agreed that it is a question of morals and principles. Then the lawyer stated that perhaps I, and the teachers, didn’t fully understand the possible consequences a fight might invoke – including the fact that we may not be allowed to leave the country.

It went on and on, but I am tired and can’t think straight. It ended with an agreement that I would discuss the issue with the teachers involved on Monday and we will all meet again next week to reconsider the situation. Uuuggghhhhhhhhh.

Excerpt Four: I spoke with the teachers about the ____ case. They are angry and scared. They feel they have done nothing wrong and yet it feels like they are being forced into allowing kids to pass who don’t deserve it. I have to fix this to protect them and our integrity too.

Excerpt Five: Wow! I think I won! I think the Board is going to back me on the ____ issue! [One of the Board members] had spoken with two lawyers and they suggested that ____’s claims were pretty much bogus. [The Board member] will be negotiating with Mr. ____ tomorrow and asked me what my bottom line would be for his negotiations.

I re-explained that I believe we should offer [the student] one more chance only in the form of reforzamiento, as 20 days at the end of the year. It took me a while to adequately explain in Spanish that the Bolivian education regulation maintains you have to divide the final year grade with the reinforcement grade to see if the promedio equals a 60, and thus a pass.
The counsellor disagrees with my plan and suggested that [the student] would be psychologically further damaged by another possible failure. But he did not say “pass him” this time and I chimed in that I believed it was ultimately the Board’s responsibility to make a decision and that the counsellor and I could only present our opinions.

Then the Board President [who now calls me hijita (daughter)], suggested the following negotiation, which I wholeheartedly agree to:
1. Explain to Mr. _____ that we have been incredibly flexible and professional and that his claims are bogus.
2. Offer the reforzamiento option and explain the psychological drawbacks.
3. If [the student] fails, the family must accept that failure.
4. Irrespective of whether they choose 2 and/or 3, [the student] does not return to our school next year.

I left the meeting quite stunned and hoping fervently that my understanding of Spanish is enough that I didn’t misunderstand the key points of the discussion.

Excerpt Six: I don’t know if I am handling this situation well. So far, the Board has allowed me my moral and idealistic solutions and so too the counsellor is quiet about the case now. Let’s see. If [the student] passes reinforcement then that will be great. But that’s it. If he doesn’t pass, they will have to change his grades after I leave.

Journal Entries in 2005 and 2006

When I initiated these actions, I did not consider if the Bolivian grading regulations were ‘good’ or ‘bad’ I just considered that they were legally binding on Colegio Americano. I felt that it was not my place, or the school’s right, to ignore the laws. I considered my actions as necessary if the school was going to respect Bolivian sovereignty and if the school wanted to challenge its compliance responsibilities it would have to do so through proper channels.

I believe that making the decision to use my position of power at the school to try and rectify the corrupt actions going on within Colegio Americano, was my first real step in becoming a good leader. Leaders must be prepared to take risks and accept responsibility for what occurs under their tenure – and an ethical leader, like the type I wanted to be, should transcend self-interest when choosing a course of action.
Begley noted that for education leaders “personal values were found to be significant influences on decision making” (1999: 257) and that was certainly the case for me. I implemented decisions that faced down hypocrisy because it was an anathema to me. I felt it was hypocritical to bend rules and compromise on the interpretation of school regulations when we were expecting our students to follow all school rules and imposing consequences on them if they did not do so. If I had been willing to negotiate the use of rules in the school, then the message this would have been giving out was that only some people have to follow rules.

The second action I took during my tenure as director of Colegio Americano was to communicate about the misconduct I had observed. I talked openly with fellow staff members. I faced the Board and solicited their, albeit grudging, support to implement changes in the school. I also wrote to the accreditation agency about the details of the misconduct and gained their on-paper support to try and improve the situation at the school. In doing these things, I attempted to engage others in supporting my decisions for I was certain that corruption is intrinsically wrong. But my moral and cultural standards were not shared by all stakeholders, so I see now that I based my decision to act on my personal convictions that misconduct should not be tolerated and I did not garner a supportive base to justify my acts.

The actions I took while director of Colegio Americano allowed me to write this thesis. If I had failed to act when I had the opportunity, I couldn’t argue here that others should also take action to continue the changes I started. I cannot judge whether my actions in stemming the corrupt practices in the school where the right ones to make. Nor can I know if once I left the school my actions were reversed. However, in hindsight I can see how black and white my perspective was, and how rigid my stance became. If given the
opportunity again, I would like to think I would have taken a less-autocratic approach in my leadership. For instance, instead of taking on all the decisions alone I could have created an appeals committee for deciding when to make exceptions to established policy. Nonetheless, my act of trying to do something about what I saw as wrong in the school was well intentioned and confirmed my belief that failure to try something is worse than failure itself.

In the grand scheme of things, my role in attempting to curb corruption at Colegio Americano was a short-lived, minor one. Perhaps only a person without a vested interest in the school could take the risk to initiate change and thus show that it was possible, but once that precedent was established, that was as far as my role in meaningful, long-term change could be.

**Student Empowerment**

I believe that the only way that Colegio Americano might be transformed in the long term is to begin with the power of the students themselves. The students are the keepers of the gate because they are the ones who have the most institutional knowledge in the school. They are the ones who gain the most from the corruption but I believe they are also the one who have the most to learn from ending the corruption.

In my teaching at Colegio Americano I introduced critical pedagogy in my classes and made students aware of their potential roles as oppressors in Bolivia while at the same time recognising that they are members of the oppressed (i.e. developing) nations in our globalised, western dominated world. If the students can be encouraged to embrace critical pedagogy, ‘own’ the school and really establish their voice in its governance then the school might begin to mould itself around the collective desires and ambitions.
of the whole student body. What that change would look like, is not something I can know and, again, that is how it should be. Nonetheless, I would place my hopes in the students and urge teachers to harness their childish desires for fairness and equality at the school and in their society. In the long term, I believe that freed from corrupt modelling at Colegio Americano and with critical thinking classes that question their socialisation in privileged values from their elite parents, these students have the potential develop a hopeful, ethical vision for their school.

Student empowerment at Colegio Americano is possible. It would be straightforward to enhance the student body’s governance functions via several well-established methods, including their already functioning student council and their honour society. It would face entrenched resistance though - I tried in my first year as principal to make changes as an individual staff mentor. The students would have to be convinced that their efforts would be worth it; they would have to make their school a place that is “fearless” and one “that discourages acquiescence... in favour of building collective consent” (Ayers, 2004: 39). If that empowerment could be harnessed then I believe change could occur.

Grande’s vision could come into play here, and I would love to imagine that an American international school could fit the type of school that could institute Red Pedagogic principles:

> While it is self-evident that indigenous knowledge is essential in the process of decolonization, I would argue that the Master’s tools are necessary... By virtue of living in this world and having to negotiate the forces of colonization, indigenous scholars are given no choice but to know, understand and acquire the grammar of empire as well as to develop skills to contest it.

2007: 330

Imagine if Colegio Americano students embraced the notions of Red Pedagogy. They are perfectly positioned to use what they learn within the school and turn that
knowledge against the status quo. Then, with the students’ opinions and desires at the forefront of decision making in the school, it is not so unbelievable to imagine Colegio Americano achieving a more balanced education structure between American ‘best-practice’ and Bolivian Education Law Reform enactment.

Of course, if students are to be convinced to become contesters of imperial power, they need to study and practise empowering education (for example, Freire or Shor). To start this, I would argue that the upper echelons of the school’s governance structures, that is, at the Board level, should allow the students at least one voting membership position. Students I taught at Colegio Americano certainly expressed their desire for empowerment:

Student should have a voice... We are part of the school; without students the school would not work. So school should not be a dictatorship.  
_Colegio Americano_ Student 2

If I could change something in the school it would be to make it easier for students to complain and be heard.  
_Colegio Americano_ Student 3

Still, I am getting ahead of myself in my imagining and want to bring the envisioning back to the steps needed to permanently eradicate corruption at the school. Ultimately, the corruption of grading and reporting at Colegio Americano occurred because it was permitted by the Board, but if the students had voting rights on governance decisions they could object and veto grading and reporting practices that they feel are unethical and unfair:

Getting good grades by working hard prepares you for college. If you are always cheating and you don’t get those grades in an honest way, then you don’t deserve them.  
_Colegio Americano_ Student 1

The students would also need to be empowered to take control of their own academic destiny by being given explicit training in reporting and grading procedures within the
school. Once that knowledge is gained by the first high school grades, secondary students should be required to record, and ultimately be responsible for, all of their evaluation and achievement documentation.

I think if the school made this student-centred reporting change in procedure, shifting the knowledge to the student, then it would be keeping that knowledge in safer hands. Of course I am not trying to be utopian here, and am mindful of the risks involved “when students have power” as Shor (1996) outlined in his book of the same name and as discussed in Oakes and Rogers (2005) *Learning Power* and Shultz’s (2008) text *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*. Still, like Diane Hart argues in her assessment handbook, *Authentic Assessment*:

> When students take on increased responsibility for evaluating their own and each other’s work, they begin to internalize performance standards and apply them to their future efforts. With this increase in autonomy comes a sense of ownership of one’s own learning and growth.

1994: 60

Of course, authentic assessment is predicated on the assumption of truth and ethicity and so *Colegio Americano* would have to establish strong, external accountability measures to move the school towards an evaluation system that they can be proud of. Gallagher’s (2000) essay *A Seat at the Table: teachers reclaiming assessment* offers possibilities for *Colegio Americano* when he writes about assessment based on engagement and local accountability:

> I believe that schools ought to be accountable… to their local communities, which should engage in ongoing negotiations with schools about what it means to be effective, responsible local citizens.

Opening up authentic assessment and evaluation processes (Darling-Hammond, 1995) to students’ in-put at *Colegio Americano* might even lead to the eradication of grades as a reporting tool. It might not, of course, because students may decide that grades are expedient and useful. Still, I like to envision a grade-less school and imagine a time at
Colegio Americano where students’ reports can no longer be so easily manipulated by an administrator’s keyboard. Whatever the system the students help to develop, I hope for a Colegio Americano where the following students’ quotations are authenticated:

The school should enforce individual learning and keep up with each student individually in order to adapt to their learning.

Grades are just numbers. Real intelligence comes deep inside each individual mind. Intelligence and success cannot be measured by numbers.

Student Questionnaire Feedback

If the students gained a voice in the governance of the school and took control of their individual academic destiny then these two factors might be a first step forward in the creation of an ethical and empowered student-centred school. Nevertheless, I contrast these ideas with the cautionary note that at Bolivia’s public universities they do have co-governance by students and this has certainly not done much to end corruption there.

Decreasing Counsellor Power

Another crucial change needed at Colegio Americano to transform the school ethically, would be a radical shift away from the central role of the college counsellor in the school’s administration. The counsellor position was unique to American International Schools and not paralleled in Bolivian education institutions. In many ways, the college counsellor position at Colegio Americano was the representative and conduit of western power and knowledge. The counsellor was the filter through which students accessed information about USA and other western universities and in justifying his role the counsellor ‘talked up’ the value of USA tertiary opportunities.

Grande argued that a Red Pedagogy “compels students to question how western knowledge is related to the process of colonization” (2007: 331) and I believe the counsellor role warrants intensive deconstruction in this matter. The way the counsellor’s role was defined meant that his opinion counted more than any other
resource – a classic paternalistic, disempowering arrangement. While the counsellor remains a gatekeeper for accessing knowledge, students and their families at Colegio Americano will remain disempowered.

I would like to see the power of the college counsellor dramatically decreased and a teaching role similar to what we in Australia call a career education teacher be introduced to take charge of facilitating students’ own college selection and application journey. For years the students at Colegio Americano mediated their college aspirations through the counsellor. This did not prepare the students to be able to plan their post-secondary careers independently in later life. It also meant that the college counsellor held great power which could be, and was, abused.

One of the school regulations that I changed when I was director of Colegio Americano was to stop the practice of the college counsellor being the authorising signatory for the college transcripts that he or she created. This change helped circumvent the counsellor’s abuse of that authority, but it would not be enough if Board members and/or directors wanted to change grades or doctor transcripts in other ways. As I have argued here, I think the best advocate for each student is the students themselves. Let the students have responsibility for their college choices and make the students the guardians of fairness by making the transcript process be accountable to them.

**Increasing Parent Knowledge**

Parent power needs to be challenged, interrupted and reinterpreted at Colegio Americano. Many of the parents have knowledge of how ‘things’ work in the school and have used the corrupt procedures to their children’s advantage in the past. So parents may not be interested in change and empowerment; at least not all of them.
I do believe that parents should better understand what an American International School can and cannot offer, since many parents at the Colegio Americano did not know how the school graded their children using an incompatible bi-national structure; nor did they know that the SACS-CASI (now AdvancED) accreditation organisation, which is supposed to be a quality assurance mechanism for the school, has historically been extremely reluctant to dis-accredit even the most lax of their schools.

But even with greater knowledge of how Colegio Americano’s functions my reflections have shown that many parents in the school accepted and tacitly endorsed the administration’s manipulations of grading for years. Thus, without parent support corruption will not end in the school – and this is a sticking point that I remain unconvinced is actually changeable.

**Strengthening Transparency**

Incorporated in the introduction of student-centred reporting procedures and college application processing, the school would also need far more transparent and accessible regulations. This idea was first given to me by one of the accreditation advisors who came to coach me when I was a new director in the last few months of my contract at Colegio Americano. She suggested that Board minutes should be kept in a reserved section of the school’s library for all stakeholders to access. I would add to the minutes, all documents of ownership of the school; all legal observances to the nation’s Education Ministry; and all pertinent accreditation certification compliance information as well. A school that is ethical has nothing to hide whereas a school that is corrupt does. Transparency is the only way Colegio Americano would prove itself changed once it finds an ethical way to match learning with reporting.
In the area of reporting progress, the school could really open up its assessment and evaluation processes and make transparent the developmental progress of all students. If children were not doing well then the families in that class would all be aware of the situation because the classroom doors would be wide open and inviting rather than closed and forbidding. Instead of seeing school as a place of intense competition between peers, the school might be able to develop a community of cooperative learners via some form of critical reflection process. Then, revealing student progress to the entire school community would not be an exercise in shaming or blaming but a celebration of risk-taking and perseverance.

If the school shares how teachers gather information on what students know and can do with all families and then transparently communicate what steps teachers regularly take to interpret and make judgements about all of that collected information, then parents could become collaborators in their children’s learning journeys rather than impotent receivers of final evaluation results. Hopefully grading and reporting at Colegio Americano would become so decentralised that members of the upper hierarchy in the school would no longer have the power to circumvent original results.

**Improving Staff Stability**

Staff stability might also help Colegio Americano become a less corrupt school. It takes time for a staff to become a cohesive team but if Colegio Americano’s teacher could build into a unified workforce it would empower them and make them less susceptible to accept misconduct from the administration or Board. Staff stability would be a worthy goal to pursue even if the ability to actually attain a stabilised workforce could be extremely hard to achieve in reality. In lieu of full staff stability, then very tightly regulated, transparent, detailed job-descriptions would make it a lot easier for Colegio
Americano to weather the tides of changing personalities working in each position. If the job descriptions were clearly outlined then the school might begin to function well even without maximum staff stability attainment.

The most expedient way to stabilise staffing would be to first focus on the local staff who have more of a stake in the school than the transient population of short term international contract teachers. If Colegio Americano could encourage the local staff to be loyal then it would really help the school. The first way that the school could do this would be to increase the local wage so that the apartheid structure of payment was abolished or at least weakened so that Bolivian teachers pay becomes comparable to the international staff’s wages. If wage equivalency is not instigated, Colegio Americano cannot transform because it will remain a site where local intellectuals are not valued. On the other hand, if wage parity became a reality imagine what an example it would set to the Bolivian students about the worth of their own identities.

I believe Colegio Americano would reap great results if staffing was reconstructed so that a local principal role was created. The position would have to be filled by a Bolivian professional who was an expert on the national education system. Relying on the secretaries to fulfil this knowledge role has proven not to be workable. A Bolivian principal with that mandate would be advantageous for many reasons: as a role model for the students because it would be a position high up in the administration hierarchy; a local deputy could be a strong voice for local staff advocacy; and having a role designed to monitor Bolivian education laws would shift the school’s mandate to one that clearly respects national education values. Eventually, with the school’s prestigious reputation already firmly entrenched in Bolivia, a Bolivian principal would have the knowledge base and authority to begin engagement with the Bolivian government to negotiate a
way for Colegio Americano to legally operate in the country in a manner that is both ethical and admirable.

In a step by step plan to increase staffing stability, the local level should be the first area to improve, but not the only area. Eventually, Colegio Americano should move on to the harder goals: the international staff and most particularly the principal and director positions. Traditionally these are more “flighty” roles because international hires don’t stay through many contracts. If the local staff stability issue is achieved this fact in itself should prove some incentive for the international hired staff leaders to want to remain at the school for longer terms.

In the long run, local staff empowerment and stability would be the best possible outcome for Colegio Americano. While it is outside the scope of this thesis to argue for a revolutionary change to the accreditation agency’s leadership standards that privilege American, or Western born, school leaders running American international schools I would love to believe it possible that one day Colegio Americano will be run by an administrative team headed by a Bolivian.

**Broadening the Student Demographic**

Another area where small change might engender bigger transformation is the idea of setting up a scholarship system at Colegio Americano. During my time at the school there were no admission scholarships or reduction in tuition-fees scholarships for students from families who were financially unable to afford access. The scholarships could be for sport, academic prowess or any other scholarly choice that the school devices. This might then allow a developing of better understanding between families from different classes and clans throughout Bolivia.
Making a fairly homogenous student body a more heterogeneous sampling of the Bolivian population, even if only a little bit, will bring challenges to the school and may be construed as tokenism by some. Yet, I believe that the eliteness of the student clientele at *Colegio Americano* based on cost entry prohibitions, allowed the plutocratic emphasis on grading and reporting practices in the school. It also helped racism remain an unchallenged ethos at *Colegio Americano*. I would hope that if the student body included more types of families, with all types of views on what is and is not appropriate, then the school would be less able to advocate school achievement based on wealth and position.

Ultimately, a broadening of the student demographic at *Colegio Americano* to include more Bolivian students from the middle and lower classes might develop a counter-socialisation imperative. If wealthy Bolivian students interact with Indigenous students on a daily basis, they can learn from each other and begin to see how their historical hatred of one another might end. Racism can only be deterred if it is confronted head on and *Colegio Americano* should stop ignoring this issue.

**Moving Beyond Americanisms**

In chapter four I outlined many of the daily practices at *Colegio Americano* that venerated the USA; such as starting the school day by flag raising the stars and stripes; music classes teaching the words to the American anthem; and, teaching money concepts in maths with worksheets using dimes and pennies. These overtly pro-American practices would have to be terminated in *Colegio Americano* based on the understanding that schools are sites of socialisation and that it is dangerous and divisive for the school to continue to graduate students alienated from their own culture. On the other hand, I do not believe pro-Bolivian propaganda and nationalist rituals should be
put in the place of the Americanisms either. Both the USA and Bolivia have long histories of warfare, patriarchy and ruthless capitalism and neither nation can offer a system of education free from graft or nepotism.

Given that the Americanism at Colegio Americano are in many ways the reason for its being, envisioning the school without these qualities is not really seeking to transform the school but seeking to create a very different school. Still it is an appealing fantasy to envision the school creating a culture of tolerance and internationalism. Just imagine a school where Bolivian and western values are debated and discussed and where the students are taught to boldly envision their country as not a place of ‘us versus them’ but a nation where peace and cooperation is possible.

Joel Spring’s (2007) *A New Paradigm for Global School Systems* offers a very useful mapping of a more democratic, global curriculum based on holistic, inclusive and eco-friendly schooling. But, again, I understand that Colegio Americano would be very unlikely to be capable of transforming to such an extent. I am also mindful of Grande’s critique of critical pedagogy’s failure to consider an Indigenous perspective and her calling for Indigenous scholars to be able to reshape and re-imagine education (2000a: 467). While I feel capable of discussing what traditions Colegio Americano should leave behind and can recommend what might be possible to create in the future, I would prefer to leave the reconstruction of Colegio Americano in the hands of the Bolivian students and teachers who continue to be involved in the school’s future.

**Dual Diploma Duplicity**

*Colegio Americano* did not have a strong relationship with its own national education system and actually functioned in a manner that deliberately sets itself apart from other
Bolivian schools. This separation must change if Colegio Americano is to end the corruption and plutocracy that is holding back the school from becoming an ethical and transparent institution. The kind of change needed at this level must be a dramatic one, because the dual-diploma system used in Colegio Americano is a crucial component in the corruption at the school. I have argued that the Bolivian diploma and the USA’s high school diploma are incompatible but are currently running congruently at Colegio Americano. The two pathways to high school graduation clash in many ways: the curriculum programs are different; the grading structures are poles apart; and, the underlying education philosophies of both systems are nationalistic and parochial so at the chalk-face the students are sent mixed messages - sometimes pro-Bolivian and sometimes anti-Bolivian.

These indelible divergences need to be faced. I believe that it necessitates the abolition of the dual-diploma practice in the school. I acknowledge that this is a radical proposal because it will cut out a fundamental reason why parents presently send their children to the Colegio Americano:

When students mention that they have graduated from an American school, they get better treatment and sometimes better opportunities

Parent Questionnaire Feedback

Nonetheless, the incompatibility of the dual-diploma structure not only breeds corruption in the school, it also helps to continue the class divisions in Bolivia and its resulting cultural apartheid:

In Bolivia it is critical for our local students to attain the Bolivian bachillerato to gain access to many jobs in this country. If we combine our more prestigious Colegio Americano school diploma with certification from the host country, our students have the greatest advantage.

Directors Questionnaire Feedback

Is it too unrealistic to imagine Colegio Americano entering into formal negotiations with the Bolivian government for an agreement that allows Colegio Americano to operate
with legitimate exemptions from nation based education regulations? The school could negotiate for articulation in legislation that Colegio Americano students be exempted from the Bolivian bachillerato certification and in its place recognise that an ‘international’ high school diploma be considered comparable. Further to a memorandum of equivalency, the school would need to negotiate that International Schools have a right to exist in the country and that such schools are legitimate on the basis of their continued membership in an internationally recognised education accreditation agency. I am not necessarily advocating that international schools should in fact have this right – as I have argued throughout that they can be sites of cultural imperialism via schooling – but it would leave it up to the Bolivian government to make that call.

It may surprise some readers that in my proposal for a better Colegio Americano I suggest ending the explicitly Bolivian aspect of the school program rather than the American part. After all, through all the ideas I wrote about how the school could change at the school level, a continuing theme was Bolivian empowerment. But after much thought, I believe this choice is the only one possible because the so termed ‘American’ part of Colegio Americano’s school program does not have to be ‘American’ in nature and can be extremely flexible and ‘international’ in its focus:

Without strict adherence to federal/national guidelines or national ministries of education, American International Schools have a greater freedom in interpreting what and how to teach. Most schools have a broad perspective and place great emphasis on critical-thinking and problem solving, self-directed learning, and an integrated approach to community service. Curricula tend to be enriched by instructional material that often does not appear in national curricula. Time is available to invest in experiential learning. Standardized testing, while frequently used as one type of assessment tool, does not drive the curriculum nor constitute the primary means to measure students’ learning.
As an International School, *Colegio Americano* already uses curriculum and assessment practices that are individualised and student-centred:

The school usually incorporates the best educational practices in the teaching of children... These schools usually are child oriented and base their educational philosophy upon the notion that all children’s needs can be meet with different services and activities.

Directors Questionnaire Feedback

In an American International School educating the whole child – academics, athletics, outdoor services, clubs – are offered. Hopefully, these ‘elite’ children will lead from a more enlightened and accepting perspective as a result of their holistic education.

Directors Questionnaire Feedback

What *Colegio Americano* would need to do is greatly extend its embrace of the high ideals that international schooling offers and focuses all that ‘best educational practice’ on their grading and reporting structures too. To do this, *Colegio Americano* could offer many different options for its students so that it facilitates the individual needs of its students. For example, for some students a Montessori styled non-competitive evaluation system might suit; for others, the rigour of the International Baccalaureate might best position them for global college applications. Grading could be an option that families choose to accept for their children and other families might prefer to have reports that utilise a comment-based analysis only. If some students know they are staying in Bolivia for tertiary studies the school could mould the subject choices and grading structure around that goal; and if an American students visits the country for only a short time the school could ensure that compatible course credits were allocated in a grading language with which USA school districts are familiar. Basically, what I am suggesting is that *Colegio Americano* develops its evaluation, grading and reporting parameters so flexibly that it could cater for all needs and wants, that is, authentic assessment.
Imagine if this radical expansion of the grading and reporting parameters at Colegio Americano was a viable option for the school. By making more flexible the school’s reporting and grading regulations, in such a way that the students are at the centre of their own reporting and grading regime, the students would be empowered and able to self-manage (but with guidance) their certification responsibilities. Each student could negotiate their learning journey at the high school level. Teachers will facilitate their learning journey – but the subjects the students want to take and the study paths they wish to follow should be returned squarely into their own capable hands. Work samples, learning portfolios, in other words, well documented and transparent record keeping for each student about their individualised learning journey would then follow.

I also like to imagine that such a flexible system would enhance Colegio Americano students’ chances to enter university. In the twenty first century the way students around the globe get into university involves a staggering variety of processes and because of this Colegio Americano should suffer no detriment if it changed its reporting and grading policies; with the caveat, that it explained its systems openly and fully.

If the school adopted these ideas, I think the changes could encourage more parents to enrol their children in Colegio Americano. It would still be able to attract a privileged clientele because of its English language immersion methods and, in all likelihood, its student cohort would expand because the school could cater for student groups it previously could not accept – special needs students; students wanting International Baccalaureate qualifications; and perhaps even more groups.

With a flexible but transparent grading and reporting regime, plus Bolivian government recognition of Colegio Americano’s unique parameters, the school would be close to
becoming a school that no longer needs to practice corruption. In its place, Colegio Americano would have the potential to become a school of truly best practice and a school that no longer has to be so separate from its Bolivian community. At present:

Colegio Americano tries to form leaders but they are out of their context. We don’t teach them to be Bolivian leaders of their own country.

Staff Questionnaire Feedback

In this new era Colegio Americano students could use their money and influence and power to help their nation improve. Guided by the practice of critical pedagogy, such as that described in The Art of Critical Pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade, 2008), it could mean that the school becomes a place where Bolivians of all classes and foreigners from many nations work together to produce a de-corrupted school. Where the students could model what they have seen at the school and teach the next generation of leaders in Bolivia that governance does not have to be corrupt to be successful. Colegio Americano students could graduate from the school with pride in their achievements; knowing that what their reports and transcripts stated are deserved and fair. In this ideal Colegio Americano students might no longer wish to leave their country for a better tertiary education, instead more may choose to stay and help Bolivia’s education improve:

After I conduct my studies in education, my goal - and I feel it is an ambitious one - is to build the best children’s special education centre in Bolivia, to accommodate children from any social, economic or ethnic background. A centre of this kind is badly needed in Bolivia. Nevertheless I plan to undertake the project, with the feeling it will be a difficult mission, but with the conviction that it will improve Bolivian education.

Student Questionnaire Feedback

Accreditation Transformation

The final area in dire need of reconstruction in the forces affecting the running of Colegio Americano is the American educational accreditation agency previously known as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement, or SACS-SACI, and now as AdvancED.
As I argued in chapter seven, the accreditation of education institutes has become a huge industry spanning the entire globe. It is an extremely profitable education business and is completely market driven. Somewhat surprising to me, its faults are well known to many who work within AdvancED:

I am concerned about what I have heard about some accreditation agencies for international schools that might be compromising their standards to get more business. In particular I heard from a reliable source that one of the accreditation agencies takes some international schools that were denied accreditation by other agencies and guarantees that they will receive full accreditation. If this is true, it is a troubling development. I firmly believe the process of having US overseas schools go through a thorough, fair accreditation is a critical component of ensuring that the schools operate to the highest standards.

Directors Questionnaire Feedback

It is unrealistic, and beyond the scope of this thesis, to argue for major changes at this level of international education. Nevertheless, for the record, I want to state that I believe accreditation as a concept is fundamentally flawed because of its self-regulating, voluntary nature. I do not believe that quality control can be ensured when continued self-improvement is the criteria upon which quality is judged. And I believe that AdvancED practices educational imperialism because it is fundamentally wrong for one country, the USA, to dominate an organisation that judges educational quality in schools throughout the world.

The one suggestion I would make that AdvancED could implement right now, without having to fundamentally reconstruct itself, is to make public the accreditation status each school is allocated. Currently, schools are publically acknowledged as either accredited or not and whether schools are fully compliant, warned, or on probation are kept hidden. Colegio Americano never achieved full compliance with SACS-CASI and teetered between warning and probation throughout the 20 plus years it had been accredited. Within the accreditation organisation Colegio Americano was known as a
school with a troubled history, but outside the accreditation organisation all that was known is that Colegio Americano is an accredited school. I believe that hiding the specific status that Colegio Americano had been allocated was unfair to the families of the students at the school. It was also unfair to prospective parents because they erroneously assumed that Colegio Americano is a school of best practice because of its membership in SACS-CASI, now AdvancED.

Colegio Americano’s owners have seen firsthand that SACS-CASI (AdvancEd) is an institution without teeth and continue to flaunt its standards knowing that the likelihood of being dropped from its membership is minimal. This understanding has helped the school continue to act corruptly even when the accreditation agency was informed of exactly how the school changed grades and altered college transcripts. If the school’s accreditation status was exposed publically its creditability would be damaged and the Colegio’s owners might feel compelled to comply with AdvancED’s standards: then again, they might just search for a more accommodating accreditation agency...

A watchdog is an essential factor in ensuring that Colegio Americano not only makes changes to its grading and reporting practices but also continues to uphold those changes once implemented. Currently, the Bolivian education department is itself too corrupt and inefficient to be that watchdog. AdvancED is not an effective watch dog either and will remain that way until it is willing to expose Colegio Americano’s faults publically.

In a truly transformational era, I would love to see Colegio Americano gain quality control via an international organisation that is far more altruistic and globally heterogeneous – for example, the International Baha’i Schools or maybe a new agency
of my imagining that is both critical and globally transforming. In the short term, under real world conditions, I acknowledge Colegio Americano will probably remain quite similar to how it was before I arrived and how it is now that I have left.

**Conclusions**

Kincheloe acknowledged that, “advocates of a critical pedagogy understand that no simple, universally applicable answer can be provided to the questions of justice, power and praxis that haunt us” (2007b: 16). The suggestions I have detailed about how Colegio Americano could be reconstructed are hopeful, idealistic and perhaps hopelessly naive. As many social observers have noted, power does not cede power voluntarily and contemporary events suggest that the Bolivian elite are fighting to maintain the status quo in their power bases and so too Colegio Americano’s owners and administrators do not contemplate foundational change for their school.

It has been my effort throughout this chapter to utilise Smyth’s Reconstruction phase of Critically Reflective Practice (CRP). I do not believe I really succeeded because what I have ended up doing is writing up my reflections of a process that could not be achieved in my two year tenure as leader at Colegio Americano. Leadership level transformatory practice that can be generated by real-time reflection and recording of events is not possible by me. I have learned this slowly and quite painfully by believing for perhaps too long that the CRP method Smyth offered as a model would ‘fit’ this analysis of a school leader.

I have learned, by undergoing the entire four stages of Smyth’s describing – informing – confronting - reconstructing model, that this methodology can make me a leader who is more reflective and therefore reflexive in what actions and decisions I take. What it
cannot do; what its scope does not allow for; is that level of change-making that critical reflection aspires to – transformational; paradigm shifting; and groundbreaking. It would be a level of critically reflective leadership that had the capacity to generate a profound energy within a whole school community so sure and strong that it could affect permanent change. That kind of energy would require long term commitment and intense community engagement and it a level that I did not reach with Colegio Americano.

From my CRP journey thus far, I have been able to better understand the type of school I led; expose its structural workings for other researchers to now consider; and I have also been able to imagine what a Colegio Americano that I would be proud leading might look like. In my final chapter I will complete my theorising with an examination of me post Colegio Americano. I will reflect on all that I have learned as a teacher, a leader and an academic from studying and writing this PhD.
Despair and cynicism are constant temptations we receive or to which we are exposed if we struggle with the concrete problems of education. Precisely because education is not the lever for the transformation of society, we are in danger of despair and cynicism if we limit our struggle to the classroom. What we have to do, I think … is to be critically conscious of the limits of education… It is important to accomplish something important in the institutional space of a school or college in order to help the transformation of society… If we understand how formal education relates to the global society… we avoid a certain naïve optimism which can lead us in the future to a terrible pessimism.

Freire, 1987: 129

Be the change you want to see in the world.

Attributed to Mahatma Ghandi
Coming Full Circle

At the starting point of this final chapter, it is timely to reflect on the Critically Reflective Practice (CRP) journey I have engaged in throughout the course of this thesis. Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) used the idea of a spiral to reflect the CRP process and the Smyth model upon which I have based my methodology used a similar representative graphic to show the method’s ongoing nature from planning to replanning and ad infinitum (Smyth, 1986: 30-31). The graphic I designed to illustrate the on-going nature of the CRP process also indicated its continuity:

I used a version of the above graphic at the beginning of each thesis chapter and now I come full circle through the four stages of reflection:

(1) Describing in chapter four;
(2) Informing in chapter five;
(3) Confronting in chapters six and seven; and
(4) Reconstructing in chapters eight and nine.

Now I am ready to both conclude and re-begin the next stages of my working life as a professional who will use critical reflection always and almost intrinsically in my practice.
For all its capacity to build theory and illuminate problematic schooling issues, CRP is fundamentally about the educational practitioner. So this chapter is going to explore my internal journey towards better professional practice inspired by a concern for social justice. While I wrote about the first three stages of my critical reflection I to some extent ‘externalised’ the story of my work in Bolivia as I tried to describe, inform and confront outside forces that impacted on my actions at Colegio Americano. Now I am going to re-insert myself into the narrative and judge my leadership, my actions and my research.

**Lesson One: Leadership Style**

I titled this thesis *Corrupted Principles* to foreshadow its exploration of my education principles and the pressure I faced to discard those values as I led Colegio Americano. This is what I termed in chapter one, my ‘ethical dilemma of leadership’ which centred on my genuine uncertainty of an answer to this question:

> What actions should I, as principal, take when confronted with specific and detailed knowledge of how the school I lead corrupts procedures so that students who have received failing final grades received passing grades on their reports and final year students have their college transcripts altered to include subjects never studied?

I have delved deeply into this complex question by working through the four stages of Critically Reflective Practice, while being guided by the wise words of critical academics such as Paulo Freire, Stephen Brookfield, Sandy Grande and many others. Their learned experiences helped me examine my lived experience and work through exactly what, how and why corruption of grading and reporting practices occurred at Colegio Americano.

I have learned that critique is a powerful starting place for examining my leadership and challenged me to push the boundaries of academic criticism to a rigorous and radical
level. They made me see that it is not enough to come to an understanding of how pragmatic but unethical actions become acceptable within the ‘Whitestream’ educational hegemony. I have learned that I could not excuse Colegio Americano’s plutocratic decision-making processes on the grounds that they were reasonable choices in a competitive market-driven school arena.

Nevertheless, in uncovering the exact details of how Colegio Americano enacted its grading and reporting policies in corrupt ways, critical theory has helped me appreciate such disclosure. Brookfield (1994) warns against a predominant culture of silencing within many school environments that preserve the status quo by discouraging policy criticism. Instead, critical theorists like Shirley Steinberg (2007) encourage a “pedagogy of insubordination” that promotes rebelliousness and I hoped it would be translatable to a principal’s context.

Henry Giroux also proclaims it a definitional duty that if we are to claim alignment with critical education theory then:

…central to its very definition is the task of educating students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationship between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change. Critical Pedagogy refuses the official lies of power (my italics added).

As the principal and then director of Colegio Americano, I tried to refuse the official lies of power and proclaim that refusal loudly. Due to the circumstances in which I found myself during my final semester at Colegio Americano, I had little time to construct my leadership style with thought, care and reflection on what type of leader I wanted to be. I relied on my personality and the forces of my teaching convictions; I think these translated into a domineering style despite being based on integrity. These
characteristics allowed me to initiate risk-taking behaviour and prepared me to take responsibility for the success or failure of my actions. Nevertheless my leadership style may have been akin to a blunt sword bludgeoning my enemies through sheer determination of will. I rewrote school regulations to close accountability loopholes; refused parents who insisted their children deserved to have failing grades altered; and, ‘whistle blew’ the school’s practices to SACS-CASI.

None of my actions at the school were nuanced nor have my writings since leaving Colegio Americano been toned down with subtlety or contrition. I make no apology for what I did at the school or for writing about it afterwards and yet, going forward I would like to transform my leadership style. In Caring Enough to Lead: how reflective thought leads to moral leadership, Pellicer (2008) urges constant reflection, self-care and acceptance that there are no definitive right or wrong responses in decision-making. His advice can be summed up as ‘don’t be too hard on yourself.’ But what really struck me was his chapter titled, “Am I Willing to Share Power?” and when I reflect on my actions at Colegio Americano I think my answer to that question is that this is an area I should certainly work on improving.

I realise now that institutional change at Colegio Americano will not be long-lasting if it is not a shared vision that is ‘owned’ by a large group of stakeholders. As Foster argues, critical leadership “is and must be socially critical. It does not reside in an individual but in the relationship between individuals, and it is oriented towards social vision and change, not simply, or only organizational goals” (1989: 46). By single-mindedly confronting the corruption at Colegio Americano and then rewriting school policies so that the regulatory loopholes were closed that had allowed the insidious practices to continue, I showed the school that change could be achieved. By not incorporating the
staff into my change-making processes, I practically ensured that the corruption paused only during my tenure as Director.

Still, Gunter reminds me that critical leadership:

... draws on the social sciences to map and analyse the interplay between the agency of the role incumbent and the structures that enhance or limit that agency. Providing practitioners with opportunities to reflect on what they do, are told to do, and would like to do, enables them to link their work with the bigger picture outside of the immediacy of action.

(2001: 96)

Thus, while it may be true that I was only able to halt corrupt practices at Colegio Americano for a brief duration of months when I was the school’s director; in the longer term the critical reflection I have undertaken in this thesis of my time as a leader may also eventually contribute to change-making by allowing other school leaders to read my work and ponder the choices I made.

In chapter seven’s “School Reconstruction” analysis, I acknowledged the weakness of my change-making approach and suggested that ethical transformation at Colegio Americano can only be achieved if it is envisioned by empowered local teachers and if the student cohort is given a strong voice in school governance. I also articulated my belief, guided by the work of Sandy Grande and her vision of a Red Pedagogy grounded in Indigenous Intellectualism (2000a, 2000b, 2007), that as a non-Bolivian it is not my right to impose a vision of transformation on Colegio Americano. The limit of my leadership has been reached. I articulated the corruption in the school and confronted the socio-political contexts that underpinned the continuation of the practices. By exposing these facts I opened up a path of possibility for change: now it is the task of those who remained involved at Colegio Americano to achieve their own solutions and hopeful visions.
As for me, well, I have solidified my belief that it is a responsibility of school leadership to model exemplary governance processes and by doing so teach our students how to be courageous leaders in the future. I am glad to have gone through the rigour of CRP research and I think if more school leaders’ document their conduct and decision-making for a public audience, this accountability will help to encourage all of us to be transparent and ethical.

Brookfield and Preskill in *Learning as a Way of Leading*, imagines the kind of leader I would like to have opportunity to try and become - in whichever educational setting I choose to work into the future:

The leaders the two of us prize most are critically aware of our failures as a society to serve all people well... The leaders we are interested in know that a vision for more humane and just communities is desperately needed and that leadership entails people coming forward who are able and eager to work with others to create such communities. They also know that leadership is often facilitative rather than directive, and that good leaders learn to create an environment conducive to people’s growth and inviting of everyone’s participation in the fashioning of change to promote the public interest. More than anything else, the leaders we are interested in are learners. They revere learning, they learn from their experience and from their co-workers, and they are constantly sharing with others the fruits of what they have learned (2009: 5).

**Lesson Two: Career choices**

As a new school leader at *Colegio Americano* I was a part of the official power structure of an elite school. I have to reflect back on my decision to even contemplate working in *Colegio Americano* - let alone deciding to go for promotion at the school. I knew very little about the school when I accepted my first job there as a teacher except that it paid very well relative to Bolivian salaries. As I described in detail in chapter four, the school is a privately owned, for-profit K-12 school in Bolivia that uses a USA standards-based curriculum in an English immersion environment. The school was a
financial member of the SACS-CASI accreditation organisation during my leadership years and this organisation enhanced the reputation of Colegio Americano by granting it international credentials. It took me until the very end of my contract to fully comprehend how the USA based accreditation agency shielded Colegio Americano from Bolivian education regulation compliance because the reputation of SACS-CASI allowed the owners of the school to infer it was educationally accountable to a parallel authority.

It is easy to look back on my decision to work at Colegio Americano and judge that I had been far too rash, ambitious and perhaps greedy. Nonetheless, I believed then that I shouldn’t judge schools by the stereotype I had in my mind (elite = corrupt, privileged, snobby) and throughout my life I have been very kinaesthetic and adventurous in the decisions I have made about where to work and what to learn from. Colegio Americano was certainly a profound learning for me and I cannot reverse the decision I made to seek employment in the school in 2002.

When I eventually came into the director position I was promoted at a time of school crisis. Internal and external political forces were converging at that time so that Colegio Americano’s continuing existence was considered to be in jeopardy. Outside the high walls of the privileged campus of Colegio Americano, Bolivia’s Indigenous majority were finally accessing executive level political power after five hundred years of near disenfranchisement and it was getting harder for Colegio Americano to ignore the new rules of a pluralistic society.

The year 2005 was a time of great consternation inside the enclaves of upper-class Bolivian society and caused stakeholders in Colegio Americano to become more blatant
in their actions to ensure continuity of privilege and advantage for students. *Colegio Americano* had a relatively long history of altering report cards so that every student passed all subjects irrespective of the fact that some students had been assigned F grades by their teachers and even though all students had not actually studied certain subjects that were documented on official Bolivian *libretas escolares* (school reports). During my directorship of *Colegio Americano*, I felt that I was under great pressure to continue these practices but as I argued in chapter five I believed they were a type of corruption that was unethical and contrary to all of my professional values.

Ultimately, I believe I did not corrupt my education principles at *Colegio Americano* – but I can now see that the very fact of taking on a leadership position within an elite international school contradicted my critical epistemology. I have learned that the schools and education institutions that I choose to work in must offer a space for my philosophical convictions and I cannot be an authentic practitioner of education without that bottom line.

I have also learned that the type of role I accept, or aspire to, in education must also resonate with who I am. Fundamentally, I can now recognise that I like being a teacher and a scholar. I am no longer a school leader – and I no longer want to be one either. I have learned from my experiences that I love research and the development of ideas far more than I like being a principal. I am a great teacher and with a lot more practice I could have been a great principal but I was not at *Colegio Americano* and I do not wish to pursue further work in international schools similar to *Colegio Americano*. 
Lesson Three: Grading and Evaluation

Implicit in the design of the Critically Reflective Practice model is the belief that by undergoing the CRP cycle it will help improve my professional practice. I have no doubt that the intense reflection I have undertaken throughout this thesis has changed the way I practise my profession generally and particularly in the way I deal with assigning grades to those whom I teach. Whether this has improved my practice is still debatable but at least my practice is far more considered than it once was.

In 2008 I decided to accept a fulltime position as a Learning Support Coordinator in an Australia secondary college. In working again with students the same age as those at Colegio Americano and teaching in a school where I have to grade and report on students’ performance, I noticed immediately that I now practise my profession quite differently to how I used to. I have changed fundamentally in how I do my job and also how I view my profession. My innocence has been stripped away and I no longer function on automatic; comfortable with the assumptions I previously accepted unquestioningly.

The area I have really sharpened my focus in is my grading practices and how I view its role in my work. I have become cynical of grading and despairing of its effect on students. These feelings have been accentuated by my readings into the subject which correspond with my observances in the current school where I teach:

It is all too common, unfortunately, for teachers to give little serious thought to grading until confronted, face to face, with the need to give good grades… Several researchers have concluded that most teachers assign hodgepodge grades … Any grade given to any student is almost always a teacher judgement based on an amalgam of different sorts of evidence. And to be honest, because teachers’ judgements are involved, and teachers are altogether human, there will invariably be some errors in teachers’ grading… It is inconceivable to me that an entire profession would allow its members to
I had previously assumed the intrinsic merit of a grading regime in schools. Now I have lost confidence in that assumption. I am more critical of any school’s ability to link its learning aims with its grading goals and even though I am very careful to try and make explicit the links between the two in my teaching and administering, I do not believe I have attained success. I try to be as fair to my students as a grading regime allows, and follow the mantra from Ken O’Connor – “there are no right grades, only justifiable ones” (2002: 190). Still, I wonder how justifiable can any grading system be? For example, even when I try and use explicit criteria for grade allocation through rubrics I am still kidding myself, considering:

Converting rubric scores to percentages and then grades is tempting but flawed... [because] percentages don’t accurately represent levels of learning as measured by a rubric.

Arter & Chappuis, 2007: 115-6

I now very much side with academics such as Alfie Kohn, who call for the abolition of grading (2002, 2004), and long for the opportunity to work in an education setting that can institute such a process. Unfortunately, I have not yet found such a setting and thus realise how embedded grading is in early twenty-first century schooling in all its institutional forms.

With the realisation that grading, in all its inevitably corrupt and specious dimensions (Nichols and Berliner, 2005), is a central component of modern day schools I came very close to walking away from the profession. It was very hard for me to reconcile the unfairness of bad grading with its importance in students’ lives:

Parents of students, having been graded themselves, realize that the marks a student receives may well affect their child’s educational occupational and financial status by opening and closing various opportunities.

Rubiszyn & Borich, 2007: 222
Eventually, the love I have for teaching attenuated against the anguish I still sometimes feel and Freire’s words, quoted on the title page of this chapter, also helped me understand that despair and cynicism are emotions I have to face after looking deeply at the reality that is modern schooling.

So I made a conscious decision to stay in the profession and decided that until such a time as transformative education becomes a reality rather than an aspiration in schools, I would have to set aside my ultimate hope that grades are abolished and work within the current grade oriented environment. But in making that concession, I decided that if schools are bound to use grading to arbitrate their evaluation systems then I believe schools must truly embrace a philosophy of grading and allow all aspects of the grading spectrum to play out.

As a result of my Critically Reflective Practice I have been able to augment my understanding of grade theory considerably and am now reconstructing my education parameters to include several new criteria. These include the convictions that:

1. The only factor to be included in the calculation of a grade must be academic performance (Brookhart, 2004; Guskey, 2003; Stiggins., 2004). Factors such as in-class behaviour, lateness of assignment submission or neatness of work should never be factored into grade calculations. With these limitations set there is some hope that assigning grades will only communicate achievement rather than motivate or punish (Arter & Chappuis, 2007: 112).

2. Grade theory is highly complex knowledge and there is a whole industry built on testing and grading. It includes dense statistical theory about things such as composite scoring; frequency data tabulation; ranges and variations; standard errors

263
of measurement and scale score variations; as well as weighting, distributions and frequency polygons (Terwilliger, 1971). Teachers and education administrators must be versed in this information if they are to use grading responsibly - or at least understand how difficult it is to be ‘fair’ when assigning student grades.

3. Schools should articulate their grading and reporting processes in simple but detailed language. This is how I would then judge whether I would want to work in the school – because a school that has only vague or inconsistent grading and reporting policies is not a place I want to spend time in practising my profession.

My final characteristic is a belief that failure should be a part of any grading system too. By this I mean if a student can be labelled as ‘excelling’ then the contrast must also be allowed and, *ipso facto*, ‘failing’ must be possible:

> It’s worth going back to definitions. To excel, after all, means to be outstanding, to do well or better than others, or than a given standard, or than a previous personal achievement. That means that our students can only excel, strictly speaking, when there’s a real possibility that they will fail to stand out, do well or better than others, or than a given standard, or than a previous personal achievement.

  *Wilkinson, 2006: 42*

My stance on failure is not a reconstructed viewpoint – I have come back to my original belief – which in fact drove much of the actions I took at *Colegio Americano*. By subjecting my assumptions on the merits of failure to critical reflection I am now more certain of why I adhere to this position, and I no longer feel guilty for holding this view.

This is exactly what CRP was supposed to release me from:

> When teachers begin to link consciousness about the processes that inform the day-to-day aspect of the teaching with the wider political and social realities within which it occurs, then they are able to transcend self-blame for things that don’t work out and to see that perhaps their causation may more properly lie in the social injustices and palpable inequities of society.

  *Smyth et al., 1999a: 22*
I stand firmly in my stance about failure because then students can learn the lesson that aiming for excellence is desirable but not everyone can actually attain it without great sacrifice and perseverance. The author of the best selling *Harry Potter* novels argues the case for failure well in speech she gave in 2008:

Some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all - in which case, you fail by default. Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way... The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more to me than any qualification I ever earned.

JK Rowling, 2008

When I was faced with a decision to allow a student to have his failing grades retained on his report at *Colegio Americano*, the counsellor advocated for grade changing using the argument that labelling a student a failure would be psychologically damaging. I now assert with more surety my disagreement with this view. However, I have a caveat: students of wealthy, privileged backgrounds such as those studying in *Colegio Americano* tend to have more resilience than underprivileged children and therefore should be able to face up to the reality of failure:

The objective judgement of failure, in the absence of shame or guilt and with corresponding and appropriately detailed feedback about how success might be achieved, might just be worth dusting off as a part of our educational practice.

Wilkinson, 2006: 43

The Bolivian elite have experienced so many generations of sheltered privilege that, in my opinion, their children are in danger of lacking compassion and empathy for the situation of their poorer Bolivian brothers and sisters. Lessons of failure could help to alter these perceptions, as Marsh (2006: 15) suggests when he advocates the use of F grades:
The education challenge is to develop in all students a healthy attitude to failure; ideally to see failure as part of life, essential to growth, a temporary setback and a learning opportunity. Above all, children in our schools need to be encouraged to see failure as an event not a state: to develop a deep belief that, although humans experience failure, no human is a failure. (My italics added.)

I am convinced that plutocratic grading dulls a student’s ability to empathise with others because what he or she has learned by passing courses without academic merit is that it was deserved because of some intrinsic aspect of their social status. Therefore, I believe that failing-to-fail in a school like Colegio Americano helps to continue the divide between social classes in Bolivia into the next generation.

**Lesson Four: White and Western in Bolivia**

Another area of personal reconstruction I want to examine in this chapter, to do with social divisions in Bolivia and my role in perpetuating the status quo by working there in an American International School. There is no getting around the fact that as a white skinned, English speaking foreigner I embodied all that children of the Bolivian elite were taught to admire. By working as teacher, then principal and ultimately as a director at Colegio Americano, I modelled the hidden curriculum motto of the school – success and opportunity comes from embracing a Western lifestyle and perspective.

I might have written a critique of Colegio Americano through this thesis, but I also accepted substantial pay cheques from the school for four years. I might not have liked the Americanism in the school, but I was the cheerleading coach and I learnt the words to the American ‘Pledge of Allegiance’ along with the students. I stood up to the Board and forced them to stop altering a few students’ end of year grades, but how many students during my tenure continued to receive Bolivian libretas escolares that maintained they had studied all the subjects officially listed?
In reflecting upon all these dualisms, I believe I underestimated my ability to deflect the pervasive and influential lessons I enacted by simply working at Colegio Americano. To then extrapolate my experiences outward, I now believe that the American International School, Colegio Americano, caused a lot of detriment to Bolivia’s social cohesion. We, the school and I, represented privilege and arrogance. I came into the nation unaware of the on-ground traditions and operated in a way that assumed ‘our’ ways were better than Bolivia’s. I did not need to communicate in any local language and I couldn’t even speak Spanish adequately but that did not matter for me to get my initial job at Colegio Americano or be promoted to the highest level in the school. I lead the school, so I represented the American International School. No matter what my actions on the ground – I personified the elitism, the pro-Westernism and the plutocracy that was Colegio Americano.

I cannot turn back time and, on a purely selfish level, I do not wish to do so. But as I consider how I must reconstruct my professional practice as a result of writing Corrupted Principles, I know I must think long and hard before I ever accept a position in an American International School again. It is my belief that schools that are affiliated with AdvancED practise cultural imperialism and that this is contrary to the dreams and aspirations of critical education theory. In journeying through Critically Reflective Practice I am now most assuredly aligned with that paradigm and it would be hypocritical of me to choose to work in this type of school now that I know it only pays lip service to nations’ educational sovereignty.

Bolivian children deserve schooling opportunities that will advance peaceful coexistence and comprehension amongst all classes and ethnicities. I hope that this thesis will help to bring these two objectives closer to reality and I bow out here
knowing that this thesis leaves me to continue to grapple with social justice, cultural equity and educational possibilities.

**Final Lesson: Critically Reflective Leadership**

I chose Critically Reflective Practice (CRP) as the methodology of my research and adapted Smyth’s (1999a) model throughout this thesis to best fit my own situation. I used CRP’s reflexive journaling approach to document my work as a new leader of Colegio Americano. At the beginning, I hoped that a critical lens on my principalship would enable me to hold on to my left-leaning ideals while at the same time help me become a high quality leader who had the capacity to change processes in the school that (I judged) needed fixing.

That was in 2004. The chart below chronicles the details of the timeline of my doctorate until its completion:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>South America</td>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>Teacher at Colegio Americano</td>
<td>Pregnant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>South America</td>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>Teacher at Colegio Americano</td>
<td>Daughter 1 yr old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>South America</td>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>Principal at Colegio Americano</td>
<td>2 yr old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>South America</td>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>Director at Colegio Americano until July</td>
<td>3 yr old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>Spiritual Director at a university</td>
<td>4 yr old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>Learning Coordinator at a secondary school</td>
<td>5 yr old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>Learning Coordinator at a secondary school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>Lecturer at a university</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Combining postgraduate level studies with a school-leadership role, (without even factoring in being a new parent as well) has been exceedingly time consuming and took great determination and organisation skills. There is no way to sugar-coat the depth of the commitment I found it took to get all the way through to the publication stage of my research. And yet, I would argue that using critical reflection in my work did make me a better principal at the time and far more knowledgeable about good leadership in the long-run.
Looking back now, in 2010, I can see that I imagined that Smyth’s version of CRP would allow me to fix the system, right the wrongs and create my own version of the school’s future. Over the course of the six years it has taken me to complete my doctorate, I went through an immense intellectual journey investigating the social and political contexts of the school I worked in and dissecting who I am as a professional and what kind of leader I want to be evolving into.

“Corrupted Principles and the Challenges of Critically Reflective Leadership” is the title I have chosen for my thesis because it focuses on the methodology I used and offers up my learned experiences of doing CRP as a school leader. I am aware of the fact that there have been too few principals who have written about their practice in a critically reflective manner. Some may have completed doctoral studies using CRP, but they have not communicated their finding more widely and the scholarly community is poorer for their silence. I offer my experiences as an example of how one principal undertook CRP at the leadership level and survived and benefitted from the experience. I hope my narrative written as a practising principal will allow other school leaders to interrogate my adaptation to the CRP methodology and consider undertaking their own version of Critically Reflective Leadership in their school or work places.
Appendix A

School Entry Negotiation Document

MURDOCH UNIVERSITY
PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

School Year 2004-2005 (then 2005-2006)

I, Christine Cunningham, am studying my PhD in Education at Murdoch University in Western Australia. As a part of my doctoral thesis I would like to conduct research at Colegio Americano by participant observation. I can assure you that I will be conducting research with the approval of my university’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) which has very strict guidelines to follow when conducting research in a school setting.

The topic of thesis is about Critically Reflective Practice in an American International School. The purpose of this study is to find out if substantive critical pedagogy and practice can be taught and modelled in an international school setting and to investigate how school administrative methods can be improved.

Participants’ Rights and Researchers’ Responsibilities

- Participants have the right to be fully informed about the nature of the cooperation involved and the possible costs and benefits to them. At the outset of each contact the researcher will inform the participant about such matters. School members have a right not to be involved, not to answer questions and to withdraw from the project. However any material collected prior to withdrawal would be used in the database.

- Participants have the right to have their privacy protected. This implies that the researcher will keep her involvement in the particular school confidential (except from the academic colleagues involved in the supervision and inspection of her work), This also means that any material published in academic journals, offered at Conferences, or included in a final thesis, every attempt will be made to anonamise the school and the individuals involved. Of course, individuals within the school may recognise each other – despite such attempts –and this is difficult to avoid. However, as the emphasis is on the system of meaning – not individuals – such recognitions are likely to be kept to a minimum.

- Participants have the right to check copies of any interviews, discussions, vignettes and other research tools used therein to clarify points, add further comments or to delete that which they would rather not have recorded. Those participants who choose not to take advantage of this process within the given time will be seen to be satisfied with the content of the transcripts. Any information offered in confidence or ‘off the record’ will not be published.
Participants will have the right to see any documents the researcher produces for publication. It is not expected that the participants will always agree with the researchers’ account, as this account will involve theoretical perspective, interpretive stance and personal values which are not necessarily those of the participants. In fact, because of the very nature of ‘ideology critique’ it is unlikely that the participants will always feel comfortable with what the researcher has argued.

The researcher will attempt to keep to a minimum the amount of time which participants will be required to give to the project and in addition she will be as unobtrusive as possible around the school. Time is precious for both the researcher and participant – nevertheless should nay participant wish to discuss any aspect of the project – on a casual or formal basis – such discussions will be welcome.

The researcher is obliged to write up material in an accurate and fair manner. The fairness of her work will be judged largely upon the quality of the relationship to the data, the interpretation, the topic and the theoretical perspectives within which she is working.

A copy of the completed thesis will be offered to the school.

Researcher’s Rights and Participants’ Responsibilities

Although the researcher guarantees confidentiality and anonymity she cannot be responsible for information leakages via participants. As such leakages could affect the researcher’s credibility within the school community it is important that participants show caution in the manner in which they talk to outsiders about the project.

If participants feel uneasy about the project or has some problems with it they should express such concerns to the researcher without delay. As participants often see things that escape a researcher’s notice such feedback is important. Alternatively, if such unease is allowed to fester the entire project can be endangered.

The researcher’s publications are not consensus documents. They are the researcher’s interpretation of the situation and are informed by her theoretical perspectives. While participants have control over the data they allow the researcher to use, they are asked to trust the researcher’s integrity and expertise in her use of the data. It is expected that participants will have alternative interpretations and it is hoped that in the spirit of fruitful inquiry these will be offered to the researcher. However, she is under no obligation to alter her interpretation unless persuaded that, given the subject of inquiry, the alternatives do more justice to the data.

I have read the School Entry Negotiation Document and understand its conditions. I agree to allow Christine Cunningham to conduct research at Colegio Americano, on behalf of the school administration.

Name:
Position:
Signature:
Date:
Appendix B

Staff Information and Consent Form

Dear Staff:

As you may be aware I am studying my PhD in Education at Murdoch University in Western Australia. As a part of my thesis I will be conducting research in Colegio Americano by participant observation. The topic of thesis is about Critically Reflective Practice in an American International School. The purpose of this study is to find out if substantive critical pedagogy and practice can be taught and modelled in an international school setting and to investigate how school administrative methods can be improved.

Part of the research involves me collecting data from the Colegio Americano community. I can assure you that I will be conducting research with the approval of my university’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) which has very strict guidelines to follow when conducting research in a school setting. If you would like to know more about the HREC guidelines you may visit their website which contains a PDF file “National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans” at http://www7.health.gov.au/nhmrc/publications/pdf/e35.pdf If you would like to have direct contact with Murdoch’s Ethic Office, you may do so by contacting the Human Ethics Office via e-mail: human.ethics@murdoch.edu.au.

You can help in this study by consenting to participate by filling out a questionnaire or permitting me to use vignettes that you shared with me. It is anticipated that the time to complete any of the above research methods will take no longer than thirty minutes of your time. Participants can decide to withdraw their consent at any time. All information given during the interview is confidential and no names or other information that might identify the participants will be used in any publication arising from the research. Feedback on the study will be provided to all participants in the form of a written summary that will be sent to the participants as an email attachment.

If you are willing to participate in this study, could you please complete the details below? If you have any questions about this project please feel free to discuss your concerns with me.

Yours sincerely,
Christine Cunningham       Nado Aveling
Student Researcher       Principal Researcher
CONSENT FORM

I (the participant) have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time. I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law. I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published provided my name or other information which might identify me is not used.

Participant Signature:      Date:
Appendix C

Student Information and Consent Form

Dear Student:

As you may be aware I am studying my PhD in Education at Murdoch University in Western Australia. As a part of my thesis I will be conducting research in Colegio Americano by participant observation. The topic of thesis is about Critically Reflective Practice in an American International School. The purpose of this study is to find out if substantive critical pedagogy and practice can be taught and modelled in an international school setting and to investigate how school administrative methods can be improved.

Part of my research involves inviting selected students from the CCS community to fill out a questionnaire. These students will come from the high school cohort and they will be students with whom I have, or have had, a classroom student/teacher relationship. As Calvert students are largely under the age of eighteen I can assure you that I will be conducting research with the approval of my university’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) which has very strict guidelines to follow when conducting research in a school setting. If you would like to know more about the HREC guidelines you may visit their website which contains a PDF file “National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans” at http://www7.health.gov.au/nhmrc/publications/pdf/e35.pdf

If you would like to have direct contact with Murdoch’s Ethic Office, you may do so by contacting the Human Ethics Office via e-mail: human.ethics@murdoch.edu.au.

You, and your parents, can help in this study by consenting to participate by filling out a questionnaire. It is anticipated that the time to complete any of the above research method will take no longer than thirty minutes of your time. Participants can decide to withdraw their consent at any time. I also guarantee that neither involvement nor non-involvement in the study will be prejudicial in any way.

All information given during the interview is confidential and no names or other information that might identify the participants will be used in any publication arising from the research. Feedback on the study will be provided to all participants, and their parents, in the form of a written summary that will be sent to the participants as an email attachment.
If you are willing to participate in this study, could you please complete the details below? If you have any questions about this project please feel free to discuss your concerns with me.

Yours sincerely,
Christine Cunningham                      Nado Aveling
Student Researcher                        Principal Researcher

CONSENT FORM

I (the participant) and we (the parents/guardians) have read the information above. Any questions we have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. We agree to take part in this activity, however, we know that we may change our mind and stop at any time. We understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law. We agree that research data gathered for this study may be published provided my name or other information which might identify me is not used.

Participant Signature:   Parent/Guardian Signature:   Date:
Appendix D

Parent and Other Stakeholder Information and Consent Form

Dear Parent:

As you may be aware, I am studying my PhD in Education at Murdoch University in Western Australia. As a part of my thesis, I will be conducting research in Colegio Americano by participant observation. The topic of the thesis is about Critically Reflective Practice in an American International School. The purpose of this study is to find out if substantive critical pedagogy and practice can be taught and modelled in an international school setting and to investigate how school administrative methods can be improved.

Part of the research involves me collecting data from the Colegio Americano community. I can assure you that I will be conducting research with the approval of my university’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) which has very strict guidelines to follow when conducting research in a school setting. If you would like to know more about the HREC guidelines, you may visit their website which contains a PDF file “National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans” at http://www7.health.gov.au/nhmrc/publications/pdf/e35.pdf If you would like to have direct contact with Murdoch’s Ethics Office, you may do so by contacting the Human Ethics Office via e-mail: human.ethics@murdoch.edu.au.

You can help in this study by consenting to participate by filling out a questionnaire or permitting me to use vignettes that you shared with me. It is anticipated that the time to complete any of the above research methods will take no longer than thirty minutes of your time. Participants can decide to withdraw their consent at any time. All information given during the interview is confidential and no names or other information that might identify the participants will be used in any publication arising from the research. Feedback on the study will be provided to all participants in the form of a written summary that will be sent to the participants as an email attachment.

If you are willing to participate in this study, could you please complete the details below? If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to discuss your concerns with me.

Yours sincerely,
Christine Cunningham     Nado Aveling
Student Researcher                          Principal Researcher
CONSENT FORM

I (the participant) have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time. I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law. I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published provided my name or other information which might identify me is not used.

Participant Signature:      Date:
Appendix E

Staff of Colegio Americano Question List

The staff group were sent the following questions in English, unless they were local staff members who I believed would have felt more comfortable with Spanish translations of the questions and in their cases I sent a bilingual document:

1. Why do you work at this school?
2. Do you think an English language education is essential for students?
3. Do you think Colegio Americano is the best school in (the city), in terms of value for money and quality of education?
4. Do you believe an American International School’s high school diploma has more prestige than Bolivian high school diplomas?
5. Do you think the US education system is superior to other nations, eg. Bolivia?
6. What is your perception of the Board of Directors at Colegio Americano?
7. What is your perception of the Southern Association of Colleges and School (SACS)?
8. If you could change anything in the way this school is run, what would it be?
9. Would you like to add anything further?
Appendix F

Colegio Americano’s Parents Questionnaire

The parents group were sent the following five questions in both Spanish and English and invited to respond in either language:

Parent Questionnaire
Cuestionario Para Padres

Participant Details/Detalles Participante
Sex/Sexo:
Nationality/Nacionalidad: ______________________

1. Why do you send your child/ren to this school? ¿Por qué mandan a su/s hijo/s a este colegio?
   Comments/Comentarios:

2. Do you think an English language education is essential for your child’s future? ¿Cree que una educación en el idioma Ingles es esencial para el futuro de su hijo?
   YES/SÍ | NO
   Further Comments/Otros comentarios:

3. Do you think that this is the best school in [the city], in terms of value for money and quality of education? ¿Piensa que este es el mejor colegio de [la ciudad], en términos de valor en dinero y calidad de educación?
   YES/SÍ | NO
   Further Comments/Otros comentarios:

4. Do you believe American International School’s high school diplomas have more prestige than national high school diploma? ¿Cree que el diploma Internacional Americano de secundaria tiene mas prestigio que el bachillerato nacional?
   YES/SÍ | NO
   Further Comments/Otros comentarios:

5. Do you think that the USA’s education system is better than Bolivia’s, at the high school level? ¿Cree que la educación Americana es mejor que la boliviana en el nivel secundaria?
   YES/SÍ | NO
   Further Comments/Otros comentarios:

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Muchas gracias por tomar su tiempo en contestar este cuestionario.

Christine Cunningham,
PhD Candidate, Candidato de doctorado filosofía.
Appendix G

Current and Former Students at Colegio Americano’s Questionnaire

The students and ex-students group were mainly asked yes/no questions and were invited to add further comments to each answer.

Senior Students' Questionnaire

Participant Details
Age: ______
Sex: _________
Nationality: _____________
Residency Status: _____________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Why do you think parents send their children to this school?</th>
<th>Comments:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Is high school a worthy requirement of your time?</td>
<td>YES NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Comments:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you think an English language education is essential for a good personal future?</td>
<td>YES NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Comments:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do you think the subjects you study in high school are relevant and interesting?</td>
<td>YES NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Comments:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Do you think that the USA’s education system is better than Bolivia’s, at the high school level?</td>
<td>YES NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Comments:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Do you think going to this school is worth all the money that is spent on your tuition?</td>
<td>YES NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Comments:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Do you think the amount of money spent on the graduation ceremony and party is worth it?</td>
<td>YES NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Comments:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do you agree that getting good grades in high school classes is an important indicator of future success in college?</td>
<td>YES NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Comments:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Do you think it is true that students have a democratic voice in the running of this school? | YES | NO

Further Comments:

10. If you could make changes to the way the school is run, would you make changes? | YES | NO

What changes would you make?

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.
Christine Cunningham, PhD Candidate
Appendix H

Directors and Principals of American International Schools in Latin America
consent email and list of questions

-----Original Message-----
From: christine cunningham [mailto:xine1972@hotmail.com]
Sent: Thursday, June 22, 2006 11:56 AM
To: XINE1972@HOTMAIL.COM
Subject: Questionnaire

Dear Colleagues:

As we close out school year 2005-6, I write this appeal to my fellow directors of American International Schools in Latin America, to consider filling out a brief questionnaire for my PhD studies.

I empathize with how busy you all must be, but to move forward on my thesis about reflective practice and accountability in the American International School experience it would really assist my work if you could write down your opinions on the attached Microsoft Word document and return it to me via email.

I can assure you all that I am conducting my research with the approval of my universities Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) which has very strict guidelines to follow when conducting research in a school setting. If you would like to know more about the HREC guidelines you may visit their website which contains a PDF file “National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans” at http://www7.health.gov.au/nhmrc/publications/pdf/e35.pdf.

By replying to this email with a filled out questionnaire, you will be explicitly confirming consent. Thank you so much, in anticipation.

Sincerely,
Christine Cunningham
Director
Colegio Americano

Questions attached to the email:
1. Can you describe in your own words what is an American International School?
2. Do you believe that a host-country benefits from having an American International School teaching their elite families? If yes, how so?
3. How important do you think an English language education is for today’s generation of students?
4. Do you believe an American International School’s high school diploma has more prestige than a host-country’s high school diploma?
5. How do you think the USA’s education system rates compared to other nations?
6. Do you think that a USA based curriculum, such as those found in an American International School, is relevant for host-nation students?
7. What is your perception of SACS and/or other US accreditation agencies, in regard to their effectiveness as a regulatory body for American International Schools?
8. In regard to grading and reporting policies at your school, what accountability checks are in place?
Appendix I

Scanned copies of an original Colegio Americano report card and new versions with failing grades removed.
Appendix J

College Transcripts that include counsellor additions of fake courses
Appendix K

Colegio Americano’s Accreditation Certificate

[Image of accreditation certificate]

This certificate is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation and, therefore, is entitled to all the services and privileges of regional, national, and international professional recognition.

290
REFERENCES


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(1990). Proyecto de Educacion Intercultural Bilingue (PIEB), UNICEF.


