

2010

# 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	i
Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	vii
Acronyms and Tables	viii
Translations	
<b>Chapter One: Ethical Dilemmas of Leadership</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction	2
Rationale	3
My Background	4
Bolivian Education and American International Schools	8
Research Questions	11
Research Paradigm and Method	13
Thesis Structure	14
Significance and Limitations of the Research	17
<b>Chapter Two: Critical Education Theory</b>	<b>20</b>
Introduction	21
Critique	21
Qualitative Inquiry	25
Middle Century Critique and Inquiry	26
Voices of the ‘Other’	28
New Methodologies	31
Questioning the Role of School	36
Towards Transformative Pedagogy	39
Lived Experience	44
<b>Chapter Three: Critically Reflective Practice</b>	<b>47</b>
Introduction	48
Choosing a Critical Theory Methodology	48
Field Work and Data Collection	52
School Entry Negotiation Documents	53
Journaling	55
Other Data	59
Critically Reflective Practice	64
CRP According to Smyth	66
Stage One: Describing	66
Stage Two: Informing	69
Stage Three: Confronting	72
Stage Four: Reconstructing	73
Ethics	75

<b>Chapter Four: Describing the Bolivian International School</b>	80
Introduction	81
Bolivia	82
Race and Class Segregation	84
Politics	85
The School: <i>Colegio Americano</i>	87
History: A Tumultuous Story	87
A Glimpse of the City Surrounding <i>Colegio Americano</i>	89
First Impressions on a Typical School Day	90
School Day	91
Governance: The Owners as School Board	92
Leadership: The Role of Director	95
Staffing: International and Local Teacher Disparities	96
The Students: Privileged, Racist and Entitled	98
Curriculum: Americanization, Text-books and Dual Diploma	102
Language: Bilingualism versus English Dominance	104
Mimicking the USA: Americanisms on Campus	106
Conclusion	106
<b>Chapter Five: Contesting Assumptions that Inform Practice</b>	108
Introduction	109
Choosing a Theme to Focus and Inform	109
It looked as if ...there was a complex mishmash of systems.	114
It looked as if... the school was trying to enact authentic assessment practices.	116
It looked as if... grading processes were unworkable.	118
It looked as if... <i>Colegio Americano</i> ‘created’ reports that contradicted teachers’ evaluation decisions.	122
It looked as if... grades were manipulated to ensure student promotion by age.	125
It looked as if... school transcripts were enhanced to help students get into college.	127
It looked as if... students understood the sorting in the system.	131
It looked as if... wealthier parents were buying educational advantage in a competitive education market.	132
It looked as if... teachers were complicit in unethical practices.	133
Emerging Theories	136
<b>Chapter Six: Confronting Local Power</b>	138
The Story So Far	139
Isolation and Exhaustion	141
Stage Three: Confronting	144
Corruption	146
Plutocratic Dominance at <i>Colegio Americano</i>	147
A Gentleperson’s D	153
Meritocracy: Advocating a Myth	154
Human Agency	158
Culture of Grading	161
Standards-Based Assessment	163
Grading Theory Complexity	170
Conclusions	172

<b>Chapter Seven: Confronting National and International Power</b>	174
Introduction	175
Racism and Privilege	176
Bolivian Schooling History	179
Bolivian Ministry of Education	183
Education Reform Law	185
Language Education	188
Bolivian Private Schools	190
Severe State Crises	194
Monitoring and Oversight	198
Illicit Grade Trade	200
Cultural Imperialism	202
Accreditation Agency	205
In Summary	211
<b>Chapter Eight: School Reconstruction</b>	214
Moving from Critique to Action	215
Learning Again from Critical Education Theorists	222
Ending Corruption at <i>Colegio Americano</i>	225
Student Empowerment	231
Decreasing Counsellor Power	235
Increasing Parent Knowledge	236
Strengthening Transparency	237
Improving Staff Stability	238
Broadening the Student Demographic	240
Moving Beyond Americanisms	241
Dual Diploma Duplicity	242
Accreditation Transformation	247
Conclusions	250
<b>Chapter Nine: Reconstructing the Personal</b>	252
Coming Full Circle	253
Lesson One: Leadership Style	254
Lesson Two: Career Choices	258
Lesson Three: Grading and Evaluation	261
Lesson Four: White and Western in Bolivia	268
Final Lesson: Critically Reflective Practice	
<b>Appendices</b>	270
A: Staff Entry Negotiation Document	271
B: Staff Information and Consent Form	273
C: Student Information and Consent Form	275
D: Parent and other Stakeholders Information and Consent Form	277
E: Staff of <i>Colegio Americano</i> Question List	279
F: <i>Colegio Americano</i> 's Parent Questionnaire	280
G: Current and Former Students at <i>Colegio Americano</i> 's Questionnaire	281
H: Director and Principal's	283
I: Scanned Copies of an original <i>Colegio Americano</i> report card and new version with failing grades removed	284
J: College Transcripts that include counsellor additions of fake courses	288
K: <i>Colegio Americano</i> 's Accreditation Certificate	290

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



## Translations

### SPANISH

Autonomía

Bachillerato / Bachiller

Buenos días

Campesino

Castellanización

Criollos

Colegio Americano

Empleadas

Horas Cívicas

Jailónes (a term of insult)

Latifundios

Libretas Escolares

Manifestación

Mestizo

Pachamama (Indigenous term)

Poco a poco

Quinceañera

Sindicato de Profesores

### ENGLISH

Autonomy to such an extent that it is almost a declaration of independence.

High School diploma

Good morning

Peasant; or poor, rural Indigenous Bolivian

Enforced learning of Spanish

People of Spanish descent but born in Latin America

American College

Hired help

Literally: civic hours  
A school period dedicated to civics instruction and celebration

Spoilt snobs

Agricultural land holding of vast size and wealth

Bolivian School Reports

Political Protest

Mixed ancestry – usually a mix of Spanish and Indio-American.

Mother Earth

Step by step

Fifteenth Birthday

Teachers' Unions