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Critically Reflective Leadership

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Abstract: Critical Reflective Practice (CRP) has a proven reputation as a method for teacher-researchers in K-12 classrooms, but there have been few published examples of this method being used to document school leaders' work-based practice. This paper outlines adaptations made by the author from an original CRP method to a Critically Reflective Leadership (CRL) method that she developed to document her own lived experiences as a principal and then director of an American International School in South America. The method described in this paper may be useful for school leaders who wish to become practitioner-researchers in their own work places. The author argues that more Critically Reflective Leadership research needs to be undertaken to provide a body of literature about high stakes decision-making by school leaders.

Introduction

> At the end of last semester, we had four students in the Grade 9 cohort who had failed several subjects. (National education regulations regarding matriculation in this South American country) require that the students take a recuperation exam to try and rectify the standing of their annual reports' grades. Today, I got started on preparing the logistics for the exams, only to discover that somehow - between mid June and now - all four students are documented as having passed all of their subjects first time (Journal Entry: January 2005).

This vignette about students 'failing to fail' was written in my daily work journal six months into my time as a first-time principal in a K-12 USA accredited International School in South America, which I refer to with the Spanish pseudonym, *Colegio Americano*. I had taken a job that none of my recent predecessors had been able to keep for more than the length of one two-year contract. I was not certain at the time why there had been such a rapid transition between school leaders, but my ambition overcame doubts and I accepted the principalship.

As the vignette reveals, my principalship was one that was very difficult because it was an experience of leadership in which I was forced to make very difficult compromises. I was appointed as principal from the ranks of the senior teacher cohort and had no formal training for the leadership role to which I was promoted. I had been a qualified secondary teacher for nearly eleven years prior to my promotion and two years of them had been served at *Colegio Americano*. Previous practice at the school had been to normally employ outsiders for leadership roles; usually USA citizens with doctoral qualifications or years of experience in other international schools. In hindsight and after critical reflection, I conclude that I was short listed for the principalship because I am Australian - and being white and a first-language English speaker would have helped too.

As part of the negotiations for my becoming principal, I agreed to work towards an accreditation compliance standard that requires those in a school leadership role to either have, or be working towards, a master or doctoral level qualification in education. I was happy to have a reason to seek this academic goal because I have always loved studying. So, in the same month that I began my principalship I also began PhD studies.

From the very beginning of my study, I sought and received permission from the School Board and my university's Human Research Ethics Committee to conduct research at the school using a critical orientation. Both groups understood that my research was open-ended in the sense that at the beginning of the PhD journey, I did not know where my writing might lead even though I did have research questions developed about my role as a principal in the school and my involvement in school governance processes.

I chose Critical Reflective Practice (CRP) as the methodology of my research. I was already aligned to critical theory before choosing a research topic and I was intellectually curious to find out more about the school that I had stumbled upon during a working holiday that had morphed into a longer residency at both the school and the country in which it was located. I had loved my work as a teacher and the opportunity to become a principal was something I had sought out, nevertheless from the beginning I also felt conflicted and uncomfortable with some aspects of working in an elite and privileged school setting because such a school was very different from any school I had ever worked in as it was far removed from the lower socio-economic status schools of which I had had previous experience.

I used CRP's reflexive journaling approach to document my work as the 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 social justice ideals while at the same time help me become a high quality leader who had the capacity to change those processes in the school that (I judged) needed fixing.

That was in 2004. Table 1 below chronicles the timeline of my doctoral studies until its completion in 2010:

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Location	South America	South America	South America	South America	South America then Australia	Australia	Australia	Australia	Australia
PhD			Part time	Part time	Full time from August	Fulltime	Part time	Part time	Completed
Work	Teacher at *Colegio Americano*	Teacher at *Colegio Americano*	Teacher, then Principal at *Colegio Americano*	Principal at *Colegio Americano*	Director at *Colegio Americano* until July	Sessional tutoring at university	Learning Coordinator at a secondary school	Learning Coordinator at a secondary school	Lecturer at a university
Life			Pregnant	Daughter	1 yr old	2 yr old	3 yr old	4 yr old	5 yr old

Table 1: Timeline of doctoral studies, 2002-2010

Combining postgraduate level studies with a school-leadership role, (without even factoring in being a new parent as well) is exceedingly time-consuming and takes great determination and organisational 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 submission stage for my research. Yet I would argue that using critical reflection in my work did make me a better principal at the time and, ultimately, far more knowledgeable about good leadership. Looking back now I can see that I began my period of Critically Reflective Leadership from a naive perspective. I imagined that CRP would allow me to 'fix the system' and 'right the wrongs' so as to create my own version of the school's future. Over the course of the six years it took me to complete my doctorate, I went on a significant intellectual journey

investigating the social and political contexts of the school in which I worked, dissecting who I was as a professional and what kind of leader I wanted to become.

Corrupted Principles and the Challenges of Critically Reflective Leadership is the title of my PhD dissertation which documents the entirety of my research journey. The use of the phrase 'corrupted principles' signifies how my education principles, which are underpinned by the values of critical theory, were very nearly corrupted because of my experiences working as a principal of an elite school.

This paper focuses on the methodology I used and describes my learned experiences of doing CRP as a school leader. I am aware 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 not only survived but also benefitted from the experience. I hope my narrative written as a practising principal will allow other school leaders to interrogate my adaptation of the CRP methodology and to consider undertaking their own version of Critically Reflective Leadership in their school or work places.

A *Critical* Method

Critical Reflective Practice (CRP) is a research method whose definition is embodied in the three words that make up the name: *critical or critically*, relating to critical education theory; *reflective* for reflecting on actions; and, *practice* describing an educator's day-to-day practice in the workplace. The CRP method is most commonly associated with education research and has evolved from a blending of action research and critical autoethnography.

CRP is still a relatively new research form, 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 Stephen Brookfield and John Smyth. Both have written books that offer similar guidelines for conducting critically reflective research and encourage secondary-level (Smyth) and tertiary-level (Brookfield) level teaching practitioners to adapt their methodologies (Brookfield, 1995; Smyth, 1999).

Additionally, a mounting body of literature has been produced dealing with similar research methods: autobiographies (Nelson, 1994; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995); teachers' ethnographic studies (Ducharme & Dippo, 1993; Brown & Dobrin, 2004); case studies of teaching practice (Grossman, 1995; Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1992; Cohen 1991; Schatzki, 2001); and reflective practice (Brown, 1995; Jordan 1997).

Originally, CRP was designed to directly capture teachers' 'authentic voices' by documenting the daily experiences in a teacher's classroom in a reflective journal "to establish an informed view of teaching and the wider context within which it is occurring" (Smyth, 1999: 2). In the last decade, reflection-based data that focuses on principal's work have been gathered (Sergiovanni, 2001); but very few case studies have been written from a critical epistemological perspective.

What sets *Critical* Reflective Practice apart from other methods of reflective practice is its potency. It does not hide behind the myth of researcher neutrality and it unashamedly acknowledges the agency of the research-practitioner. I was attracted to the method because I perceived CRP as being able to work through deep questions concerning equity, social justice and transformational education.

John Smyth's CRP Method

I embarked upon my PhD guided by a Critical Reflective Practice (CRP) handbook that was written by John Smyth (1999) with teachers as its primary audience. Smyth outlines four steps in his method which are titled:

1. describing
2. informing
3. confronting
4. reconstructing

I decided to try and follow his four stage cycle during my PhD research because his methodology resonated with me and I thought I would be able to understand and copy the stages he and his colleagues had delineated in their handbook. Even though the examples given to illustrate each stage of the CRP cycle were teacher level case studies, I agreed with his urgings that teachers be critical reflective practitioners so that they could firstly, understand what social, economic and political forces shape their teaching decisions and then secondly, find ways to reshape their teaching in a way that better aligned with their personal philosophy of education. Given the situation I was in, this seemed appropriate as I was constantly dealing with leadership issues that were outside the realm of my previous experiences and that seemed to require responses that could not be handled at a superficial level.

Adapting the Method for Leadership

When I started using Smyth's CRP handbook, I thought I could simply substitute the term 'principal' for 'teacher' in the handbook and be done with it. I was wrong. The roles and therefore the reflections of a teacher and the roles and reflections of a principal perspective differ markedly. I came to the explicit realisation early on in my journaling that while Smyth's underlying philosophy of CRP was appropriate for my work situation; I would have to adapt each stage of his suggested research design to better fit the kind of data a school leader could produce. At that point, I had not yet learned that the kind of research I was doing was quite different from most teacher-level research but ultimately, I concluded that the key differences were:

- the greater breadth of issues that a school leader can observe and document;
- the need for a substantial length of time to be dedicated to conducting research to develop the complex narratives of school leader's work; and
- the acknowledgement that school leaders deal with complex and important issues (such as school budget oversight, accreditation compliance documentation and student matriculation information) and this makes their reflections both contentious and significant.

These differences emerged in the course of my doing critical reflection and documenting the process. Smyth's CRP guidelines include the implicit expectation that a teacher will have enough time to use the method as on ongoing cycle of practice, reflection, improved practice, more reflection and so on. It also assumed teachers have enough sovereignty over their work environment and the situations they write about to use CRP as a reflection based, tool for making immediate change.

As a principal, my work did not fit neatly with those assumptions because of time limitations and the breadth and complexity of the work in which I was involved each day. I wanted to still utilise a step-by-step methodological process in my research but I needed to

alter Smyth's method so it could encompass a process that allowed for the journaling of work practice that were:

- broader in scope than teachers' work;
- collected over a substantial timeframe, such as several school years; and
- responded to with reflective and reflexive action in the immediate, medium and longer terms.

In the next section of this paper I will describe how I learned to make specific adaptations to each stage of the CRP process and how these alterations created a new version of the method that I now term Critically Reflective Leadership.

Stage One

Stage One in CRP, **describing**, involves the gathering of data to accumulate enough information to comprehensively describe the school research site. Smyth's CRP method recommends journaling as the principal form of data collection. Professional journaling is not like writing in a personal diary, which simply records events. Rather, while professional journal writing records events it also includes thoughts, reflections and ideas about those recorded events. "Journaling is a means of telling the story of professional practice over time" (Street, 1990, 15), but doing journaling well is a learned skill. That skill is the "capacity to comprehensively describe an engagement in professional practice [which] is an essential part of developing researchable data" (Street, 1990, 6).

In the evenings of each school day, I would sit down at my home computer and write about events in which I had been involved in during that day, including:

- teaching classes
- scheduling and timetabling;
- organising substitute teaching;
- planning and conducting professional developments;
- attending Board meetings;
- meeting with parents;
- disciplining students;
- writing reports;
- organising school-wide events;
- hosting assemblies; and
- 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; I had to be selective in what I chose to write about. According to Street (1990, 9) this is a common issue 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." The amount and type of writing varied from day to day and included: "partial transcripts of conversations" (Smyth et al., 1999, 29) that I participated in or observed; and descriptions of small incidents, extraordinary occurrences and major events that happened on campus. I also pasted artefacts into my journal that I thought provided interesting insights, such as documents I had produced, correspondences I had received and sent, systems materials, school history pieces and school-wide reports and briefs.

My journal writing followed many of the conventions of letter writing and sometimes wandered into stream-of-consciousness. This style enabled me to 'purge' about the main events of each day in a coherent, emotional and highly descriptive manner. After two years I

had written over 100,000 words, divided into more than 500 days of separate entries. My complete journal was a thick tome of data, comprehensively describing the inner-workings of a USA accredited international school in South America.

Modifying Stage One

According to Smyth's CRP model, Stage One starts with the recording of straightforward description of one's daily practice in a journal. But it also has a second aspect which I modified: the parallel recording of critical reflections regarding the descriptive accounts of events written in the journal, including theorising about the actual process of keeping a descriptive journal.

This was the first modification I made to Smyth's recommended model. I started my journaling intending to use the two-part process but very quickly found that I struggled with having enough time in a day, and enough intellectual capacity to record and immediately deconstruct my practice. I found that attempting to reflect on my descriptions at such an early stage in the CRP process was extremely difficult to do. This was anticipated by Smyth when he acknowledged that, "it is sometimes hard to see what is happening when you are struggling to manage the many complex events occurring" (1999, 14).

I chose to accept that I could only react at a reasonably shallow and short-term level to my writings and use that initial reaction to try to improve my next day's actions and decision-making processes. I knew I would have to go deeper into an analysis of my practice but accepted that more profound theorising would emerge over time and perhaps even continue after the data collection period of my research ended.

My critically reflective journaling at *Colegio Americano* generated various forms of reflexive actions in the immediate and longer term. But during stage one, I only focused on my capacity to deal with situations I had described in my journaling that I could improve in the short term.

Smyth's stage one processes had one other recommendations of process that did not work for me as a school leader. In its original teacher-focused iteration, Critical Reflective Practices involves collective reflection and shared organisational learning (Street, 1990; Cressey, 2006). The idea behind this collective reflection is that discussions with trusted colleagues, who become critical friends, should help to break down the isolated nature of one's reflections, thus making them more active, social and dialogic (Smyth et al., 1999, 30). This was also designed to encourage feedback from teacher-colleagues that would enable all the participants both to gain insights from the process.

While the reason for this form of sharing has merit, my own situation as a school leader in an international school setting necessarily meant that my reflective journey virtually began and ended alone. Issues of immediate confidentiality and the nature of my role as the head of the staffing hierarchy meant that I could not seek a sounding board for my descriptive writings from any staff member. Nor did I have an established network of leader colleagues to use as critical friends because there are so few International Schools in each South American country so that other school leaders are considered rivals in a highly competitive education market.

To sum up: in stage one of my Critically Reflective Leadership process, I immersed myself in my work and the very isolated experience of recording that work. As a school leader undertaking real-time research, I critically reflected critically each day on the vignettes in my journal and took action afterwards that resulted from these reflections. Sometimes immediately applicable changes to my practice became obvious from my journal writing, but

more often my work actions and decisions needed to be played out for an extended period before they elicited a reflexive response as a result of ongoing, deep reflection.

Stage Two

Informing is the confusingly-labelled second stage in Smyth's CRP process. I say 'confusing' because I do not feel that the verb 'inform' conjures an easy image of what the stage involves. Nevertheless, it is the stage in the process where the practitioner-researcher has to step back from the immediacy of the descriptions written in her reflective journal to consider what issues outside of her control are affecting on her work. Smyth explains it as the *how* section of analysis, that is, the questions that arise at this stage, starting 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?
- How did my assumptions about what is good education practice help me make decisions?

CRP was developed because of a concern that much of educationalists' practice develops from taken-for-granted assumptions that are largely unconscious/unexamined. The 'informing' stage of the CRP process attempts to make explicit, the assumptions that were implicit. This allows the researcher to determine whether the tacit knowledge that informs their practice can withstand scrutiny or examination.

Smyth's guidelines for Stage Two moves straight into steps for analysing the 'how' questions that are embedded in the study. It is likely that this occurs because, again, at the teacher-level of CRP it is assumed that the amount of content covered in a teacher-practitioner's journal will be such that it can be collated into patterns, themes and pedagogic principles.

Modifying Stage Two

In my case, Smyth's informing stage of CRP made more sense to me if I thought of it as a period for medium term reflections and reflexive actions. I moved in to this stage of the method during the annual school breaks in the two years of my school leadership role.
I had remained isolated in my studies during Stage One of the CRP process but I now needed to share my burgeoning data with people who could offer a different perspective to my own and who could help me choose what topics to concentrate on in the next stages of critical reflection. I leant on the support of my university supervisors, who had been reading my journal entries in stages ever since I had started collecting data. Given their familiarity with my topics, we were able to communicate and work together to deconstruct my practice, choose a theme on which to concentrate my analysis, and then consider what factors seemed to have informed that theme.

As a principal, my journal writings covered a multitude of topics. I ultimately decided to focus on the theme of evaluation and certification regulations in the school and with the help of my PhD supervisors struck upon the phrase, 'it looked as if...' as a way to articulate my thoughts. In a subsequent paper on my PhD studies, I will elaborate what my research into these regulations uncovered, but here I simply touch on what I compiled as list of surmisings:

- 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... the school '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... teachers were complicit in unethical practices.
- It looked as if... wealthier parents were buying educational advantage in a competitive education market.

With these surmisings in place by the second year of my school leadership tenure at *Colegio Americano*, I was able to use these phrases to narrow and focus my journal writing, critical reflections and reflexive action. I decided that if these observations were accurate then they were not practices that I wanted to continue in a school I was leading because I deemed them unethical and unfair. So I dedicated my final year in the school to making *Colegio Americano's* grading practices more accurate, truthful and workable; ensuring teacher's final grades were never changed at the administration level of the school; and figuring out how college transcript enhancements had been occurring and putting a stop to such practices.

If I had not done this medium-term reflection step of CRP, I would not have been able to understand the broader pattern of school-culture at *Colegio Americano* that allowed evaluation and certification process in the school to become corrupted and unethical. But I did come to understand the pattern and it allowed me to expose and then change the situation and this is the great strength of CRP being done by a school leader who has the power in their role to enact school wide change.

To sum up: my adaption in Stage Two of Critically Reflective Leadership, invoked the idea of 'agency' as a possibly more apt term than Smyth's term 'inform' for this stage in the methodology. While it is the stage in which the practitioner-researcher becomes informed about the underlying philosophies of education imbued in the school culture, for me, it was the informed agency of the principal and/or director role that was the cornerstone of this stage. By this I mean, that the school leader chooses, as a critical agent, to engage with the data which in turn influences the direction the research analysis takes and the course of future action in the school.

The sheer quantum of data a longer study can produce means that the focus of deep analysis will be one of choice and it will be a unique choice for every individual school leader. Those choices can empower a school leader to "define what counts as knowledge" and use her "extensive experiential wisdom" (Smyth et al., 1999a, 20) to make theory and either test it or not.

The advantage of analysing data generated over a long period of time is that it can provide enough detail to develop complex critical stories on deep issues of leadership.

Nevertheless, the length of time this stage took to complete, due to the copious nature of my written record, was a defining feature of my Critical Reflective Practice methodology. To get through the laborious nature of the tasks expediently, I:

- regularly and comprehensively analysed and revisited the raw journal writing data;
- had intense discussions with critical friends about theme development; and
- created a list of issues that 'looks as if' surmisings had uncovered.

Stage Three

Stage Three of Smyth's Critical Reflective Practice model, **confronting**, is the place to deal with the information that emerges from Stage Two reflections. It is where one theorises and attempts to construct adequate explanations for *why* one does what one does in the workplace. Stage Three requires the researcher to confront the questions she has

uncovered about the wider cultural and political assumptions that inform practice and ask *why* they wield such an effective influence.

Smyth encourages researcher-practitioners to 'do something rather than just gripe about it' at this stage in the process and argues that his CRP methodology offers teachers a way to move his research from criticism to active engagement in change-making practice. It is a pivotal step in the process because reflexivity should come to the fore and the practitioner-research should lead changes in practice and organisation on the basis of her reflections.

Modifying Stage Three

For me, Stage Three became a reflection on the actions I took with regard to the activities I described in the vignette at the beginning of this paper. Especially after I became the school's director I enacted change by:

1. investigating better-practice grading and reporting models used in other South American international schools;
2. making my decisions transparent to the stakeholder at *Colegio Americano* and laying out a case for change to the school's grading and reporting standards;
3. engaging in extensive written, verbal and eventually face-to-face negotiations with the US-based accreditation agency of which *Colegio Americano* was a member; and
4. compiling a strategic plan for the school to institutionalise changes that would remain operational even after I left my position.

In this stage I also used my journal to reflect on the merits of the reflexive decisions I was making and have outlined above. Ideally, these reflections should have helped me to develop a coherent theory that confronted my previously naive practices. Ideally, this stage is the time to learn from mistakes and successes and explain how they came about.

However, I found that enacting change as a school leader is an almost all-consuming occupation. So in reality, for me, Stage Three was when I developed a theory that helped me to understand why *Colegio Americano* might operate in ruthlessly competitive ways and who benefited from that reality. It was a time when I laid bare the inner workings of the school and reflected on its merits and foibles. And then it was a time when I acted decisively.

To sum up: reflexive action is the key component of this stage of Critically Reflective Leadership. It is the stage that I took to be the time when the reflective cycle supports and encourages agency via reflection. The bravery of CRP's ambitions gave me the courage to act: but because it was a time to act, it was also the most daunting stage in the process for me.

Stage Four

The final stage of Smyth's CRP process is termed **reconstructing**; it is his stage for envisioning ways to reconstruct one's practice that result from recognising problems uncovered by doing Stage Three. Smyth argues that this stage can move practitioners beyond their old ways of practising to create new, informed and critical modes of working.

I concur with Smyth, that in Stage Four a practitioner-researcher goes from acknowledging the political nature of all her work in education to embracing her responsibility to be a powerful, intellectual force (Smyth et al., 1999, 20-21). As a school leader, that force may not necessarily be able to be used to reconstruct a school's practices because alone one cannot always succeed in effecting sustainable change to an institution, but

it can be used to reconstruct a principal or director's practice of leadership and this is at least a step forward in being an authentic, ethical and accountable leader.

Smyth argues rightly that 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. CRP can exposes details of high-stakes decision-making in schools and offer them to the public to be dissected, discussed and learned from. While it is important that this kind of data be published, I also found that that the deep analysis and reflection of my professional reconstruction resulted in the most profound knowledge I learned during this study.

Modifying Stage Four

Using my method of Critically Reflective Leadership, I discovered that really deep reflection requires a long-term perspective to be done well. While I was working for *Colegio Americano* I engaged in a cycle of research that produced description, reflection and reflexive action in a continuity of work practice. Yet, when I left *Colegio Americano* I did not feel that I had really delved into the reconstructive stage of my CRP journey. At first, I thought I had undertaken this stage because I had changed aspect of governance practices at the school and that seemed to fit with Smyth's notion of reconstruction.

There is an argument that 'true' critical reflective practice can only occur when the researcher is actually working at the research site as the process is supposed to support change and so that cannot happen if the work does not continue. Reconstructing school practice with authentic transformation is a noble ambition of Critically Reflective Leadership but is, in my experience, less likely to be achieved by a lone school leader.
I do not write this in a pessimistic tone, but I learned that lasting change can only occur when the majority of the school community wants it. I know that when I ended my contract at *Colegio Americano* and flew home to Australia, the school retained some of the governance and administration practices that I had modified during my tenure - but it went back to some it's bad old ways as well.

My experience of 'doing' critical reflection continued to develop as I moved out of the role of school leader and into that of a full-time doctoral student role in 2007. I found that the fourth stage of CRP did not have to be about reconstructing the school's practices: it could mean reconstructing my leadership traits, capabilities and motivations. After I left *Colegio Americano* I did not apply for another principalship and I felt exhausted, depressed and deeply conflicted about who I was as an educator and whether my first school leadership position had been a positive experience.

To develop a wider perspective on my experiences I needed the guidance of reading again through critical education theory and cultural studies to allow me to view the "situation differently" (Smyth et al., 1999, 34). I read some good advice from relatively recent critical texts, and it slowly emerged that I needed to fundamentally reconstruct my perception of good leadership.

I will not go into great detail about the specifics of what I learned in the course of six years of critical reflections on leadership, as this information will be the theme of a future paper. In brief, I learned from my experiences that:

- I must choose which type of school I seek to lead with far greater discernment than I did with *Colegio Americano* and only consider working in a school that aligns with my critical perspective.
- 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 be a great principal but I was not at *Colegio Americano* and I do not wish to pursue further principal work in the future.

Brookfield and Preskill's, *Learning as a Way of Leading*, imagines the kind of leader I would like to have opportunity to try and be, 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 (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009, 5).

To sum up: Stage Four signals the change from theorising about high stakes decision-making to critiquing one's own work-practice experiences. As the shift in focus moves to longer-term change making the benefits of interrogating leadership continue even if one ceases to lead in a school. CRP does continue at this stage of my Critical Reflective Leadership but the changing making agenda focuses on the internal change making of the practitioner-researcher.

Conclusions

I spent from 2004 to 2006 juggling the all-encompassing roles that a school leader takes on each day with documenting those actions in real-time. In those two years, reflective journaling was an immeasurable help in making my decision-making processes reflexive. By the simple act of documenting what I had done in my work each day I gave myself regular time and focus to reflect critically on possible alternatives to problems I indentified as priorities to resolve. I argue that these are good outcomes of my CRP research because they helped me to become the accountable leader I try to be in my work now and always and because other school leaders need to read that it is possible to use CRP in their daily practice and that this disciplined practice will help them to also become leaders who make decisions that are based on critical reflection of their immediate actions.

Nevertheless, the very nature of critical reflection necessitated the writing of transparent descriptions of actions and decision-making processes that I was involved with each working day. A principal is privy to high-stakes information and I did not initially even think to question whether it was acceptable to research in those areas. But others on staff did begin to question the boundaries of my research. In February 2006, I was promoted to the directorship of the school. By then, colleagues were openly warning me against researching the school at the director level on the grounds that I was now attending Board meetings and therefore privy to the kind of information that should be secret and, by implication, unavailable for scrutiny.

When a colleague blatantly suggested that by critiquing school governance practices by documenting them in a journal, I was being 'too cavalier ... and overstepping the job that I was promoted to do,' I relayed his statements word for word into my reflective journal immediately after our discussion:

> You are an idealist who needs to get off her white horse once in a while; [because], you are in danger of being seen as the scapegoat… [so] you should be careful of protecting your reputation (Journal Entry: March 2006).

My colleagues questioned the fit between my role as their school leader and my commitment to critically researching my own practices and decisions in the role. I believe some colleagues were arguing that a director's loyalty (and, if necessary, complicity) was required in school leadership positions. My journal writing forced me to reflect on whether I agreed that leadership loyalty is more important than research imperatives.

The fact that I am now writing about these incidents in this paper shows that I disagreed with those sentiments. I wanted to complete my doctorate and I also wanted to practise critical reflection in whichever school role I had. Other school leaders who read this reflection can agree or disagree whether I made the right choice. But, what my PhD journey taught me was that the question of leadership versus research imperatives needs to be discussed and considered more widely.

In this paper, I have outlined a method of critical research designed specifically for school leaders to utilise. I have adapted it from John Smyth's original teacher-level critical reflective method and renamed it Critically Reflective Leadership. By undertaking critical reflective practice as a new principal in a K-12 school, I grew as a leader and became more certain of what type of a leader I wanted to be. I have learned that whatever we do as leaders in schools, we are modelling how to be leaders to the students and staff under our care. This is a moral responsibility and the fundamental reason I now believe it is so important for more critically aligned school leaders to become reflective practitioners.

Leadership work in schools is essential to research because our work covers areas that many teachers are not privy to, including:

- board politics and decision making;
- governance processes;
- accreditation compliance;
- certification and evaluation regulations;
- finance and budget imperatives; and
- staffing issues.

As stated throughout this paper, these are very high stakes issues and disclosure about them is a tricky and risky business. Yet it is also a responsibility of school leadership to model exemplary governance processes and, by doing so, to teach our students how to be courageous leaders in the future. 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.

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