The Time that is Given Us

Brent Griffith, Ed.S.

Marshall University

College of Education and Professional Development

Paper submitted to Faculty of the Marshall University Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements of

Public School Leadership Doctoral Program Residency

South Charleston, West Virginia, 2014

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# Rationale for the Theme

In J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, an unlikely hero named Frodo Baggins embarks upon an epic quest on which hangs the fate of his world. He has inherited the One Ring of power and must destroy it before it falls into the wrong hands. To do this, he must travel to Mount Doom and destroy the ring in the volcanic fires from which it was forged. Frodo, being a mild mannered hobbit, is daunted by the task which is set before him and despairs at the thought of the journey ahead.

On his journey, Frodo faces opposition at every turn. Trolls, goblins, and even giant arachnids stand between him and his goal. But, in every instance, through strength of will and with the help of his friends, Frodo is able to persevere. After a long time walking the roads and trails of Middle-Earth, he is able to reach his destination and complete his quest.

When reflecting on my own journey through the Public School Leadership Doctoral Program at Marshall University, I could not help but to think of the task set before Mr. Frodo Baggins. Like Frodo, I did not know if I was up to the task of reaching my goal. I was daunted by the trials I expected and discouraged by the ones that were unexpected along the way. But, again like Frodo, through perseverance and with help from a few trusted companions, I have journeyed a great distance and now stand at the foot of the last mountain to be climbed.

I have finished my coursework and portfolio requirements. Metaphorically, I am standing at the base of Mount Doom. The only task left to me is to climb the mountain and my mountain, of course, is the dissertation process.

The following account is of my own quest to earn a doctoral degree. While not all of the trials I faced were pleasant, I approached each as a challenge that brought the opportunity for growth as opposed to an obstacle merely to overcome.

# Coursework

As The Lord of the Rings begins, Frodo Baggins is happy and content. He spends his days in The Shire eating, drinking, and making merry and could not want any more from life. But, one day, a wizard named Gandalf showed up at his door and turned Frodo’s life upside-down. Gandalf insisted that Frodo leave the peacefulness of The Shire and take the mysterious ring he had inherited from his uncle Bilbo with him. Within days, Frodo had traveled farther from his home than ever before and had strayed considerably from what his comfortable lifestyle. This leg of his journey brought Frodo to new sights, new peoples and new experiences. His eyes were opened to what existed beyond the world he knew.

I felt much the same as Frodo as I began my own journey. I was once content in my life as a teacher and aspiring principal until one day the desire to obtain a doctoral degree appeared at the doorstep of my mind and refused to leave. As I began my coursework and was exposed to research, both quantitative and qualitative, for the first time, my eyes were opened to the intricacies of education which had existed just beyond my comfort zone.

In LS 703, during my first semester of doctoral coursework, I was introduced to scholarly research. I had no previous experience with research on this scale. Literature reviews, abstracts, research proposals and IRB approvals were all new to me. Even writing in APA format was foreign. I remember feeling terrified and excited in equal measure each week as I learned what new task was to be given us. Completing my first research proposal felt like such an accomplishment. It had a literature review, problem statement, research questions, methods and references. Looking at this paper now, I can see how far I have come and how much I have learned since I began this program. It was only seven pages long. Now, as I think about putting together a prospectus for a real research project, I am thankful for what I have learned and that I was able to start out slowly.

Performing qualitative research for the first time in EDF 615 was equally challenging, but an even more enlightening experience than learning about quantitative research. The quantitative research tasks I had previously were challenging, but the qualitative tasks in this class put my research and writing skills to the test.

As part of my training in qualitative research, I had to observe educators at work in real schools and then interview them afterwards. Keeping notes during observations was difficult, but transcribing the recordings of my interviews was truly challenging. I came away from this experience not only with a greater understanding of research as a whole, but with a greater respect for those who work with qualitative data.

After the first weeks of Frodo’s journey, he arrives at Rivendell, home of the Elves. Here he finds rest, guidance and friendship. During his stay, Frodo is joined by a fellowship of friends from all backgrounds who pledge to assist him in his endeavor. But, even more importantly, here he receives guidance. He learns the truth of the ring he carries and why it must be destroyed. Later, as Frodo leaves Rivendell, it is with renewed purpose and a clear vision of what must be done.

I had a similar experience when in my coursework I began to study curriculum. In these courses I learned the reasoning behind the work I had been doing in education. Furthermore, I explored my own beliefs about my role as an educator and even the role of schools themselves. Through my studies, I came to a better understanding of what my purpose as an educator should be. Like Frodo leaving Rivendell, I completed these courses with a better understanding of the road ahead and how I might walk it with purpose.

One of my more memorable courses was CI 702 – Curriculum Theory with Dr. Karen McComas. In this course I learned about the many theoretical perspectives from which educators approach the design of and purpose of curriculum. I even created my own curriculum theory from what I had learned in the course which I called the “Neo-Traditionalist Perspective.” This theory mixed elements of the Political, Poststructural, Gender and Phenomenological Perspectives and focused on content, personal growth and community awareness.

Through this activity I learned as much about myself as an educator as I did about the theories and theorists that I studied. I realized I was more interested in curriculum, especially who designs it and why, than I previously thought. This course, as much as any other, inspired me to learn as much as I could while in this program so that I may be a factor for change in whatever educational realm I find myself.

Because of this, I chose Curriculum and Instruction for my area of emphasis. In the courses I chose for this purpose I learned about writing for publication, curriculum at the different developmental levels and how to use technology to support and expand curriculum in schools. In these courses I leaned invaluable lessons on what curriculum is and how to design curricula that best meets the needs of students.

I especially enjoyed the technology and curriculum course. In this course, I not only learned to think about curriculum in a new way, but was able to practice presenting curricular elements through specific technological applications. I learned many strategies for better delivering lesson to students which I was able to share with the educators with whom I work.

As Frodo traveled with his companions toward his ultimate goal of destroying the One Ring of Power, the going was easy enough until they attempted to cross the Misty Mountains. Finding the snow covered peaks too treacherous to pass, the fellowship opted to traverse the mines of Moria to the other side of the range. Less a mine and more an abandoned underground city, Moria was a dark, treacherous place where none entered lightly.

During their days in the dark, Frodo and his companions face blood-thirsty orcs and cave trolls as they raced through the mine to the sunlight on the other side. One of their number is even lost on the bridge of Khazad-dûm saving the party from certain doom. Eventually, Frodo and his friends are able to exit Moria and continue their journey on the surface.

Frodo’s claustrophobic experience in the dark caverns of Moria reminds me of my own time completing the leadership coursework of the doctoral program. Many times I felt like Frodo, lost in the dark and searching for the way through. And, as Frodo lost a companion while underground, I saw more than a few of my classmates abandon their quest for a doctoral degree because of the demands of completing coursework.

Eventually, Frodo managed to reach daylight once again and I emerged from the journey of three years of coursework. In the dark, so to speak, I was able to focus clearly on the aspects of myself and my profession that truly mattered. My studies and experiences during this time refined my skills as a student, educator and leader. If not for the guidance and support of my professors throughout the program, I would likely have wandered aimlessly through the coursework and perhaps become irrevocably lost.

In my leadership courses I explored the myriad theories and models of leadership. In LS 710 – Principles of Leadership, I learned that leadership is all about the relationship between leaders and followers. Each of these theories attempts to explain how leaders arise and what details of their personal character, environment or situation led to the development of their leadership skills. Great-Man theories suggest that some people are born to lead, literally destined for greatness. Situational theories, on the other hand, suggest that leaders are shaped by the demands of the specific situations in which they find themselves. I find that I fit neatly into none of these theories, but share qualities with all.

I feel that my own leadership desires stem from my feelings of dissatisfaction with various aspects of the educational process. As a teacher, I took notice of flaws in the system and in the leadership approaches I experienced. I came to believe I have something to offer. For this reason, I feel I associate strongly with the Leadership-Role Theory. This theory holds that leaders emerge due to a combination of personal characteristics and the demands of the situation. As a teacher, I emerged as a leader because of my desire to help my fellow teachers and I was successful in these endeavors because my leadership skills surfaced and progressed from there.

In LS 705 – Administration Theory, I explored these ideas, and my own motivations, even further. In this course, I further researched leadership theories and how they are applied in leadership roles. Since beginning to pursue my Master’s Degree in Leadership Studies I had considered the theory of Servant Leadership to be most closely related to my own personal style. While I still consider the characteristics of servant leadership (listening, empathy and stewardship) important, I now feel that this theory does not accurately represent my leadership style. There are some leadership tasks, such as employee discipline, that cannot be successfully approached while seeking first to be a servant.

While in this course, I first considered Transformational Leadership Theory and how it related to my own personal style. Transformational leadership involves leaders transforming stakeholders, environments and circumstances through passion, charisma and force of will. While I would like to describe myself as a transformational leader, I am not yet able to do so. I strive to personify characteristics of this theory, such as the value of teamwork and shared vision, but am sure that I am not yet transformational. Transforming stakeholders through personality and communication seems like a skill that will take years to obtain, if obtained at all.

In these courses, I studied many different leadership theories and approaches. I related to the aspects of many, but did not feel that any one truly represented me as a leader. That is why I now feel that Situational Leadership Theory is the approach that is the most closely associated with my own particular leadership style. Situational leadership style solves the problem of any one leadership approach not being applicable to all situations. I believe that I, as a leader, need to be flexible in my approach so that I can related to each topic, problem and person as the situation dictates is necessary. If I have learned one lesson in my career as an educational leader thus far, it is that adaptability is my most useful skill.

# Research and Scholarship

As Frodo progressed on his journey he was able to overcome many obstacles. After leaving the mines of Moria, he was betrayed by a friend, separated from his company and fell victim to some very bad directions. But through all this, he never lost hope. Until, that is, he met the giant spider, Shelob.

Tricked into taking the wrong path by Gollum, a twisted creature bent on sabotaging Frodo’s intentions of destroying the ring, Frodo wanders into the lair of Shelob, a massive man-eating spider. Despite his best efforts to get away, Frodo is soon overcome by the arachnid. Stung by Shelob and injected with venom, Frodo appears to be dead. But appearances can be deceiving. With a little time to recover, and help from a friend, Frodo is soon revived and resumes her journey.

There were times in the process of completing my coursework when I felt all but dead; beaten by obstacles too large to overcome. Like Frodo, I had tried my best, but thought that I had done all I could do. And, also like Frodo, if not for the encouragement of those closest to me I might have given up. Most of these instances occurred when I faced the supplemental experiences outside of the coursework. My professors asked me to do things I felt I was not prepared or even qualified to do. But it was also in these instances that I had my greatest triumphs. Like Frodo, I found that what does not kill me only makes me stronger and that, like him, I could even surprise myself.

Early in my doctoral coursework, I submitted a paper for publication at the instruction of Dr. Francis Simone while taking CI 677 - Writing for Professional Publication. I submitted the essay *Sixth-Grade Gifts* to the journal Education Week. While my article was not published, I learned a great deal through this process about myself as a writer and what it takes to be published.

This course, and especially this project, really put me in my place as a writer. I had not been in the program long and thought I had a handle on writing professionally. I was wrong. Examining the essay I submitted so long ago, I understand why it was not published. It is not very good. But it is a great representation of the gulf that separates who I was as a writer then and who I am as a writer now.

Toward the end of my doctoral coursework, I co-authored and co-presented a research study at the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration (SRCEA) 53rd annual conference in New Orleans, Louisiana with Dr. Barbara Nicholson and Dr. Louis Watts. The research study was titled *Principal Assessment of the Efficacy and Appropriateness of Their Preservice Administrative Preparation*.

Working with my instructors, I was able to experience many of the facets of research writing for myself for the first time. I built the survey on SurveyMonkey.com, wrote select parts of the study’s methods and results, and was able to present the findings of the study at the conference. Presenting at the conference was by far the highlight of my involvement. I was nervous about presenting in front of so many established researchers, but everything went well and I am thankful for the experience.

# Other Professional / Academic Pursuits

After being revived and escaping the lair of Shelob, Frodo sets off on the last leg of his journey. He has come far and can see Mount Doom standing like a mirage in the distance. Here, nearing the end of his adventure, he has only one companion left, the loyal Samwise Gamgee. He and Sam are tired. In fact, they have come nearly as far as they can go. They realize that turning back is not an option and completing the quest is all that matters. Setting their sights on the mountain in the distance, they cast away their gear and move forward. This is a bold act of ones who have committed themselves fully to the completion of a task. Without their gear, they can move more swiftly, but have given themselves no option of changing course. Together they have overcome many dangers and have no fear left for what may lie ahead. They will reach their goal or die trying.

Through the process of completing the coursework and the various other requirements of the program, I found a resolve within myself which was greater than I could have expected. I had overcome much and now realized of what I was truly capable. After submitting an article for publication and presenting at a conference with my professors, I realized I was able to complete my task and I would let nothing stop me. Like Frodo and Sam, I cast away my doubts and fears and moved forward with a new perspective on myself and my place in the world. It was with this attitude that I was able to complete the remaining elements of the program. These experiences required me to use what I had learned to represent myself and my program. Nearing the end of this long process, I was no longer a beginner, but an experienced doctoral student with much to offer others.

Because of my recent experience at the SRCEA conference in New Orleans, I was asked to co-present a session at the Marshall University Doctoral Student/Faculty Seminar during the fall semester of 2012. The topic of the session was "Conference Preparation.” As a presenter in this session, I shared my experiences preparing for and attending the conference. This experience marks a turning point in my journey to become a doctoral candidate. I realized, then, that I was no longer a beginner with doubts about whether I could meet the challenges I would face in this program. I was a seasoned doctoral student presenting to beginners who now struggled with the same fears with which I had struggled. This realization helped me to overcome my fears about the program and move forward to the end stages with confidence.

At about the same time, I was asked to help represent the Marshall University Graduate College Leadership Program at The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Poster Session with Dr. Michael Cunningham. I was honored to be a part of this process and for the opportunity to express what I have learned to the evaluators.

This was my first experience with college accreditation evaluation. It was revealing as to how the process worked. I was happy that I was able to represent the programs in which I learned so much.

I also had the opportunity to teach the graduate level course LS 693 - School Law for Support Personnel. I facilitated this course in coordination with Dr. Michael Cunningham. As the teacher of this course, I provided educators with a working knowledge of school law and other legal matters as it pertained to student attendance. The class mainly focused on laws dealing with mandatory attendance and juvenile matters.

This was my first experience teaching at the graduate level. It gave me the opportunity to use the knowledge and skills I had learned in my post-graduate career to help other educators expand their own knowledge. I felt that this was a rewarding task and one that I would like to experience again.

# Reflection

Nearing the end of his journey, Frodo was not the same person he was when he left the safety of his comfortable home. He had experienced things that had changed him in a fundamental way. He was never going to look at himself or the world the same way again.

Like Frodo, much has changed in my life since I entered this program. The first, and most appropriate, was that I became a school administrator. This has been an exciting change, to say the least. Working as a principal is the most rewarding position I have ever had, but also the most challenging. As I progress in my career, I value my experiences in the doctoral program for the knowledge and skills I have obtained.

I feel that I have grown much through the experiences I listed previously and the many I have not mentioned. Through my coursework I learned about school law and curriculum theory. Through my research and scholarship activities, I learned how to add to my professional field with careful study and writing. And, through all the other activities in which I participated along the way, I learned the importance of teamwork and of passing what I know on to others. But, most importantly, I feel that through this program I have learned to have confidence in myself and my abilities and that I am able to overcome any obstacle.

As a leader, I have grown tremendously since I began this process. I started with no true leadership style at all because I had not experienced what it was really like to be a leader. Now, I believe I have a strong grasp on what kind of leader I am and, more importantly, what kind of leader I hope to be. As stated earlier, I feel that I have come to embrace a situational leadership style. Situational leadership theory identifies four basic leadership styles: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. Effective leaders are able to utilize the most appropriate leadership frame that a situation might require (Beaver, 2011). I feel this holds true in my work as a building level school administrator in which I am required to wear many different hats in order to resolve a myriad of issues involving a great variety of stakeholders. Experienced and inexperienced teachers need to be lead differently, as do strong and weak teachers. Furthermore, some decisions require a quick response from myself only, while others are better addressed by the consensus of stakeholders. I feel that situational leadership is a good fit for the public school setting, with its wide range of issues and challenges, but I would like to incorporate more democratic leadership into my own personal style. The initiatives and programs being used by schools today increasingly require buy-in from stakeholders at every level. When implementing new initiatives, it is much easier to work with the group than to force something into place.

# Conclusion

At the beginning of this process, I was not sure that I would even be granted access to a doctoral program. After all, I was only a classroom teacher with dreams of becoming something more. Then, I thought I would never have the confidence or knowledge needed to present at a national conference. I even had doubts that I had the intelligence or the willpower to complete the coursework. But I surprised myself and completed each of these tasks, and many more, with of the help of faculty, friends and family members along the way.

I had no idea that this journey would be filled with so many rewarding opportunities. Looking back, I can barely recognized the person, student or educator that I was in the beginning. As I approach the milestone of admission to candidacy, I can look back proudly at my experiences and know that I am on the right track.

And now, like Frodo Baggins, I have only one task left to complete. The mountain I must climb is tall and steep and I am weary from all that has come before. But I am also encouraged by all that I have accomplished and hopeful about what is to come. Gandalf, the wise wizard, once said to Frodo, “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.” I complete this stage of my journey confident that the time and effort I have dedicated to this process has not been in vain and will only lead to greater fulfillment as time goes on.

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