1-6-2023

Won't He Do It?! African American Males Who Achieved Their Doctor of Education (EdD): Perceptions of Success Factors

Felicia Lewis

ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, WON'T HE DO IT?! AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES WHO ACHIEVED THEIR DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD): PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS FACTORS, by FELICIA HARDIN LEWIS, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

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WON'T HE DO IT?! AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES WHO ACHIEVED THEIR DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD): PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS FACTORS

by

Felicia Hardin Lewis

Under the Direction of Nicholas J. Sauers, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Doctoral student attrition is a significant problem of practice for higher education (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Peterson, Kovel-Jarboe, & Schwartz, 1997; Dixon, 2016; Buss, Zambo, R., Zambo, D., Perry, & Williams, 2017). African American males complete doctoral degrees at a significantly lesser rate than other races in this country and fewer than African American females. This study explored the research problem of doctoral student attrition by examining African American male doctoral student success factors in EdD programs in the United States. The study's purpose was to examine the experiences and perceptions of African American male graduates of EdD programs to determine the factors that supported their program completion while also serving in a leadership capacity in their professional roles. The following research questions guided this study: 1) What program and institutional components supported these AAM students in their doctoral pursuits and contributed to the successful attainment of their EdD degrees? And 2) What individual factors enabled these African American male students to

persist to the successful completion of their EdD degrees? Tinto's Student Retention Theory (1993) framed this study.

This qualitative case study was conducted virtually. Participants were recruited online. Members of the social media Facebook group entitled "Doctor of Education (EdD) Network" who met the study criteria were invited to participate. The data collection consisted of interviews with eight African American males who earned an EdD while also serving in leadership roles within the last five years, as well as documents. Data analysis involved organizing data into categories based on the student retention theory framework. Findings from this study highlight the factors supporting African American male doctoral student retention and program completion. The study's findings build upon the existing literature and support further studies on attrition and retention of African American male students in EdD and other professional doctoral programs. More light has been shed on the issue, providing insight to educational leaders whose institutions, programs, and students may benefit from any revelations uncovered through this research.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES WHO ACHIEVED THEIR DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD) DEGREE: PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS FACTORS

by

FELICIA HARDIN LEWIS

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education and Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2022

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my daughter, Lauryn. You have been with mommy every step of the way through this process. I love and appreciate you for your humor and patience. I hope that you see that anything is possible with God, hard work, and persistence. Mommy loves you more than you know. I hope I made you proud.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my mother, Beverly Netherly Hardin, and my grandmothers, Sherley Netherly Simmons, Mae Belle Spears Hardin, and Augustine McLeod Fontenot Hardin. God blessed me with the most amazing and strong matriarchs. Thank you for your example, love, and support. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several individuals I must acknowledge. The process of completing my program and this dissertation has been one of the most challenging endeavors of my life. I am beyond thankful for everyone who supported me along the way.

First, I must acknowledge the amazing participants of this study. Thank you for lending your voices as Black men and as leaders in education to this very important topic. No doubt others will be as impacted as I was by all that you shared. I hope you all are as proud of this work as I am.

I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Nicholas Sauers, Dr. Susan Ogletree, and Dr. James Kahrs. Thank you for your guidance and feedback. I want to give special recognition to Dr. Sauers for your role as chair. Your support and patience were EVERYTHING. Thank you.

Also, shout out to the members of Cohort IV, with whom I began this journey. Your success was an inspiration for me to keep going. Thank you especially to Dr. Cynthia Tookes, Dr. David Curlette, and Jennifer Fero for your friendship, support, and encouragement.

To my daddy, Nathaniel Hardin – you birthed this love of education in me, as well as the determination to finish whatever I start. You and mama provided the template for hard work and dedication. You also sowed seeds that I am still reaping the benefits from. Thank you for your example. Thank you for your love and your prayers. Thank you for your sacrifice. Thank you for teaching me how to trust God...I needed it. I love you and hope that I made you both proud.

Thank you also to the most amazing grandfathers anyone could ask for – C. W. Simmons and Tobe Hardin, Sr. Poppy and PawPaw, thank you for your love and support. Thank you to my brothers, Nathan and Reggie as well.

Angela, Prince, Darius, and Nikel – words cannot even begin to capture how much I appreciate you both for your love and support through this process. You have been with me through the ups, downs, frustrations, tears, and moments of elation. Travis, thank you for always being willing to review my writing and thanks to you and Angie for keeping Lauryn when I needed you. I love y'all.

To my former colleague, Rahem…from the moment you learned that I was in a doctoral program, you only addressed me as "Doc." Hey, Doc." In some of my weakest moments, your greeting was an affirmation that encouraged me to keep pushing. Thank you.

To my former vice president and mentor, Jeff Tarnowski…thank you for selflessly pouring into me and for taking a genuine interest in my professional future. You set in motion my journey to teaching, and ultimately my journey to the doctorate. You literally changed the course of my trajectory and put me on a path in education that has been fulfilling and purposeful. I am grateful to you.

There are a host of others – too many of you to name. Family, friends, colleagues, students, etc…just know that your prayers, well wishes, and support were felt. For everyone who called me “doctor” before it ever came to be, it meant more than you know. Thank you.

Finally, I have to thank God for His goodness, grace, and mercy. Without Him, none of this would have been possible. When I lacked faith in myself, my faith in Him pulled me through. Thank you!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Student retention remains of paramount importance and concern for educational leaders and other stakeholders of the academic community. This issue transcends and persists across academic levels – K-12, postsecondary, and graduate-level education (Lau, 2003; Márquez, Cano, Romero, Noaman, Mousa Fardoun, & Ventura, 2016; Burke, 2019). Doctoral student attrition remains a significant problem of practice for higher education (Buss et al., 2017; Dixon, 2016; Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Peterson et al., 1997). Further, African American males (AAM) complete doctoral degrees at a significantly lesser rate than other races in this country and also earn significantly fewer doctoral degrees than their African American women counterparts (National Science Foundation Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2019). "[I]n 2019 African Americans made up 7.1 percent of all doctorates earned…in the United States…[and] women made up 64.3 percent of all African Americans earning [those] doctorates in 2019" (National Science Foundation Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2019).

This study endeavored to shed more light on African American male doctoral success and to provide more insight to educational leaders whose institutions, programs, and students may benefit from any revelations uncovered by the culmination of this research process. This study explored the research problem of doctoral student attrition by examining African American male doctoral student success factors in EdD programs in the United States. The focus specifically on EdD programs provided an opportunity to explore the experiences of AAM students who were also practitioners serving in leadership capacities while pursuing their doctoral degrees to establish further homogeneity among the study participants.

The use of "AAM" to abbreviate the term "African American males" in this study is intentional and is prevalent in the existing research within this area of investigation. Further, as Jernigan, Dudley, and Hatch (2020) acknowledge, this study recognizes that the descriptors "African American" and "Black" are not one and the same; however, they are used interchangeably in this study, as is generally accepted in much of the extant literature (Jernigan et al., 2020). It should also be noted that the AAM participants in this study often interchanged the terms "Black" and "African American" when referencing themselves or their race during their interviews.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study aimed to examine factors contributing to AAM doctoral student retention and completion in Doctor of Education (EdD) programs in the United States. According to Harper and Wood, Black males earn doctorates disproportionately in the fields of education and social services (2016). In addition to the typical challenges associated with doctoral study, these students are also often navigating the challenges of doctoral study while working full-time as well. Many also hold leadership roles, adding another dimension to the demands they have to manage while pursuing their doctorates. This study sought to build upon the existing literature by exploring their experiences related to retention and completion, and to provide university, departmental, and program leadership with more insight into those experiences and needs of these students. Doing so highlights individual and institutional practices that promote retention and completion.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What program and institutional components supported these African American male students in their doctoral pursuits and contributed to the successful attainment of their EdD degrees?
2. What individual factors enabled these African American male students to persist to the successful completion of their EdD degrees?

Significance of Study

Student attrition remains a challenging issue in K-12 education and at the college level (Burke, 2019; Lau, 2003; Márquez et al., 2016). Doctoral attrition is generally reported as consistently being around 50% (Rigler, Bowlin, Sweat, Watts, & Throne, 2017) across programs and institutions, domestically and abroad. As such, retention and attrition have been extensively studied. Furthermore, although doctoral student attrition has received significant research attention, most of that research has focused on traditional students and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs. This study is significant in that there was a need to look deeper into the factors that are more specific to AAM doctoral students – enrolled in EdD programs – to better understand the experiences of this distinct group of learners. In response to the phenomenon of doctoral student attrition, this research study examined doctoral success in this particular population and context. Since little has been written regarding doctoral attrition, retention, and success as they relate to AAM students, and even less so in doctor of education programs, a study of this nature was needed.

Further, the scarcity of Black male leadership in education – K-12 and higher education – and the impact of this lack of representation also make a study of this nature necessary, particularly with regard to increasing the pipeline of AAM into educational leadership (Ononuju,

2016; Wint, Opara, Gordon, & Brooms, 2021). Increasing the Black male presence in educational leadership requires more Black males with advanced degrees. The results of this study shed light on factors contributing to persistence and completion rates in this population. It provides insight to university, departmental, and program leadership interested in identifying more ways to promote retention and reduce attrition, particularly among African American male students.

Theoretical Framework

"Theory guides the researcher through the research process by providing a 'lens' to look at the phenomenon under study" (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 367). Establishing a solid theoretical framework contributed to the strength and direction of this study. Upon exploring the literature, Vincent Tinto's student retention theory (Tinto, 1993) was selected to frame the study. Student retention theory (SRT) appears extensively in the extant literature on persistence, retention, and attrition. While SRT was developed with undergraduate students in mind, its primary tenets (i.e., student connection to/integration with the institution; institutional factors vs. individual factors that impact success) are very much relevant to the graduate student experience as well.

Tinto introduced his first retention model (model of student dropout), theorizing that students who integrate socially into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate (1975). He refined his theory in later years as he encountered more information and gaps in the extant literature on the topic. His integration model illustrates the importance of the interaction between student and institution for retention. Tinto explores the factors that potentially lead students to drop out. He initially created his

retention and integration framework as he found prior models lacking in two significant ways. First, the term "dropout" had not been clearly defined previously, so he felt it was important to distinguish between students who failed out, withdrew, or transferred to other institutions. Second, prior models had not addressed the nuance of individual and institutional factors contributing to student attrition (1975).

Tinto derives aspects of his integration model from Durkheim's theory of suicide (1975), which posited that insufficient integration into society could lead individuals to resort to suicide. From that perspective and through that lens, Tinto theorized that if a college/university is a microcosm of society, with its own people, culture, systems, values, and structures, then instances of student departure can result from insufficient integration with the institution. Insufficient interactions and differing values between student and institution may increase the chance of departure. This particular aspect of Tinto's theory is referred to as integration. Because institutions are comprised of social and academic systems, it is vital for students to integrate meaningfully and sufficiently into both. Doing so can positively impact a student's transition and decrease the likelihood of attrition. Tinto also notes that an imbalance could be problematic – for instance, a student who integrates socially but not academically, or vice versa, remains at risk of not persisting.

According to Tinto, student departure often results from a combination of individual characteristics and background, along with the degree to which they are able to integrate academically and socially with their institution. Tinto's student retention theory also expounds on the specific ways in which interactions and integration can impact a student's decision and/or ability to persist. The student's background (i.e., family background, individual attributes, and

academic) can impact his or her ability to integrate with the institution academically and socially. He also discusses the importance of students' commitment to their own goals, as well as their commitment to the institution. In addition, the academic aspect of integration (student's grades, development, peer interactions, faculty interactions) impacts retention as well. Tinto's initial model of student retention in 1975 emphasized the importance of integration socially and academically into their institution. In 1987, his model evolved, taking into account how student outlook can also impact retention. In its latest iteration from 1993, his retention model further expanded to include external factors, highlighting the importance of the awareness of abandoning one way of life and adopting another when starting college (Tinto, 1993). The consistently high rate of doctoral student attrition behooves institutions and programs to continue to explore this phenomenon. This framework helps to provide more insight into the "why" and ways to most effectively support doctoral students and increase completion rates.

This study endeavored to examine factors related to AAM doctoral completion of EdD programs in the United States. Because Tinto's student retention theory provided a framework for better understanding factors related to student persistence, retention, and attrition, it was a practical framework for conducting this study and addressing the research questions. Further, because the research questions are student-focused with regard to exploring their experiences navigating doctoral study, and institution-focused with regard to providing institutional and program leaders with more insight that could decrease attrition, SRT was a solid framework for this study. Student integration with their institution – academically and socially – and the impact on persistence, retention, and attrition is at the heart of Tinto's SRT. Examining AAM doctoral

student success in EdD programs through this lens provides a great deal of insight for programs of this nature and other stakeholders who are invested in student success.

In conclusion, Vincent Tinto's student retention theory (SRT) (Tinto, 1993) provided a reliable frame upon which to construct this study on factors related to African American male doctoral student success. The theory's significant aspects, which highlight the importance of student connection to and integration with the institution, as well as the institutional vs. the individual characteristics that impact success, provide an insightful lens through which to explore the guiding questions of this study. Moreover, although SRT primarily focuses on the undergraduate student experience, the theory's components are undoubtedly significant and easily applicable to the graduate student experience. Through the nexus of this framework, case study methodology, and research questions, this study further illuminated the topic of doctoral student success as it relates to the pervasive phenomenon of doctoral student attrition for more innovation and improvement in this area.

Limitations

Some factors limited this qualitative case study. The research design and scope of the study limited the findings in several ways. First, as a qualitative case study, the limited number of participants in this investigation on doctoral student success focused solely on African American males. Second, the study only included participants who completed EdD programs in the United States in the last five years. Investigating other demographics, other programs, or individuals who did not complete their doctoral programs could shed further light on the issue of doctoral student attrition.

Additionally, Tinto's student retention theory served as the study's framework but was based on undergraduate students, which could be viewed as another limitation. Though most factors related to undergraduate retention could also apply to graduate students, all of the factors did not translate to doctoral students. And while Tinto's student retention theory provided an adequate frame for the study and facilitated the researcher's ability to address the research questions and fulfill the study's purpose, a framework explicitly related to doctoral student retention and success may have better served the study's aims.

Definitions

The following terms have been defined to provide more clarity and context to the study:

Attrition - The number of students at an institution (college or university) who start but do not complete their degrees (Delen, 2012); leaving college prior to completion of one's degree (Tinto, 1993). This study makes reference to doctoral student attrition – the number of doctoral students who did not complete their degree programs.

Completion - Fulfilling all academic requirements associated with obtaining one's college degree; graduating (Causey, J., Huie, F., Lang, R., Ryu, M., Shapiro, D., & National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). In this study, completion refers to doctoral student who graduated from their programs.

Liminality - One's process of becoming; a transition or transformation (Adorno et al., 2015). In the context of this study, liminality refers to these EdD students' transition to scholar-practitioners.

Persistence - A student's successful matriculation from one academic term to the next (Braxton & Francis, 2018). This study focuses on doctoral students progressing from through their academic terms and doctoral milestones towards their degree.

Preparedness - The degree to which a student is ready for the academic and social aspects of higher education (Marr, Nicoll, von Treuer, Kolar, & Palermo, 2013). This study references these EdD students' readiness with regard to the academic rigor and socialization within their programs and academic communities.

Self-efficacy - Belief in one's ability to accomplish or succeed at a particular undertaking (Bandura, 1997). More specific to this study, self-efficacy refers to the participants' belief in themselves to successfully meet the challenges of doctoral study, and the ultimate belief that they would graduate with their EdD.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The subject of doctoral student attrition has received increased research attention in recent years. U.S. doctoral education has been under intense scrutiny due to continued high rates of attrition (Church, 2009). Doctoral programs, both face-to-face and online, have reported attrition rates ranging from 50% to as high as 70% (Rigler et al., 2017). These numbers are particularly unsettling when considering the financial investment and time spent on the part of students, faculty, programs, and institutions. It begs the question of why this group of otherwise high-performing students, with an apparent track record of academic success, as evidenced by their ability to complete undergraduate and graduate-level coursework, falter at the doctoral level. Many studies have examined the reasons for this phenomenon. Ample evidence exists regarding numerous factors contributing to the successful completion of or, conversely, attrition from doctoral study (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). This phenomenon impacts AAM to an even greater extent (Ballard & Cintron, 2010; Brooms, 2017; Harper & Wood, 2016; Scott & Sharp, 2019; Wood & Palmer, 2014). This literature review explores the factors that recurred most often in the research and is organized into distinct sections reflecting those factors: Individual Factors and Institutional Factors. The final section narrows the focus to AAM, exploring these factors through the lens of their particular experiences as evidenced in the existing body of research.

The General Issue of Doctoral Attrition

Because student attrition has been and remains a conundrum for leadership at all levels of education – K-12, postsecondary, and graduate – it has received a great deal of research attention

for many decades (Jacks, Chubin, & Porter, 1983; Rigler et al., 2017; Tinto, 1987). More recently, research on questions regarding doctoral student attrition has increased. U.S. doctoral education has been under intense scrutiny due to continued high rates of attrition (Breitenbach, 2019; Church, 2009). Both domestically and abroad, doctoral programs have consistently reported attrition rates ranging from 50% to as high as 70% (Rigler et al., 2017). The sheer volume of non-completers is staggering, but even more so when considering the amount of time, money, and other resources that are also lost in the process – by students and institutions (de Valero, 2001; Hunter & Devine, 2016). This phenomenon necessitates an investigation into the factors causing students to abandon their doctoral pursuits (Pyhalto, Toom, Stubb, & Lonka, 2012). Many studies have examined the reasons for this phenomenon, and it is imperative to gain more insight and identify solutions to this challenge, one which continues to beleaguer the field of education.

Contributing Factors – Individual vs. Institutional

Understanding factors that impact students' desire and/or ability to complete their doctoral journeys is essential. Due to the extensive research on doctoral student retention and attrition throughout the years, the body of research is replete. Researchers have identified numerous factors that directly contribute to doctoral student retention and attrition rates (Caballero, 2020; de Valero, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Much of the literature highlights primary reasons and conditions under which doctoral students are likely to persist or leave doctoral study, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Many studies also highlight persistence strategies for students and retention measures for programs and institutions (Church, 2009; Cross, 2014; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Emergent themes related to

doctoral student retention and attrition most recurrent in the literature include self-efficacy, advising, student preparedness, identity, program design, socialization/belonging, and program/departmental/ institutional culture (Adorno, Cronley, & Smith, 2015; Enikõ & Szamosközi, 2017; Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012). Upon synthesizing the literature, the vast majority of the factors related to doctoral student retention and attrition fit into two distinct categories – individual factors and institutional factors (Buss et al., 2017; de Valero, 2001; Edwards, Cangemi, & Kowalski, 1990; Goenner & Snaith, 2004; Golde, 1998, 2005; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

Doctoral student success is complex and multifaceted. As such, it cannot be attributed to just one reason. While there is not one cause, it is critical to explore the factors that impact student success for understanding and action (Gilmore, Wofford, & Maher, 2016). The expansive body of existing literature has found numerous factors that promote and hinder doctoral student persistence, related to the student, advisor, and/or institution (Bednall, 2018; Skakni, 2018; Sparkman et al., 2012).

Reasons for doctoral attrition often point to students and their deficiencies; however, students' decisions to abandon their doctoral pursuits are rarely singular and are often a combination of factors that involve themselves as well as aspects of their programs (Adorno et al., 2015). When exploring the topic of doctoral student attrition, valuable insight can come from students, faculty, and program administration. Gardner (2009) investigated and compared the reasons students and faculty felt were the primary reasons doctoral students struggled with and ultimately abandoned their doctoral programs. For her study, Gardner interviewed several students (60) and faculty members (34). Students' main reasons for attrition were: 1) personal

challenges, 2) departmental challenges, and 3) incongruence with the program/institution. Faculty members' attributed attrition primarily to: 1) the student's lack of ability, drive, focus, motivation, and/or initiative, 2) the student not being cut out for doctoral study, and 3) personal challenges. Gardner also noted that faculty placed the onus upon the students.

Similarly, Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty, & Turner (2014) found that personal challenges and student/program incongruence contribute significantly to students discontinuing their doctoral journey. Additionally, they cited other factors, including financial, emotional, and familial. Gopaul (2019) notes that research attention to critical aspects of doctoral education and the doctoral student experience has expanded significantly in the last three decades, with an intense focus on factors such as socialization, time to degree, attrition, and supervisor relations.

In their study, Gilmore et al. (2016) found that demographics, desire, resourcefulness, initiative, and persistence were key aspects of doctoral student success. However, new doctoral students are often unprepared for what the journey has in store for them. As Brill et al. (2014) discuss, the demands of doctoral-level work often present an unexpected, unfamiliar rigor to new doctoral students, which can also impact their confidence in their abilities or expose deficits.

Individual Factors

Student Preparedness. High school performance has been established as an indicator of future college performance. Retention and attrition are also of major concern in K-12 education (Enikõ & Szamosközi, 2017; Sparkman et al., 2012). School leaders continue to combat the dropout phenomenon, particularly at the high school level (Márquez et al., 2016; McFarland, Cui, Holmes, & Wang, 2020). For those high school students who do persist and ultimately transition to college, the challenge of retaining them transfers from school and district leadership

to college and university leadership (Burke, 2019; Tinto, 1975). An enormous amount of literature examines college retention and attrition. In addition, extensive research exists on how students' academic performance in high school may be a predictor of their levels of performance in college and their likelihood to persist to graduation.

Another recurring theme of doctoral student persistence/attrition found in the literature was student preparedness. Doctoral students often enter programs unaware of the degree to which they will be required to demonstrate a different skill set and perform at a higher level than they may have previously (Brill et al., 2014). Numerous studies found that the degree to which a student was or was not prepared for doctoral study directly impacted their performance (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Bade, 2014). Gardner (2009) and Rigler et al. (2017) noted items such as entrance exams (i.e., Graduate Record Examination/GRE; Miller Analogies Test/MAT), GPA, preparation courses, research experience, and writing ability as aspects that could provide insight into the way prospective doctoral student would potentially respond to the rigor of doctoral study, suggesting that these should be seriously taken into account when being considered for program admission. Garcia and Yao (2019) further asserted that prospective students lacking in these areas would encounter more challenges as they begin and progress through their program, possibly resulting in an increased likelihood of attrition.

While student preparation is related to persistence and attrition, students are not expected to arrive at doctoral study knowing and being everything that they will need to know and eventually become. There is an expectation that faculty will facilitate students' transition into doctoral study and that scaffolding will occur with writing and research training (Garcia & Yao, 2019). Rigler et al. (2017) note that programs and faculty need to provide students with the tools

to be successful with writing and research well in advance of their comprehensive exam, proposal, and dissertation. Early and frequent opportunities to perform research and scholarly writing is key to developing doctoral students along their journey. Once they reach the candidate stage, students often report increased stress, lack of structure, and unclear expectations, contributing to the potential for challenges to progress, persistence, and timely completion of their doctoral study. (Rigler et al., 2017).

Identity and Impostor Phenomenon/Impostor Syndrome. Identity plays a significant role in doctoral students' performance, success, and challenges (Leshem, 2020; Mantai, 2017). Often, new doctoral students are either unaware of the aspects of becoming a scholar or underestimate the process. By the time an individual considers doctoral study and finds himself in a doctoral program, he has accomplished a considerable amount academically – minimally, a bachelor's and a master's degree. Having done so can result in a naiveté upon arrival to doctoral study. In their study, Garcia and Yao found that many students had no idea of all that was involved in the journey to becoming scholars (2019). Because doctoral prospects have typically already achieved two degrees, they sometimes underestimate the doctoral journey. They may be naïve to the rigor or the required skill sets that they may not have previously acquired (Brill et al., 2014; Rigler et al, 2017). Whether due to a lack of awareness, preparedness, or both, students may struggle with their identity as researchers and academics, which can result in feelings of inadequacy (Ramsey & Brown, 2018). Successful doctoral students tend to understand that the doctoral journey is one of becoming. They are aware that the tools needed for their survival are developing along the way, such as their growth as researchers (Bednall, 2018).

The lack of awareness of the process of becoming has proven problematic based on the literature. If a doctoral student has the misconception that he is supposed to know things and have skills that he lacks, this can erode his self-confidence. “Some recent studies have emphasized painful feelings of ‘stupidity,’ as PhD students are constantly struggling at the upper limits of their competencies (Pyhalto et al., 2012). Students could potentially reconcile those feelings if they understand that they are not supposed to “know” and have not yet “arrived.” This journey is, in fact, a process. As Garcia and Yao (2019) surmised, for doctoral programs and their students to experience higher completion rates, gaining insight into doctoral student perceptions and identity as part of a larger academic community, resulting in the provision of appropriate programming and support, is imperative. Garcia and Yao further assert that the successful transition into and navigation of doctoral study requires incoming doctoral students to transform their prior mindset from that of students into developing scholars, ultimately contributing to their self-efficacy.

While students adjust to the rigor of doctoral study and come to terms with the grueling process of becoming researchers and academics, feelings of self-doubt can potentially threaten their confidence and negatively impact their self-concept. As a result, impostor syndrome is prevalent among doctoral students. The term impostor phenomenon (also referred to as impostor syndrome) was coined in the 1970s by Drs. Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes (Clance, 1985). Students who experience impostor syndrome struggle with feeling fraudulent, inadequate and/or incapable, though others may see them the opposite way (Parkman, 2016). They see their accomplishments as lucky but do not attribute them to their abilities (Persky, 2018). In the context of a cohort or learning community, impostor syndrome leads to a diminished sense of

belonging (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Mantai, 2019; Pyhalto, Vekkaila, & Keskinen, 2015) and can ultimately result in procrastination, stagnation, and self-sabotage, all of which are rooted in fear of failure. (Brown & Ramsey, 2018).

Self-Efficacy, Motivation & Commitment. Steadfast commitment despite of any potential challenges that may arise is critical to a doctoral student's persistence and ultimate completion of their degree (Bandura, 1997; Brill et al., 2014; Kurtovic, Vrdoljak, & Idzanovic, 2019). In their study, Rigler et al. (2017) also speak about the importance of motivation and its direct impact on one's likelihood of meeting and overcoming the challenges of doctoral study. Pyhalto et al. (2012), Gardener (2009), as well as Gilmore et al. (2016), counted motivation among the necessary skill sets that would enable doctoral students to reach the finish line. Gilmore et al. also shared faculty perspectives on student motivation, which they deemed of the utmost importance and necessary to endure the arduous journey of doctoral study. Self-efficacy and motivation were also expressly noted by Pyhalto et al. (2012) as factors directly impacting doctoral student success and that in their absence, those students experience more instances of feeling isolated and increased time to complete assignments. Self-efficacy becomes even more critical to persistence and completion at the dissertation stage when the student is likely beyond coursework and working in isolation (Varney, 2010).

Liminality, Student Identity Development, & the Process of Becoming. Liminality is essentially an anthropological concept that has to do with the process of becoming (Adorno et al., 2015). Undertaking doctoral study is a liminal process because students are transitioning while they are on this journey (Keefer, 2015). They are becoming researchers and scholars (Mantai, 2019). They are developing into experts in their chosen field of study. They are going

from not knowing to knowing. As such, this shift in identity can present some anxiety for students. The transition and shifting identity can be disconcerting and rob students of self-assurance. So programs must help students negotiate these transitions and understand that transformation is part of the doctoral process (Adorno et al., 2015). As Garcia and Yao (2019) note, students need to understand liminality at the outset of their studies to be better prepared to persevere.

Personal/Non-School Related Factors. While numerous factors impact doctoral student persistence and completion, many of them can be unrelated to the student's academic or institutional experience (Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1995; Peterson et al., 1997). Much of what enables a student to undertake doctoral study and see it through to the end has to do with themselves. Brill et al. (2014) noted, persistence was significantly impacted by personal characteristics such as learning style, work ethic, self-efficacy, preparedness, and prior knowledge. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014) shared similar findings, asserting that individual characteristics such as age and marital status affect persistence rates. Lott, Gardner, and Powers (2009) also stated in their research findings that several aspects that influence a student's success are personal in nature. As with all the other main factors attributable to doctoral student persistence or attrition, personal factors are worth exploring further and in more detail to provide students with more information that would prepare them for success.

The COVID-19 Pandemic. This study explores the doctoral experiences of students who completed their EdD degrees within the past five years – between 2017 and 2022. The COVID-19 pandemic spans part of that timeframe. For a study such as this that explores academic success factors, it was important to consider this pandemic's potential impact on students. Recent

literature indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted doctoral study for many. Findings from Bukko and Dessi's study revealed that many doctoral students studying during the pandemic were adversely affected "by the convergence of their personal, professional, and academic roles into one lived space… [causing] feelings of deprivation, and emotional labor as scholar-practitioners endeavored to meet professional challenges, maintain their scholarship, and care for families and themselves" (2021, p. 32). Pyhalto, Tikkanen, and Anttila's study (2022) further highlights the negative impact of the pandemic on doctoral student progress, reporting "impaired access to the data, erosion of scholarly support networks, reduced access to institutional resources, poor work–life balance and reduced wellbeing" (p. 10). Finally, a survey study of doctoral candidates impacted by the pandemic conducted by Glorieux, van Tienoven, Te Braak, Minnen, and Spruyt revealed significant research struggles among 60% of the respondents. Some were forced to adjust and/or postpone their research and 30% reported a lack of program support in doing so. Additionally, Communication with advisors diminished as well (2021, p. 40).

Institutional Factors

Supervision, Advising, & Mentoring. Supervision, advising, and mentoring were recurring themes in most of the literature examined for this review. The student/advisor relationship is arguably one of the most critical components of doctoral study, the quality of which can make or break a student's journey (Adorno et al., 2015; Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010; Golde, 1998, 2005). Brill et al. (2014) found that poor and/or lack of quality advising impacts student retention and further asserted that the student/advisor relationship is the most important for the doctoral student. Schroeder (2015) shares that faculty advising, though grossly

underestimated, is a major determining factor of doctoral student success. According to Mazerolle, Bowman, and Klossner (2015), faculty mentoring contributes significantly to student satisfaction with their doctoral experience and certainly impacts student persistence, completion, and time to completion (Pyhalto et al., 2015). Gilmore et al. (2016) state that a low-quality student/advisor relationship can contribute to attrition, and conversely, a high-quality student/advisor relationship can promote student success. In their 2010 study, Barnes et al. provided insight from the student perspective, noting how student satisfaction and retention related to their positive perceptions of their interactions and the value of their relationships with their advisors.

Rigler et al. (2017) shared program leadership's perspective on the student/advisor relationship, indicating that they agree that this relationship has the great potential to positively or negatively impact the doctoral student's success. Meaningful, frequent interaction with their advisor is a strong predictor of program completion. That said, it is essential to note that doctoral students are responsible and accountable for their academic performance and interactions with their advisors. They should approach it as a symbiotic relationship in which expectations are discussed and agreed upon (Barnes et al., 2010).

Mantai (2019) notes that faculty advisors are not the only support provided to doctoral students and that although supervisors hold a formal role in supporting students, peers, and other faculty work in conjunction to promote doctoral student success. Mantai (2019) further asserts that it is the support of peers that contributes most to doctoral students' sense of belonging, which also emerges as a major factor in student persistence. The significance of the student/advisor relationship has been well-documented in the literature. As such, institutions and

programs can continue to be attentive to this relationship's sensitive and critical nature and encourage students and advisors alike to work to foster the most positive, productive plan for collaboration (Bednall, 2018).

Social Support. Social support for doctoral students, or the lack thereof, can impact persistence, retention, and graduation. The cohort model is a form of social support established by an academic program, department, and/or institution. Essentially, a cohort is a group of students that begin their academic journey together, matriculate through coursework together, and typically work toward a common graduation date (Schroeder, 2015). The cohort model addresses several factors largely attributed to doctoral student attrition. Those factors primarily include a lack of support (perceived or actual), a sense of not belonging, and feelings of isolation. In their study, Bagaka's, Badillo, Bransteter, & Rispinto (2015) found that the cohort model benefits for most students by fostering an environment that promotes program completion. Upon reflection and examination of their own experiences, Wolfe, Nelson, and Seamster (2018) assert that their cohort was valuable in that it was formed voluntarily and not imposed on them by their respective programs. As such, students had shared motivation and a common work ethic. As Swayze and Jakeman (2014) share, cohort members benefit by growing together as critical thinkers, in knowledge, and motivation. Having cohort members to lean on during the transition to doctoral study and throughout the process is another benefit of the cohort model (Adorno et al., 2015). It fosters a bond and communication that serves students along their journey (Swayze & Jakeman, 2014). Doctoral students enrolled in cohort-model programs experience higher persistence and completion rates (Rigler et al., 2017). Additionally, cohorts can diminish the

feelings of isolation often associated with doctoral study (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Holmes, Sea, Smith, & Wilson, 2010).

African American Male Doctoral Pursuit

As has been well documented, a myriad of factors, such as campus environment, advisor relationship, social support, writing ability, and motivation, can impact doctoral student success (Pyhalto et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2018). Further, challenges associated with doctoral-level study can potentially threaten persistence and completion for those individuals who decide to embark upon this arduous journey. Individual *and* institutional factors play significant roles in a doctoral student's ability to traverse these challenges, stay the course, and matriculate to graduation (Edwards et al., 1990; Gardner, 2009; Gilmore et al., 2016). Many of these factors transcend gender, age, and race. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that in addition to the shared challenges that many doctoral students encounter during their matriculation, AAM pursuing doctoral degrees are reportedly at risk of facing a distinct set of additional challenges in the process (Ballard & Cintron, 2010; Brooms, 2017; Rigler et al., 2017; Scott & Sharp, 2019). While AAM doctoral pursuit has increased, this demographic still pursues doctoral study at a much lesser rate than other groups, and pursues doctoral degrees in education to an even lesser degree (Harper & Wood, 2016; Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2019).

African American Male Pipeline to Doctoral Study

When considering the lesser rate at which AAMs are pursuing and earning doctorates as compared to their counterparts – fewer still in educational leadership – it is first critical to examine the educational pipeline for AAMs from K-12 and leading up to the doctoral level. "The conditions affecting African American males in schools and society remain highly complex and

astonishingly problematic irrespective of meager gains in achievement and graduation rates in recent years" (Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010, p. 20). Countless researchers have explored and reported on the adversities that AAMs face throughout their educational journeys at all levels – K-12, postsecondary, and graduate. Unique obstacles encountered at each level (Jackson, 2003), starting at the K-12 level. "School systems nationally are grappling with the herculean task of how to close the achievement gap between African American males and their [K-12] counterparts" (Dyce, 2015, p. 144). Some of the barriers they face at the K-12 level include higher instances of grade repetition (Cook Sandifer & Gibson, 2020; Scott, Allen, & Lewis, 2014), overrepresentation in dismissals and suspensions (Howard, T. & Howard, J., 2021; Kent Butler, Shillingford, & Alexander-Snow, 2011; Matthews-Whetstone & Scott, 2015; Scott et al., 2014), overrepresentation in special education (Scott, Allen, & Lewis, 2014), harsher punishments than their White peers (Howard, T. & Howard, J., 2021; Scott et al., 2014), educator fear of and lower expectations of AAM (Scott et al., 2014), tracking into lower-performing classes/pathways (Scott et al., 2014), increased instances of crime/incarceration (Howard, T. & Howard, J., 2021; Kent Butler et al., 2011; Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010), Perceived lack of ability (Kent Butler et al., 2011), and stereotype threat (Beale, Charleston, & Hilton, 2019; Borman, Choi, & Hall, 2021; Bryant, 2020; Whaley, 2018). It is also important to note that AAMs experience similar challenges to African American females (AAFs). However, AAFs tend to experience more academic success in their K-12, postsecondary, and graduate careers (Kaba, 2008; Young, 2020). "[T]here are a myriad of historical and causal factors proffered to explain the disparate conditions of African American boys and men in contrast to their peers of other racial/ethnic backgrounds" (Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010, p. 20).

K-12 Underperformance. Underperformance is often cited as the greatest challenge facing AAM at the K-12 level. “In almost every category of academic failure, African American males are disproportionately represented” (Jackson, 2003, p. 45). *Underperformance* is an umbrella term encompassing several factors. The most notable of these factors is higher dropout and suspension rates. Other challenges related to underperformance among this group include struggles with literacy, mathematics, and science, as well as disproportionate numbers of AAMs assigned to special education. Additionally, many AAMs may have less access to the technology necessary to complete their homework successfully, which could be due to a lack of internet access or devices. Also, assistance with navigating the technology at home may be unavailable. Further, AAMs also experience higher incidents of crime and incarceration during their K-12 careers, obviously impacting their ability to persist to graduation (Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010). For AAMs dealing with one or more of these factors, abandoning their studies is easier than navigating the challenges of academic life.

Postsecondary Challenges. For AAMs, challenges at the college level can begin before they even arrive with the lack of access to higher education (Naylor, Wyatt-Nichol, & Brown, 2015). Factors such as test scores, finances, family resources, and paperwork required for admissions and/or financial aid can preclude many AAMs from college admittance (Davidson, Clark, Ijames, Cahill, & Johnson, 2020). Those who can enroll experience higher attrition rates than their counterparts (i.e., women, other ethnic groups, AAFs). Generally, many first-year college students face challenges, including adjusting to a new environment, being away from home, academic challenges, establishing connections, and isolation. Many AAM students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic situations, tend to struggle more academically in

college than other groups. When attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs), they find it more difficult to establish social connections with others on campus. These obstacles can impact their self-efficacy and persistence. For AAM, "the lack of academic preparation, absence of other students with similar cultural backgrounds, and financial need, coupled with the anxieties of being away from home, all contribute to freshmen students leaving school" (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013, p. 207).

Graduate School. Given the obstacles faced by AAMs at the K-12 and postsecondary levels, it is evident why many never make it to the point of pursuing master's and doctoral degrees. This stark reality highlights the pipeline issue. For those AAMs who manage to defy the odds and somehow arrive at the doctoral level, their journey is laden with the challenges that all doctoral students encounter. Those challenges are often related to the campus environment, advisor relationship, social support, writing ability, motivation, identity, and impostor syndrome. Add to these the potential challenges specific to these students as AAMs, particularly when enrolled at primarily white institutions (PWIs). Those potential challenges include but are not limited to racial prejudice, stereotype threat, lack of support, misandry, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue (Beale et al., 2019; Borman et al., 2021; Bryant, 2020; Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones, & Allen, 2010; Hall, 2017; Okello, Quaye, Allen, Carter, & Karikari, 2020; Scott & Johnson, 2021; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Whaley, 2018).

African American Male vs. African American Female Academic Achievement. One of the more startling aspects of AAM academic achievement is the vast difference between the rates of attrition and completion compared to AAFs. While the presence of African Americans on college campuses has drastically increased over the last several decades, this is primarily due

to AAF enrollment (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013). The number of [AAFs] holding bachelor's degrees is on par with their representation in society. However, [AAMs] continue to lag in academic achievement and educational attainment (Griffin et al., 2010). At every academic level, AAFs are statistically outperforming AAMs. AAFs are completing high school at higher rates and embarking on postsecondary and graduate education than AAMs. "Black girls outperform Black boys on K-12 assessments of academic achievement" (Young, 2020, p. 604).

Moreover, of those African Americans who do go on to attend undergraduate and graduate education, AAFs are graduating at higher rates (Griffin et al., 2010). "This unique academic trend extends beyond the K-12 instructional environment to postsecondary settings (Young, 2020, p. 605). This phenomenon begs the question that if African American men *and* women are experiencing the same racial and socioeconomic challenges (i.e., systemic racism, discrimination, underemployment, poverty, lack of access), what is causing the wide chasm in academic achievement between them? "[D]ue to their rapid increase in higher education attainment, Black American women are positioned to become more economically successful than their male counterparts in the years and decades to come" (Kaba, 2008, p. 316). Since it is not a question of academic ability, it is crucial to hone in on the reasons for these persistent disparities in AAM academic achievement.

AAM and Educational Leadership. With all of the well-documented challenges facing AAM students, the voices of successful AAM doctoral students and educational leaders are critical to shifting the phenomenon of academic underperformance among this population. "Educational leadership plays a vital role in improving the academic outcomes of underserved and minority students. The leadership practices of Black educational leaders have contributed to

the theorizing of effective, culturally responsive practices to improve student outcomes" (Ononuju, 2016, p. 99). In order to effectively address the academic disparities of AAMs, exploration of the academic journeys, leadership experiences, and best practices of successful AAM students and educational leaders is imperative, particularly since most AAM educational leaders serve in predominantly urban institutions (Ononuju, 2016). As is well-documented in prior research, representation can be a powerful aspect of student success. For AAM students, seeing "themselves" in their instructors and among the leadership of the institutions they attend can impact their self-concept and visualization of their potential for success.

Furthermore, AAM leaders can influence, connect with, and relate to AAM students in ways that may not have been unavailable to them during their academic journeys potentially diminishing many challenges that have historically plagued AAMs at all academic levels. "By emphasizing the specific knowledge of a community that relates to its functioning, well-being and development, educational leaders have greater access to educating the whole child as they develop connections between the home and the classroom" (Ononuju, 2016, p. 100). Researching AAMs in educational leadership presents a challenge due to their scarcity, pointing to the pipeline issue caused by underachievement and lack of access (Ononuju, 2016; Wint et al., 2021). Representation is critical. Wint et al. (2021) state that "Representations of Black males who are succeeding across educational realms, particularly those who were able to thrive in under-resourced environments, may serve as a method of bolstering the antideficit narrative of educational attainment and success for Black males" (p. 11).

Conclusion

Student retention and attrition continue to challenge leadership across all levels of education in the United States (Burke, 2019; Lau, 2003; Márquez et al., 2016). In particular, doctoral attrition consistently hovers around 50% (Rigler et al., 2017), irrespective of program, institution, or locale. African American male attrition exceeds that by another 10-20% (Ballard & Cintron, 2010). As such, this phenomenon continues to be examined, and increasingly so among this demographic. Moreover, while doctoral student retention and attrition have received significant research attention, most literature has focused on traditional students and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs. This review of the literature identified the need to look deeper into the factors that are more specific to AAM doctoral students in professional programs to better understand the experiences of this distinct group of learners. More specifically, this study explored the experiences of AAMs who successfully completed their EdD programs. This research study endeavored to provide a more in-depth examination of the doctoral attrition phenomenon in this particular population and context from a success perspective. Since little has been written regarding AAM doctoral, and AAM EdD students to an even lesser extent, a study of this nature was needed. The results of this study highlight factors contributing to persistence and success among this population. School leaders (in K-12 and higher education) interested in improving AAM doctoral recruitment, AAM academic success, and increasing the AAM pipeline to educational leadership will benefit from the study findings.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study explored African American male (AAM) perceptions of the factors that contributed to their successful completion of Doctor of Education (EdD) programs in the United States. The following research questions addressed participants' perceptions of the factors that promoted their success:

RQ1: What program and institutional components supported these African American male students in their doctoral pursuits and contributed to the successful attainment of their EdD degrees?

RQ2: What individual factors enabled these African American male students to persist to the successful completion of their EdD degrees?

This qualitative study aimed to examine factors related to AAM doctoral success in Doctor of Education (EdD) programs in the United States. Through qualitative inquiry, this study endeavored to expand the current body of literature on doctoral student success and attrition by examining the experiences of AAM graduates of doctor of education programs. In addition to the typical challenges associated with doctoral study, AAM students often face other threats to their academic success at the K-12, postsecondary, and graduate levels (Brooms, 2017; Harper & Wood, 2016). This qualitative study sought to expand the existing literature by exploring to what extent, if any, this applies to AAM doctoral students, specifically those pursuing the EdD. AAMs complete doctorates at a lower rate than other groups (Ballard & Cintron, 2010; Scott & Sharp, 2019).

Further, this study purposed to shed light on the experiences of AAMs who successfully completed their doctorates in education. Qualitative studies provide an understanding of a

situation or phenomenon based on lived experiences rather than determining cause and effect (Yin, 2009). The research occurs in a natural setting, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument for data collection. Since the study aimed to explore AAM EdD perceptions and experiences related to their program completion, a qualitative approach was appropriate. The study's goal was to identify institutional and individual factors that promote program retention and completion and possible strategies for reducing attrition. The following sections will describe the research design, sample, data collection techniques, and data analysis process.

Research Design

Qualitative research generally seeks to explore and/or answer *why*, while quantitative research typically seeks to answer *what* (Barnham, 2015; Pieridou & Kambouri-Danos, 2020). Barnham explains that quantitative research is typically a series of *what* questions, and qualitative research asks *why* questions to gain deeper insight (2015, p. 837). Although this study's research questions are posed as "what" questions, they are ultimately seeking to gain a deeper understanding of "why" and "how" this study's participants were able to successfully avoid or overcome the pitfalls that many doctoral student succumb to, contributing to the high attrition that is prevalent in doctoral education.

As a qualitative case study, it examined the themes and patterns of individual experiences revealed through their own stories and explanations (Merriam, 1998). Yin (2009) defined a *case study* as an empirical inquiry that explores a phenomenon within its real-world context. This study also sought to understand the meaning that participants have developed over time based on their own experiences and to examine emerging patterns related to overcoming the phenomenon of doctoral student attrition (Merriam, 1998). A case study design focuses on developing an in-

depth description of a phenomenon (Yin, 2009). Therefore, given the research purpose of examining factors related to AAM doctoral success in Doctor of Education (EdD) programs in the United States, a single case study approach best fit the study's aims. This study examined a single case involving eight AAM EdDs and their respective doctoral experiences. A descriptive case study approach allowed for addressing the research questions by highlighting institutional and individual factors that promoted these AAM EdD students' success.

A case study investigates the effectiveness of programs or organizational structures by addressing how and why things exist within a relevant context (Yin, 2009). A descriptive case study approach was used to answer the research questions by exploring these participants' experiences and perceptions of the factors that impacted their doctoral success. This approach facilitated the exploration of these AAM EdDs' experiences as students navigating doctoral study from their perspectives within a bounded case (Yin, 2016).

The case study methodology was most appropriate for this qualitative study because the primary objective was to "…seek greater understanding of the case… [and] the uniqueness and complexity of its embeddedness and interaction with its contexts" (Stake, 1995, p. 16). Specifically, each participant's account, related to their individual doctoral experience, was gathered, consisting of their reflection and recollection of relevant occurrences, and the related causes and effects. The case study approach helped obtain participants' accounts as AAM EdD students who successfully navigated their doctoral studies while also managing other obligations, ultimately shedding more light on doctoral student completion among this population. Asking questions and having participants share their perspectives and experiences provided great insight. The insight gained from data collection and analysis is valuable for institutional and program

leadership in determining the factors that positively impact AAM doctoral student completion and factors that may be contributing to attrition or even low recruitment.

Further, the case study methodology coupled with Vincent Tinto's student retention theory (Tinto, 1993) as the theoretical framework for this study provided a relevant lens through which to explore this phenomenon and answer the research questions. Tinto's student retention theory (SRT) emphasizes the importance of a student's integration into the social and academic life of the institution for retention. SRT also highlights how a student's characteristics, background, and other external factors impact retention and attrition (1993). In summary, this qualitative study employed the case study methodology, and utilized Tinto's student retention theory as the theoretical framework, all of which were appropriate for addressing the research questions.

Sample

Sampling is the process of obtaining participants for a study from the population that is being studied (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). "[Purposive] means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem…" (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). In purposive sampling, the researcher is interested in discovering, understanding, and gaining insight into a qualitative problem (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2013). As such, purposive sampling was suited to this study and was used to invite individuals who met the criteria to participate -- AAM who graduated from EdD programs in the United States within the last five years. Further, as Moustakas posed, essential criteria for participation included an experience of the phenomenon, an interest in better understanding the phenomenon, willingness to be interviewed and recorded, and consenting to publishing of the

data (1994). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to determine which respondents to interview and who would add the most value to the study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Based on the focus of this study, the following initial criteria for selecting participants for interview included the following:

- AAM graduate of an EdD program within the last five years
- Served in an educational leadership capacity/role while attending the program
- Graduate of a regionally accredited university

Each of these criteria was determined based on the study's aims to examine factors related to AAM completion of Doctor of Education (EdD) programs in the United States. AAM students often face challenges specific to their demographic (Brooms, 2017; Harper & Wood, 2016). AAMs also complete doctorates at a lesser rate than other groups (Ballard & Cintron, 2010; Scott & Sharp, 2019). As such, the first criterion required for study participants was that they were AAMs who graduated from EdD programs in the United States. The fact that doctoral student attrition continues to hover around 50% (Rigler et al., 2017), combined with the specific challenges that threaten AAM persistence throughout all levels of their educational careers (Jackson, 2003), makes this a problem worthy of exploration. As Jackson notes, "In almost every category of academic failure, AAMs are disproportionately represented" (p. 45). It is important to note that the specific focus on EdD programs is most intentional. Because EdD programs are typically professional, practice-based programs, their students are typically educational professionals and leaders – practitioners – currently working in the field (Gregory, 1995; Kerlinger, 1964). Further, many EdD students are simultaneously serving in professional roles of considerable responsibility in which they have already made significant contributions to their

respective schools, districts, and institutions (Aiken & Gerstl-Pepin, 2013). Pursuing doctoral study while working and serving in a leadership capacity can present a distinct set of challenges (Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1995), which is what this study explored. Also, the voices and presence of AAM doctoral students and educational leaders are tremendously valuable in the retention battle. "Educational leadership plays a vital role in improving the academic outcomes of underserved and minority students. The leadership practices of Black educational leaders have contributed to the theorizing of effective, culturally responsive practices to improve student outcomes" (Ononuju, 2016, p. 99).

A review of the extant literature revealed that doctoral student attrition in EdD programs had not been explored to a great extent. A study of this nature adds to the existing body of research. In addition, focusing on participants who graduated within the last five years allowed for encapsulating their shared and/or varied experiences within a specific timeframe (Larsen & Conway, 1997; Malmberg, 2007). Individuals are likely to recall their experiences more clearly and accurately the more recently they occurred. "Recall of events from many years before may involve reconstruction, may be biased by a personal narrative, and may be affected by various individual difference factors" (Howard, 2021, p. 932). So identifying participants who graduated within the last five years was prudent.

The final criterion, individuals serving in leadership roles while enrolled in EdD programs provided additional aspects to establish commonality between participants. "Leaders of color are underrepresented…in proportion to the current and growing number of children of color in our schools" (Robicheau & Krull, 2016, p. 26). The voices of these AAM EdD recipients were critical to gaining more insight into what helped them persist to graduation, both for honing

in on ways to increase the pipeline from K-12 to higher education, and increase the AAM representation as school leaders (Ononuju, 2016). As Robicheau and Krull (2016) discuss, more representation in school leadership is crucial for diminishing racial disparities in education and creating a powerful image for students of color.

Learning about the experiences of successful African American male EdD students is invaluable for current and prospective AAM doctoral students. Their voices also provide K-12 and higher education leaders with tremendous insight related to increasing the pipeline of AAMs in educational leadership. The ultimate benefactors are the students that these AAM EdDs serve. "Educational leadership plays a vital role in improving the academic outcomes of underserved and minority students. The leadership practices of Black educational leaders have contributed to the theorizing of effective, culturally responsive practices to improve student outcomes" (Ononuju, 2016, p. 99).

"[A] fundamental tasks relating to the undertaking of fieldwork for a qualitative research study lies in "gaining access." This involves securing entry into a particular organization and ensuring that individuals associated with it…will serve as informants" (Shenton & Hayter, 2004, p. 223). Identifying and recruiting participants can often prove challenging. Leveraging social media can often circumvent many challenges related to gaining access (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016; McKenna & Myers, 2017). Social media has become a viable means of recruiting participants for research studies (Sikkens, van San, Sieckelinck, Boeije, & de Winter, 2017; Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). As such, the Facebook group entitled "Doctor of Education (EdD) Network" was identified as a means for identifying and recruiting participants for this study. The Doctor of Education (EdD) Network has over 4500 members. It is "a support group [for

individuals] in the process of completing their doctorate degree or who have finished the process and are moving toward new projects after the doctorate" (Munroe, 2015; par. 1). Group members network, discuss the doctoral process, share strategies for success, support each other's research goals, celebrate each other's successes, and encourage each other.

An invitation to participate in this study was shared via Facebook post to the Doctor of Education (EdD) Network. The invitation was initially slated to be reposted for up to four weeks following the original post to ensure a sufficient number of respondents and a quality pool of participants (Dillman, 2000). However, sufficient respondents completed the study questionnaire within the first week of posting the invitation. The social media invitation extended the study's reach and access to a broader population from which to obtain the sample (nationwide). When utilizing social media recruiting, Ferrigno and Sade (2019) admonish researchers to proceed cautiously and remain mindful of ethical considerations. They also emphasize vigilance against exploiting participants in any way. "Investigators must recognize the need for transparency in all aspects of online research recruitment, and their presence on social media must be plainly visible at all times to facilitate both individual and public trust in the research enterprise" (p. 4).

Respondents received an electronic link to complete the study questionnaire in Qualtrics, an online survey website. The questionnaire was included demographic questions designed to determine participant eligibility, assuring that participants met each criterion for participation. Questionnaires serve as an effective and efficient means of data collection, providing responses that are relatively simple to analyze (Patten, 2011).

After reviewing the questionnaire responses, eight respondents were invited to interview for this study. Table 1 breaks down the participant demographics. The eligibility criteria were as

follows: African American males who earned their EdD within the last five years, attended a nationally or regionally accredited program, and worked in a leadership capacity in education during their doctoral studies. All eight participants met the criteria.

All of the participants identified as African American. Half (50%) of the sample were between the ages of 25 and 39 at the time that they completed the EdD; three participants (37.5%) were between 40 and 49 years old; one participant (12.5%) was between 50 and 59. Half were married, and half were single. Two participants (25%) had children, and the remaining six did not (75%). The participants with children did happen to be married as well.

Five participants (62.5%) were raised by both parents, and three were raised by a single parent (32.5%). One participant was raised by his grandmother. Another participant was raised by his mother and his maternal grandparents. Five participants also identified as first-generation college students (62.5%), while the remaining three had parents who had obtained their degrees, including bachelors, masters, and one doctorate. One participant self-identified as having a disability or disabling condition.

All of the participants held leadership roles during their doctoral matriculation. Three worked in higher education (37.5%), and three worked in K-12 (37.5%). Three participants hold very distinct leadership roles (37.5%). One is as a principal in a correctional facility. In that role, he oversees the GED, certificate, and associate degree programs offered by the state where the facility is located. The second is a pastor who also holds a leadership role with the [name/location of organization] Baptist Congress of Christian Education. The third is a teacher-leader who is responsible for spearheading and coordinating an innovative professional development program for the teachers at the high school where he serves.

Eight study participants allowed for adequate saturation. *Saturation* is defined as the collection of data in a study until redundancy of the data has occurred (Morse, 2005). "What is needed is an adequate number of participants…to answer the question posed at the beginning of the study" (Merriam, 1998, p. 64). Data saturation involves continual sampling within a study until repetition of the data set has occurred, and no new information is being uncovered (Bowen, 2008). Eight participants allowed this repetition and redundancy to occur and for themes to become evident and emergent. Through purposive sampling, data was collected from each participant to gain perspectives from all subjects.

In their study, Beninger, Fry, Jago, Lepps, Nass, and Silvester (2014) caution researchers who utilize social media in their research to be aware of the varying views of potential participants (skepticism, acceptance, and ambiguity) as well as their concerns related to validity and anonymity. As such, careful attention and appropriate steps were administered to explain the study's purpose, obtain informed consent, convey participant expectations, and verify interview transcription. Prior to interviewing, each participant received a copy of an informed consent letter outlining the purpose of the study, the criteria used to select the participants, and the methods that were used for conducting the study. Each participant was also assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 1 outlines the participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age Range	Area	Role	Institution Type	Program Format
Bethel	30-39	K-12	Principal	Private PWI	Face-to-Face
Bronner	25-29	Higher Education	Associate Dean	Private PWI	Online
Caswell	30-39	Correctional Facility	Principal	Public HBCU	Online
Coleman	30-39	Higher Education	Regional Manager	Private PWI	Online
Gregory	50-59	Christian Education	2nd Vice President & Pastor	Private PWI	Hybrid
Lamont	30-39	Higher Education	Director	Public PWI	Hybrid
Parker	30-39	K-12	Research Coordinator & Teacher Leader	Pubic PWI	Hybrid
Sandler	30-39	K-12	Principal	Private PWI	Face-to-Face

All of the participants identified as African American. One participant was under the age of 30 when he completed his EdD. Six participants (75%) of the sample were between the ages of 30 and 39 at the time that they completed their EdDs; and one participant (12.5%) was between 50 and 59. Half were married and half were single. Two participants (25%) had children and the remaining six did not (75%). The participants with children did happen to be married as well.

Five participants (62.5%) were raised by both parents, and three were raised by a single parent (32.5%). Of those raised by a single parent, one was raised by his grandmother, and another was raised by his mother, but his maternal grandparents were heavily involved in raising him as well. Five participants also identified as first-generation college students (62.5%), while the remaining three participants had parents who had obtained their degrees, including bachelor's

master's and one doctorate. One participant self-identified as having a disability or disabling condition.

All of the participants held leadership roles during their doctoral matriculation. Three worked in higher education (37.5%), and three worked in K-12 (37.5%). Three participants hold very distinct leadership roles (37.5%). One is as a principal in a correctional facility. In that role, he oversees the GED, certificate, and associate degree programs offered by the state in which his particular facility is located. The second is a pastor who also holds a leadership role with the [name/location of organization] Baptist Congress of Christian Education. The third is a research coordinator and teacher-leader who is responsible for spearheading and coordinating an innovative professional development program for the teachers at the high school where he serves.

Again, one of the eligibility requirements was that participants graduated within the past five years. As such, that 2017-2022 timeframe happens to include the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the eight participants, half were still in the midst of their doctoral studies during COVID. For some, their commencement exercises were impacted by COVID as well.

Selecting eight participants for interviews allowed for adequate saturation. Saturation is defined as the collection of data in a study until redundancy of the data has occurred (Morse, 2005). "What is needed is an adequate number of participants…to answer the question posed at the beginning of the study" (Merriam, 1998, p. 64). Data saturation involves continual sampling within a study until repetition of the data set has occurred and no new information is being obtained (Bowen, 2008). Eight participants allowed for this repetition and redundancy to occur

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Data Collection

Case studies can have multiple data sources. The data methods used in this study were interviews and documents (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation was achieved via these two data collection methods. "Triangulation…is the use of more than one approach to researching a question…The combination of findings from two or more rigorous approaches provides a more comprehensive picture of the results than either approach could do alone" (Heale & Forbes, 2013, p. 98).

Interviews

The interview is a common form of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Barnham, 2015). Because of the exploratory nature of a case study, interviewing is a suitable data collection method (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Eight participants from the pool of

questionnaire respondents were selected to interview. The interviews consisted of a set of standardized questions. Participants received follow-up questions when clarity was needed. Interview questions addressed participant perceptions regarding the factors that impacted their EdD program completion and directly reflected the study's research questions and theoretical framework (Tinto's student retention theory). Participants responded to questions about the institutional and individual factors that contributed to their doctoral success. They discussed strategies and behaviors that helped them overcome challenges. An additional aim of the interview data was to compare and contrast the participants' experiences.

Interviews did not exceed 90 minutes. There was no specific physical site or research setting for this study. "The research setting can be seen as the physical, social, and cultural site in which the researcher conducts the study" (Given, 2008). As such, interviews were conducted virtually via the online meeting platform WebEx. COVID-19 restrictions and concerns made virtual interviews most prudent and necessary out of an abundance of caution. All interviews were recorded via digital recorder and fully transcribed, allowing for greater accuracy in reporting each participant's responses as they shared their experiences. The files are stored via a password-protected USB file and locked in the researcher's office.

Documents

Although interviews were the primary data source for the study, documents were a secondary source. The documents collected related to each participant's experience navigating doctoral study while simultaneously serving in leadership roles. These documents helped to provide more context to the discussions and interview data collected from the participants about their perceptions of the factors that impacted their progress toward their EdD program

completion.

The documents connected to the focus of this study (research questions) and the criteria for sampling (i.e., AAM graduate of an EdD program within the last five years; Served in an educational leadership capacity/role (K-12 or university-level) while attending the program; and Graduate of a regionally accredited university. “Document analysis is often [combined] with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation…[as the] researcher is expected to draw upon multiple…sources of evidence [for] convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources and methods” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). In addition to the interviews, documents were an additional data source in this study for further insight into the participants’ prior experiences as doctoral students. Research questions and the theoretical framework guided the document collection and analysis. While certain documents were anticipated, flexibility had to be allowed for the unexpected discovery of valuable data and leads and being open to new insights along the way (Merriam, 2009). Participants shared documents representing what they felt impacted their doctoral success – family support, cohort camaraderie, and advisor interactions. Documents of note included the email exchange between Dr. Sandler and his program director that came at a pivotal make-or-break point in his matriculation. Another was Dr. Coleman's commencement speech sharing his journey and the individuals who were instrumental in his success. Dr. Parker submitted song lyrics from the album he wrote during his break from doctoral study that gave him a creative outlet for addressing challenges he had been facing.

Again, triangulation was accomplished via the data gathered through interviews and document collection. These data collection methods were the most effective for garnering

valuable insight from the study's participants based on the research questions and the theoretical framework. The following section will discuss the analysis of the data that was collected.

Data Analysis

Data analysis aims to reveal the underlying meaning of particular aspects of a particular human experience (Creswell, 1998), achieved by utilizing the methods selected to collect and analyze this study's data. Since the primary source of data collected in this study were the words of the interviewees, a comprehensive process was conducted to ensure that each participant's words were recorded and transcribed as accurately as possible. This was critical since the study's purpose was to explore participant experiences and perceptions, which is only accomplished through accurate recording and reporting of the data. Recordings of each interview were transcribed and underwent a multi-step review process, after which an in-depth analysis occurred. Data analysis included of multiple steps, as the data collection involved interviews and documents (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). As discussed by Ruona (2005), the analysis consisted of four separate phases: 1) data preparation, 2) familiarization, 3) coding, and 4) the generation of meaning. Each phase is outlined below:

Data Preparation

The initial phase of the data analysis was data preparation, which involved reviewing and separating the data into categories (Ruona, 2005), specifically reviewing and transcribing the recordings from the interviews via audio-to-text transcription software. The transcripts were then reviewed while listening to the initial audio recordings to check for accuracy and edited accordingly. Copies of the edited interview transcripts were emailed to the respective participants for verification to ensure that their words and meanings were documented correctly.

Upon receipt of each participant's verification, the final drafts were uploaded to NVivo for coding. After this data preparation phase was complete, next was the familiarization phase.

Familiarization

The second phase of the data analysis for this study was familiarization. According to Ruona (2005), the familiarization phase involved reviewing and reflecting on the data, which occurred through carefully analyzing each interview transcript and document collected while referring to any interview notes. Analyzing the interview transcripts and documents created more familiarity with the data. Reviewing the interview notes while analyzing the transcripts accomplished the same. They allowed for connections and correlations to be drawn that may have initially gone unnoticed during the actual interviews (i.e., frequently mentioned references and commonly shared phrases). Themes – overarching themes and subthemes – emerged during the familiarization phase of the data analysis.

Coding

Once the familiarization process culminated, the third phase of this data analysis – coding – commenced. Ruona (2005) purports that the coding process may be viewed as simply creating labels for the data and then putting them into separate categories. Interpreting the interview and document data involved two coding cycles, as recommended by Saldaña (2013). The first cycle was done to group the data more broadly, while the second cycle was a more in-depth analysis of the data. In vivo coding was used in the first coding cycle, and pattern coding in the second coding cycle. In vivo coding was appropriate for the first coding cycle since it involves literal coding based on the participants' own words from their interviews and documents. In this study, participant voices were the primary means of data collection and answering the research

questions (Saldaña, 2013). This form of initial coding was used to amplify verbiage (phrases or words) that seemed to be of significance while ensuring that the participants' voices and intent were still clearly relayed (Saldaña, 2013). Similarities in the text from all of the participant interview transcripts were identified. The In Vivo codes used the participants' words to relay their perceptions and experiences accurately. These codes emerged as participants touched on aspects of those experiences that connected to the study's goals and guiding questions.

For the second cycle, Pattern coding was implemented, which detected emergent themes in the data by combining related groups of data from the initial coding cycle into smaller clusters (Saldaña, 2013). Since the second cycle's primary purpose was to categorize the data and codes from the first cycle more thematically (Saldaña, 2013), it was important to use a process that facilitated this categorization. Because of its focus on deriving meaning from categories of data established in the first cycle (Saldaña, 2013), Pattern coding worked for achieving the study's goals. Pattern coding was accomplished via cluster analysis and exploration of emergent patterns. NVivo software was used to conduct the cluster analysis so that like codes were grouped together. By analyzing the in vivo codes that were identified in the first coding cycle, NVivo grouped similar codes together in this second cycle. This produced a detailed cluster analysis diagram comprised of a number of codes that were grouped together based on similarity, also revealing patterns of similar wording of perceptions and experiences shared by the participants, as evidenced by their proximity in the cluster diagram. Pattern coding allowed for assembling similar codes in preparation for the final phase of data analysis – generating meaning.

Generating Meaning

The last phase of data analysis is referred to by Ruona (2005) as the generation of meaning, which calls upon the researcher to interpret data based on first having identified the recurrent themes found in the data. After conducting interviews, transcribing, data preparation, familiarization, and coding, recurring themes were evident upon final reflection. These emergent themes adequately addressed the study's research questions. In addition, the documents collected for this study were also analyzed, with the ultimate goal of determining how they contributed to a greater understanding of AAM doctoral student persistence and completion. The various documents collected from participants were analyzed for connections to factors that supported their EdD completion and alignment with the data collected from the participant interviews. These documents provided more context and clarity to the interview data. Through the analysis, clear connections were made between the interview data, the documents collected, and the goals of the study.

Research Trustworthiness

Credibility

Several methods were employed to ensure the credibility of this study, including clarifying any biases; and peer review/debriefing. It is important to reveal any pre-existing bias that I may hold related to my motivations for conducting the study. Biases have to do with the researcher's feelings about factors contributing to doctoral student attrition. As such, I will outline previous history and experiences that could have potentially skewed the lens through which the study was developed and my interpretation of outcomes (Creswell, 2013). My potential biases include the commonalities I share with the study participants – I am an African American educational professional pursuing an EdD. My journey academically, professionally,

and as an African American are all points of potential bias for me, any or all of which could have influenced the way that I conducted data collection, interpreted the research, and reported the data.

Credibility of the study was strengthened through triangulation. “In our search both for accuracy and alternative explanations, we need discipline [and] protocols… [and] in qualitative research, those protocols come under the name ‘triangulation’” (Stake, 1995, p. 107). Triangulation of the data collected via the interviews and documents resulted in the emergence of major themes and subthemes that were identified, coded, and analyzed. Validity was achieved through the recording and transcribing of the interviews. The subsequent coding of the interview data and documents collected resulted in emergent themes. Finally, member checking, in which participants reviewed the opportunity to review the researcher’s written accounts of the interviews, is an additional validation method utilized in the study (Stake, 1995). Member checking throughout the process ensures accuracy. In addition, enlisting the assistance of a peer to whom the researcher can be accountable in designing, executing, and analyzing the study and who can serve as an outside, objective voice for the research and researcher will add an extra layer of validation and trustworthiness.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencing the research study, a detailed proposed study was submitted for approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Georgia State University, whose purpose is to protect and advocate on behalf of human subjects who are being studied in order to safeguard against any abuse or exploitation in the research process. All required researcher training was completed, and all professional guidelines set forth by the IRB required when executing a

research study involving human subjects were adhered to. Consent forms were emailed to the participants, and consent was obtained at the time of the interviews. Before each interview began, the consent form verbiage was read to each participant, outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of the process, any potential risks and benefits involved, and what they could expect for the process to entail (Creswell, 2013). At that time, each participant was given the option to withdraw from participation or consent to be interviewed. Protection of the participants and the data was paramount. For data protection and security, backup files and recording instruments have been maintained. Throughout the research process, any deception or exploitation of participants was vigilantly guarded against. Data were interpreted and presented objectively. Falsification and plagiarism were avoided, and the research has been reported clearly and concisely, using terminology that is easy to understand. Upon completion of the study, results will be made public and accessible (Creswell, 2013).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine factors contributing to African American male doctoral student retention and completion in Doctor of Education (EdD) programs in the United States, explored through the lens of AAM educational leaders who successfully completed these programs within the last five years. Extensive research over the years points to consistently high percentages of doctoral student attrition (Buss et al., 2017; Dixon, 2016; Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Peterson et al., 1997) and the low percentages of Black males earning doctorates in education (Harper & Wood, 2016; National Science Foundation Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2019). Vincent Tinto's student retention theory (1993), which provided the framework for this study, highlighted several contributing factors to college student persistence – institutional and individual factors. Participants' accounts supported Tinto's assertions and shed light on additional factors for further consideration.

During the study, participants provided insight into their doctoral journeys, particularly factors that supported or threatened their matriculation. After interviewing these eight leaders, four major themes emerged as having been most impactful to their success. The first theme that emerged was that relationships within the program shaped the student experience. Participants extensively discussed how their interactions with individuals in their programs (faculty, cohort members) contributed to or, in some cases, inhibited their progress. Another theme of the study was that student attitudes, outlook, and behaviors affected their doctoral success. This theme highlights the motivations, views, and actions reported by the participants that influenced their successful EdD program completion. The third theme identified was how the participants' support systems impacted their outcomes, giving insight into the individuals and entities in their

environments that aided their successful matriculation. The final theme that emerged had to do with how their race – their blackness – factored into their journey to doctoral success or, in other words, how being Black/African American impacted their experience as doctoral students. These four key themes are expounded upon below, providing a comprehensive picture of the factors that impacted the doctoral success of the participants, as experienced and recounted by them.

Relationships with Their Academic Community Impacted Student Success

Participants reflected positively on several aspects of their respective institutions and EdD programs. During interviews, participants repeatedly referenced their relationships and interactions with members of their academic communities. Tinto's student retention theory, which serves as the framework for the study, emphasizes the importance of students establishing connections with their campus community (1993). For the participants in this study, those campus connections primarily included relationships with *program personnel* and *cohort members*. Participants provided insight into how they interacted with and experienced support from program personnel and their cohort members. Those accounts are discussed below.

Program Personnel

The relationship with various program personnel emerged as a significant factor in the success of these participants. Personnel in this context consists of faculty, including dissertation chairs, other committee members, and course instructors. Interactions with program leadership were also referenced. In addition to their direct roles in each participant's matriculation, these individuals also played an important role in brokering the relationship between participants and the institutions. Much of the participants' perceptions of their institutions and their doctoral experience reflected the quality of these relationships, which is consistent with what Tinto asserts

in his student retention theory (1993). Participants relayed the critical nature of the relationships and interactions with various program personnel. While several participants referred to having a period of adjustment and reaching a mutual understanding of expectations of each other's roles and responsibilities, most relationships and interactions with program personnel were reported as positive.

Participants repeatedly referenced positive aspects of interfacing with program personnel, which occurred via instruction, communications, writing feedback, and general support. Dr. Sandler, one of the study participants, noted how personable and hands-on his professors were. He shared, "One of the things that helped us to be successful as doctoral students is that they were practitioners as well…we could talk to them about things that were going on in our buildings, and they could give us advice."

While interactions with other faculty were mentioned, all participants referenced their relationships with their dissertation chairs and other committee members. The extant literature states that the student-advisor relationship is critical to doctoral student success (Adorno et al., 2015; Barnes et al., 2010; Brill et al., 2014; Golde, 1998, 2005). Consistent with the research, these interactions significantly impacted the participants' doctoral experiences and ultimately helped to propel them to their successful completion. Among other aspects of these relationships, participants reported how committee members utilized their research strengths and foci to guide and support them. Dr. Gregory shared that his chair and program director drew from his prior experience as a coach and principal in advising his doctoral students. Dr. Gregory also had a committee member who was instrumental in helping him to learn and utilize NVivo in his data analysis, which he initially found to be somewhat overwhelming. He credits his third committee

member with ensuring that he "was on point and in line with scholarship that was already out there, even though I was cutting a niche." Another participant, Dr. Parker, shared that although his methodologist was a quantitative instructor, he helped him to present his qualitative data "using tables, charts, graphics, and things like this." Dr. Parker went on to say that his methodologist "was very helpful, making me that much more successful."

A consistently reported hallmark of these positive chair and committee relationships was communication. While there was a period of adjustment for many participants, most came to have a high appreciation for the value their committee members brought to their doctoral process. A key aspect of communication was clearly established expectations. Dr. Lamont, another study participant, shared, "My chair was marvelous. I hated her at times because she had a certain level of expectations for me. She set the expectations from the beginning. And so, looking back at all of that, I get it, and I'm appreciative." Clear communication and expectations set the tone for productive relationships between the participants and their committees.

For some participants, these stakes were established early on in their interactions. For others, this occurred later due to encountering challenges during the process. For instance, Dr. Sandler had to switch chairs before completing his program because his initial chair decided to retire. He shared that he was initially resistant to her feedback until she reportedly told him, "We can do this the easy way or the hard way, which means you're probably not going to defend this fall." He acquiesced because he wanted to graduate with his cohort. Hence, he accepted her guidance, which ultimately benefitted him, stating, "It ended up working out well for me because she was an approved editor, and she edited [my writing] for me." Similarly, despite the

challenges, Dr. Caswell especially credited his outside committee member with the high quality of his dissertation. He shared:

> If it wasn't for her, I would have never gotten done. She was awesome. At first I thought she was my enemy. She read it line by line. That was her thing, 'I'm gonna go through this line by line.' When I finished, I got her a bracelet from Tiffany's with 'Line by Line' [engraved] on it.

Dr. Parker described his challenges with his chair and how they collaborated to work through them. "Part of [my success] was my relationship with my chairperson…building that and learning each other." He described that initially, he would submit work to his chair, but it would take weeks to receive feedback and that it would be harsh and deflating. After discussing it, they decided it would be better to break the work into smaller segments. "It started to build momentum…it was smaller pieces that he could review more quickly. We were constantly trading back and forth, and I experienced more success. The feedback was easier to take, and the corrections were easier to make."

As with Dr. Parker, several participants acknowledged having to understand that their chairs were managing heavy workloads along with other personal obligations. Having that understanding helped them to calibrate the expectations of their chairs. Dr. Caswell, who attended a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), described having a good relationship with his chair but also shared having to come to terms with the reality that she was juggling a lot:

> "HBCUs don't have the same money as our PWI sister schools, so [our chairs] have so many people that they're chairing committees for. God bless them. So I was in constant

communication with her and learning to be patient. You want feedback the next day, but that wasn't realistic."

Trusting that their chairs had their best interests at heart was a point expressed by several participants. For many participants, it was essential to connect with a chair whose research foci aligned with theirs. Those who had the option to choose their committees expressed wanting to identify a chair who was not only supportive of their topic but also knowledgeable and invested in it. Dr. Bethel described the intentionality with which he sought out his chair, sharing that he was very intentional about identifying a chair who would be the best fit for him. "I was not interested in having someone else's research being projected onto me. I found him, and because of that, I felt very comfortable in that work." For Dr. Bethel and other participants, being in sync with their chairs and committee members ultimately helped to strengthen their research, writing, and defenses.

While most participants relayed positive experiences with program personnel, negative accounts were also reported. Some participants recounted negative experiences with faculty that they suspected were racially motivated. Dr. Coleman shared a situation that had the potential to prolong or end his doctoral studies and how the matter was resolved. He described initially being assigned to a dissertation chair who was suspected of "being one to keep African American students from progressing into the proposal stage. They went back and actually looked at the work that we were submitting. They could not understand why he was giving me such scrutiny." Dr. Coleman was eventually assigned to another chair with whom he ultimately had positive interactions and successful outcomes. "The director of the program actually took me under her

wing and was like, 'From this point on, I got you.' She just laid out a checklist, and from that time…it went so rapidly."

Dr. Caswell reported experiencing racism even at the HBCU that he attended. A white faculty member had accused him of self-plagiarism for what Dr. Caswell described as "two sentences that I forgot to put a citation on. Two sentences that weren't even really direct quotes either." Dr. Caswell expressed being extremely surprised and hurt, sharing, "I was so broken. I was like, what is this man trying to do to me?" He further shared that students were expected to research a particular topic for their dissertations and build upon that research in various classes as they progressed through the coursework phase of their studies and continue doing so post-coursework. So some similarity to previously submitted work is expected, but certainly not gross, overt plagiarism. Dr. Caswell expressed being well aware of this and had successfully navigated coursework and assignments up to that point. Failing that course caused his time in the program to be extended since it was only offered once each academic year. While he described feeling somewhat vindicated by that faculty member's departure, unfortunately, Dr. Caswell's resonating takeaways were that:

> Racism is a reality you can't run from even at an HBCU. There's no monolith for where you're gonna find it. It's not just at a PWI. It's not just at these independent institutions. It can be even institutions that you think that are traditionally there to protect you."

He went on to share that he was grateful for the faculty who had advocated for him based on his prior academic track record and work in their classes.

Another insightful piece of data related to program personnel worthy of note came from Dr. Bethel, who shared what he considered to be several exciting dynamics he experienced in his

EdD program. He attended a predominantly white institution (PWI). However, his entire cohort were persons of color, his department chair was an African American man, and his three dissertation committee members were African American. While he was very grateful for having had that experience, he pointed this out as being very much atypical of his institution, historically compared to the cohorts just ahead and just behind him in the pipeline. Dr. Bethel also noted that most of his instructors were white and male and acknowledged that they were all great. In addition, he reported that there were only a few African American faculty teaching in his program and that they brought a much-needed perspective. Dr. Bethel relayed that, to his disappointment, those African American faculty did not remain with the University, including the department chair mentioned earlier. He went on to share that none of those vacancies were replaced with new African American faculty, adding that with those departures went the courses that focused on race. Dr. Bethel referred to this as "problematic," further expressing that he saw it as a disservice to the EdD students who missed out on those courses. They also would not have the privilege of connecting with those faculty and advisors whose research foci might have aligned with their own. So although Dr. Bethel reported positive experiences related to how he was supported by program personnel, he observed a lack of diversity that his program needed to address to better support its African American students.

Most participants experienced positive interactions with program personnel. For those who had challenging situations arise, they were either resolved directly with that person or through other members of their program personnel. So positive outcomes were ultimately achieved as a result of the intervention of other personnel. All were demonstrations of the program support and conflict resolution provided through program personnel.

Several factors emerged as enhancing the quality of the participants' relationships with program personnel. First, establishing clear expectations at the outset was noted by most of the participants as having been critical to their success. Several participants also mentioned "managing up" as another means of maintaining a productive relationship with their advisors. "Manage up theory is derived from the business world where the subordinate takes ownership of the mentoring relationship with their superior by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of both parties and applying that information in managing a productive relationship" (Han, Gentle, Stefanopoulos, Burneikis, Lipman, & French, 2022, p. 1). Managing up in the context of this study refers to the proactivity exercised by these former EdD students to maintain consistent communication with their advisors and progress on their dissertations. They did not wait to hear from their advisors or rely solely on them to set the pace or to initiate periodic check-ins. Instead, these participants assumed the onus for doing so, even noting that they understood how busy their advisors were and that they were managing a great deal of responsibility, having oversight over numerous students in addition to their other responsibilities as faculty.

Based on the experiences and perceptions reported by the participants, relationships and interactions with program personnel significantly impacted their progress and program completion. The accounts shared above amplify how critical program personnel were – particularly instructors and committee members – to these participants' doctoral success. Relationships and interactions with program personnel may have been the most crucial institutional component in these students' successful matriculation, rivaled only by the cohort, which is discussed below.

Cohort Members

Empirical evidence seems to confirm that cohorts help foster student success (Bagaka's et al., 2015; Schroeder, 2015; Swayze & Jakeman, 2014; Wolfe et al., 2018). Consistent with the literature, participants reported receiving immense support from their cohorts, which they reciprocated to their fellow cohort members. Participants were asked to describe their experiences with their cohorts. Most of those experiences were reported as positive, enriching, and adding value to their overall doctoral journeys. Many participants credited their cohorts with empowering them in various ways to complete their doctoral programs successfully. Interactions with their cohort members involved assignments and due date reminders, group texts, socializing outside of school, checking in once coursework ended, and even encouragement for those who may be wavering in their resolve or who had fallen behind. A testament to the depth of the relationships forged among their cohort members is that their interactions were not limited to only school-related dealings; many have even extended beyond graduation. The value of the cohort was referenced numerous times by most of the participants. For instance, Dr. Bronner shared, “My cohort members were a big part of my support system. The four people that I was tight with…we talked about everything. We checked in. So that was very helpful and allowed us to stay connected.”

Dr. Gregory described how valuable his cohort was and how he supported his fellow cohort members during his time in the program and beyond. He spoke of how collegial they all were, despite their differences. While they all leaned on each other, as the oldest in his cohort, his cohort members often relied on him for additional support, especially since he was the first to complete the program. Dr. Gregory shared that once he graduated, “They were all looking to me

for assistance, encouragement, motivation, or prayer. I have been able to lend a hand to my cohort members who are coming behind as well. We still stay in touch to this day."

Dr. Bethel also reported feeling very connected to and supported by his fellow cohort members. He appreciated and benefitted from the cohort model, sharing that his cohort members were very vocal about their commitment to graduating and graduating together. He described their shared sentiment and the impact on him as follows:

> We're the [cohort nickname]. Yes, we're gonna finish this together. We're gonna check on each other.' Like, we were literally a team. If it wasn't for them, I don't know. I would have finished. Right? But I don't know if I would've finished anywhere near the time that I finished.

Dr. Parker enjoyed the support and camaraderie of his cohort. He spoke of how much fun he had interacting with his cohort members, saying that the group consisted of "really bright, fun people. The people of color…we made sure to all go out to eat together and do kind of our own little extra things to keep each other motivated and that type of thing." While they were taking courses together, his cohort members interacted often, but this unfortunately waned once they completed their coursework and retreated to the isolation of their research and writing. He spoke of the initial excitement and togetherness he experienced, stating that in the beginning, there were shared feelings of unity and support among his cohort members "…up until the dissertation phase. Then you just never hear from anyone. Everyone's studying at everyone's own pace. I know a lot of them didn't finish."

Dr. Caswell spoke of navigating interpersonal challenges in his cohort member interactions. He shared that those challenges had to do primarily with strong personalities and

competitiveness. Despite these hurdles, it was ultimately a positive experience for him. He stated, “Imagine trying to get a group of six Type A leaders to function as one. But my cohort members *were* supportive. I made a lifelong friend. He finished before me but was there the whole time by my side.”

Although he felt equipped to handle the challenges he encountered based on his prior professional experiences having to “interface with individuals from all walks of life,” Dr. Coleman shared that politics were present among his cohort. “In the program, I dealt with a lot of politics with cohort members. Some members felt like they were already doctors, even though they got into the program yesterday.”

Their cohorts provided most of these participants with a built-in support system. Cohort dynamics and interactions varied for each participant. However, participants benefitted from their cohorts and attributed some measure of their doctoral success to their cohorts. Most shared an appreciation for the cohort model as a feature of their programs’ designs, but more evident was the value found in the support, engagement, and camaraderie between cohort members. According to most participants, many interactions extended beyond the classroom, and some continued beyond graduation. Program support provided via the cohort was evident in the data and significant and valuable based on participant accounts.

In summary, this section detailed the first major theme from the data collection and analysis – relationships within the academic communities promote doctoral student success. For the study participants, those relationships primarily included 1) program personnel and 2) cohort members. The relationships and interactions that participants had with their program personnel and cohort members shaped the student experience and impacted their progress and successful

completion of their EdD programs. This concludes the explication of the first major theme. The following section will detail the second major theme from the data analysis – student attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors affected their doctoral success.

Student Attitudes, Outlooks and Behaviors Affected Their Success

The next theme revealed the impact these participants' attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors as students had on their success. This study aimed to identify factors that contributed to the successful completion of doctoral studies by these African American male EdDs. As such, several factors related to the participants' attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors emerged in the data collection and analysis as significantly impacting their doctoral pursuits – specifically, the participants' inspiration and motivation, self-efficacy, and self-discipline. They are detailed below.

Inspiration & Motivation

Data collection revealed that participants' inspirations and motivations had a significant impact, first on their desire to pursue doctoral study, then served as touchstones and reminders in challenging times of the journey. Research indicates that motivation contributes to doctoral student success (Gardener, 2009; Gilmore et al., 2016; Pyhalto et al., 2012; Rigler et al., 2017). Participants reported they were motivated by the opportunity to grow in knowledge and as leaders, the potential impact and access that could result from earning the doctorate, as well as an innate sense of responsibility to their communities and those they serve.

Participants expressed the desire to grow as leaders and to be more effective in their roles as a major factor prompting them to undertake doctoral study. The notion of growing as leaders and building the capacity of students and other educators came up repeatedly in the interviews.

Dr. Parker spoke passionately of his desire to help hardworking teachers be more effective and impactful, despite limited time and resources. He saw the EdD as an opportunity to grow as a leader and to expand professional development opportunities for the educators at his school. He wanted to learn more about being an excellent teacher and how to replicate it. Dr. Parker's doctoral journey began with the question, "Is there anything that you can do to help a teacher go from wherever they're starting from to a little bit better? I saw this doctorate as a way to finish that formal education and also expand my voice."

Several participants also reported being motivated by a great sense of responsibility – the sense that achieving the doctorate was not only about them. Passion for service, social reform, and social change came up in the interviews when participants were asked about their inspiration and motivation to pursue the EdD. Many expressed that they were compelled by a sense of responsibility to impact change. This was either a result of the injustices they experienced personally or witnessed. Dr. Bronner spoke of his passion for serving through education and that he saw the EdD as a way to reach a wider net of people. After beginning his studies, he became even more inspired, sharing, "After I started writing and really digging into the literature and seeing the barriers, some of them I identified with. It became much bigger than me and my own goals." Dr. Lamont, who has sickle cell disease, indicated that the life expectancy is short for individuals with this illness and that he was not expected to live to the age of 19. Because of this, he shared:

> We don't get to see 'Dr. Whoever' with sickle cell, right? Because of the way our community is and how much injustice we experience, we don't get to see a lot of doctors

that look like us. And so all of that combined is why I wanted to go on to the doctorate level.

Several participants shared that they were inspired to pursue the EdD based on how it aligned with their current professional roles or future career aspirations. In addition to the knowledge gained, the EdD presented an opportunity for potential career advancement. This was not just for the sake of promotion. In addition, participants expressed that holding a doctorate in their field would raise their profile, extend their reach, and expand their influence, enabling them to make more positive changes in their schools and communities. Not having a doctorate presented a barrier for many of them. Dr. Bethel spoke to this, saying, "I knew that I needed that 'Dr.' at the front [of my name], or that 'EdD' at the back [of my name] in order to get into certain rooms and spaces, especially in education." For Dr. Lamont, the absence of African Americans who held doctorates at his workplace further motivated him to pursue the EdD. He shared that he was often "…in meetings or places where I did not see a lot of people that looked like me with 'Dr.' in front of their names." For these participants and several others, it was not simply about being called "doctor." Instead, it was about having a voice and the proverbial "seat at the table" where vital decisions impact the communities and individuals they serve.

While most participants discussed the professional motivations for pursuing their EdD and its potential impact, several reported that their doctoral aspirations began before adulthood. Dr. Bronner reflected on the lasting impression left on him when his middle school principal earned his doctorate and the importance of that moment. He recalled, "There was this whole ceremony and recognition of him of getting a doctorate. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew he was now 'Dr.' That's powerful. That's inspirational." A couple of participants indicated

that they had wanted to be a doctor for as long as they could remember, even before knowing what they would study. “I have always wanted to be ‘Dr. Lamont.’ So a lot of it was just intrinsic that, you know, this is what I want to be. This is where I'm going to end up.” Dr. Caswell recalled deciding as a child that he would one day become a doctor. “I always wanted to be called ‘doctor’ since I was a little kid in the projects.” This dream began at ten when his mother purchased a set of Encyclopedia Britannica encyclopedias. He learned that he could become a doctor that did not have to practice medicine or dentistry. “That was kind of exciting to me.”

Participants also noted that others knowing about their doctoral pursuits as another motivating factor for them, including their students, as well as individuals who made up their support systems (i.e., family, friends, mentors, colleagues, and fellow students). While some participants referenced these individuals specifically, others felt this responsibility innately. Also, they all expressed an awareness of the significance of being African American males pursuing their doctorates and what that meant for them, their families, and their communities. Dr. Bethel spoke of his students encouraging him to pursue his doctorate based on all their conversations about education and future goals. They would ask him, “When you gonna get your doctorate?” Not only did their encouragement prompt him to start, but he then felt a responsibility to persist because they were watching him. Dr. Sandler shared that a mentor encouraged him to obtain his doctorate, which he had not been considering prior to her suggestion. She attempted to impress upon him how important and necessary it was for him as a black male in education to do so, stating, “As a young African American male you have no choice. You need to get it.”

Several participants also conveyed that once they began their doctoral studies, the fact that their coursework and research were relevant to their day-to-day work resulted in a meaningful and dynamic academic experience. The fact that their cohorts and faculty consisted of colleagues and fellow practitioners made for lively and engaging discussions. Dr. Gregory shared, "The excitement of the studies and the interactions in the class with my cohort really kept me motivated." There was also a symbiotic dynamic to their studies. Several participants reported the opportunity to apply their professional experiences to their assignments, research, and writing. For many, several assignments had to be completed in their work settings. This alignment of their studies with their work was reportedly helpful in maintaining their motivation to persist to completion. For instance, Dr. Parker shared, "With these programs, it's highly contextual, and a lot of the assignments [are to] go to your institution. Talk to the business office. Go to your institution and talk to the admissions director, and that type of thing."

Participants shared several factors that inspired and motivated them to begin and continue their doctoral studies. Among the factors most mentioned were growing as leaders, the desire to expand their influence and effect change, and a sense of responsibility. Several were pursuing an aspiration seeded in them as children, while others arrived at the notion of pursuing their doctorates in adulthood. There was no one motivating factor for any participants, but rather a combination. These factors were reportedly significant enough to keep these participants committed to completing their studies.

Self-efficacy

According to the literature, motivation and self-efficacy are critical factors in student success (Pyhalto, 2012; Varney, 2010). Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to perform the

actions needed to reach a desired outcome (Bandura, 1997). In this study, self-efficacy has to do with each participant's belief in his ability to successfully persist through the challenges of doctoral study and ultimately obtain his EdD. Belief in their ultimate success was a recurring theme among the participants. Self-efficacy is a critical component of achievement (Bandura, 1997). Concerning their self-efficacy, most participants expressed confidence in their ability to succeed in their doctoral pursuits. They had all previously completed undergraduate programs, master's programs, and some had even completed specialist programs. These accomplishments helped to bolster their faith in themselves and their ability to complete their EdD programs. However, although most participants were optimistic, many acknowledged that they had faced moments of uncertainty at some point during their doctoral journeys. Multiple participants spoke of fearing the unknown at the outset, not knowing what to expect. Research indicates that student preparedness, or the degree to which a student is prepared for the academic rigor of their programs, significantly impacts their performance (Brill et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014), which ultimately impacts their success. When asked how prepared he felt, Dr. Bethel described it in this way:

> I felt like I could handle the task, but there was still a high level of concern, too. I think I hyped myself up. But in the same way that you go into a boxing match or go into a sporting event. You're like, yeah, I could win, but you don't know. You think you know, but you don't know.

Dr. Gregory spoke of being somewhat intimidated at the start of his doctoral studies, despite having earned a 3.8 GPA in his master's program. He confessed that he questioned whether or not he could meet the standards of his doctoral program. "I was a little suspect of

whether I could toe the line…Once I was in class and doing the work, I found I was more than prepared. The rigor of [my] master's program really prepared me for the doctorate." Other participants reported feeling relatively confident initially, even not knowing what to expect. Dr. Caswell shared, "I knew to just go with the flow. I realized that I had the wherewithal to be successful. The difficult piece was just figuring out what the expectations were at the terminal degree level."

Similarly, Dr. Coleman spoke about beginning his EdD program with a level of uncertainty, but ultimately that he was ready for the undertaking: "I felt very prepared. I think that I was as any doctoral student would be. You're first nervous about what you're getting yourself into. And then [less nervous] as you go along the journey." Having attended the same university for his two previous degrees, Dr. Lamont reportedly had a relatively seamless transition into doctoral study, resulting in less trepidation and more confidence as he entered his EdD program. He shared, "My master's program was extremely rigorous, so when I got into my doc program, it was just picking up where I left off. I still had room for growth…but I do feel like I was prepared for it."

Many participants referenced God, faith, and spirituality. Their self-efficacy seemed to correlate directly to their faith and religious beliefs, as evidenced by their multiple references to God, prayer, and scriptures. Those participants' belief in their successful program completion connected to their faith in God. That faith seemed to have served as the anchor for their self-efficacy. To say it differently, their faith in themselves reflected their faith in God. Moreover, when their faith in themselves may have waivered, their faith in God assured them they could persist. To this point, Dr. Sandler stated, "What's the biggest reason why I have my doctorate

right now? Ultimately, it's God." Several participants referenced prayer and faith as pivotal to their doctoral journey. In addition to discussing how instrumental prayer was in helping him make it through his program, he shared that it was just him and God on his four-hour drives to campus and back home. "The Lord was kind. My wife and children were praying, the church was praying, and I was praying," further stating, "The top priority for me was prayer." Dr. Bronner selected a Christian program and reported that as a "believer," the faith-based tenets of his program and their devotions were very valuable to him. Dr. Coleman also made numerous references to the role God and prayer played during his studies, not only his prayers but also those of his grandparents and his church. When asked what he attributed his doctoral success to, Dr. Caswell stated:

> My belief in God. The power to know that I can overcome every situation. Spirituality was really the center for me. I know that I'm from powerful DNA that goes all the way back to Africa, through the diaspora and through the slave trade. My bloodline was able to survive. To know that 'the race isn't given to the swift, nor to the strong, but to the one who endures until the end.' Just knowing I can do all things [through Christ who strengthens me]. You know, there's nothing impossible [for God].

While multiple participants reported moments of self-doubt, which is common according to the literature (Persky, 2018), most instances were fleeting, even if they were recurring. No participants expressed a sustained sense of inadequacy or inability to complete their studies. So even though several participants experienced uncertainty about the potential challenges of doctoral study, they all possessed a high level of self-efficacy and ultimately believed in their

ability to succeed. That self-efficacy, rooted in their faith in God, contributed to the successful completion of their programs.

Liminality

Liminality, or the process of becoming, emerged as a factor connected to the participants' doctoral success (Adorno et al., 2015; Keefer, 2015; Mantai, 2019; Varney, 2010). While participants did not specifically refer to the term "liminality," this process of becoming was an experience shared by all of the participants. As previously mentioned, participants discussed their experiences of beginning the doctoral journey with varying levels of confidence. Some began with a high level of confidence, which was calibrated once the process was underway. This calibration occurred as the result of engaging in rigorous coursework, receiving not-so-favorable feedback on their writing, or managing the demands of doctoral study along with their other professional and personal obligations. Other participants expressed being cautiously optimistic at the outset but gained confidence as they moved through the process, also experiencing a recalibration. In both instances, acceptance of this liminality – the process of becoming – was instrumental in their success as doctoral students. It was vital for them to understand that they would not know everything about what was to come, nor were they expected to be proficient in academic research and writing at the doctoral level. All participants, whether confident or cautiously optimistic at the beginning, adjusted accordingly and settled into the journey of *becoming* scholars – the *liminality*. Having earned an English degree, Dr. Bronner entered his EdD program reasonably confident in his writing ability. However, after submitting Chapter 1 of his dissertation, he was advised to consider using an editing service. He shared, "When my chair would send back my chapter with edits, or I didn't do well on an assignment,

those moments were very humbling. But they also allowed me to take a step back and just trust the process." For Dr. Parker, humility was key in how he chose to approach each new academic journey that he decided to undertake:

> I try to take a humble posture of a learner. If you don't, then you're not really going to hear the feedback and grow when they're marking up your paper with all the APA conventions that you're missing, or the feedback that they give you. I was ready for feedback. I was ready to work hard."

Liminality showed up in the experiences shared by all of the participants. Coming to terms with the process of becoming scholars was something that they all encountered at some point in the doctoral journey. Understanding and accepting all aspects of their liminality – the uncertainty, the lack of awareness, the unknown, the feedback, their development, and their becoming – aided their transition into doctoral study and helped them traverse the challenges that they each faced along the way.

Self-Discipline

Self-discipline was another attribute shared by the participants that also emerged as a critical component to completing their EdD programs. Self-discipline reflects a student's commitment to his goals, which Tinto spoke of in his student retention theory (1993). Interviews revealed that self-discipline was a key factor in their ability to maintain their progress and ultimately graduate. The participants demonstrated self-discipline through their 1) perseverance and their 2) time management. Multiple participants reported encountering situations that could have threatened their completion and required them to exercise great grit and perseverance. Some of the challenges they spoke of were related to balancing personal and professional

obligations along with school, typical of the working professional who decides to undertake doctoral study.

Perseverance. Self-discipline in the form of perseverance was a critical component of the doctoral journey for each participant. Dr. Lamont navigated doctoral study while managing a "disabling condition." Dr. Gregory spoke of how difficult the journey was for him, having to drive four hours to spend six days on campus four times a year, spending time away from his family and church. Others encountered unexpected situations along the way that could have potentially ended their studies, but for their perseverance. In addition to the challenges Dr. Coleman had endured when he had to switch dissertation chairs, his beloved grandmother, who had helped raise him, was battling cancer. He shared, "She had been fighting liver cancer from that time all the way up until 2017. You see the reality, but you don't want to face the reality. That's what I went through with her because that was my world."

Two participants shared instances when they had seriously considered abandoning their doctoral studies. Dr. Sandler recalled wanting to quit several times during the first and second years and finally reaching a point of mental and physical exhaustion, feeling as though he could not continue. He woke up one Saturday morning and decided he would not attend class. After not showing up, Dr. Sandler shared, "I got 50,000 texts from my cohort members, and they were like, 'I don't know what's wrong with you, but you better get to this campus! If you don't, we're coming to your house!' So I went." During his interview, Dr. Caswell shared that he felt he was being subjected to academic hazing in his program and finally reached a breaking point stating, "' This is too much. I'm sick of them hazing me. I'm quitting.' But I'm highly self-motivated…I

have grit and perseverance. I don't like to start stuff and not complete it. I was not going to be an ABD."

Although some participants experienced adversity that caused them to consider abandoning their doctoral pursuits, ultimately they all discussed being compelled to finish what they had started, sharing sentiments like "come what may" and "no matter what." Several participants discussed how their resolve and determination fueled their persistence. Dr. Bronner spoke to this, saying, "When I decide to do something, I'm going to do it. I'm very determined. I'm just a hard worker. Like, I see the benefit that comes out of this and that drives me to keep going…keep pressing." Similarly, Dr. Lamont shared:

> When I want to do something, I'm going to do it – period. Now, did I have moments where I was like, 'I hate this school, I hate doing all this work. Why did I go back to school?' Absolutely. But for me, it was just remembering that I can do anything for three years.

Dr. Lamont went on to express another sentiment shared by multiple participants – the added pressure of people knowing that they were working on their doctorates. He stated, "Telling everyone that you're in a doc program and that you're going to be 'Dr. Lamont' one day kind of comes with that pressure that you have to finish." Similarly, Dr. Bethel also expressed, "I had put it out in the universe to my students and my family…Both my parents got their master's. My father is an ABD. My parents were like, 'You have to finish.' That was always playing in my head."

All of the study participants reported facing challenges on the path to their EdDs, both expected and unexpected. Despite those challenges, they each displayed a great deal of tenacity.

The data suggest that their perseverance was a critical component of the self-discipline that seems to have contributed to their successful doctoral program completion. Time management was another vital element of their self-discipline that repeatedly emerged in data. Each participant discussed habits related to time management that impacted his success.

Time Management. Self-discipline in the form of time management was also a common factor among the participants. Those who reported being more effective at managing their time, even while experiencing challenges, progressed through their programs more seamlessly and met their anticipated timelines to graduate. Several participants reported having dedicated time for completing assignments during their coursework and writing during the dissertation phase of their studies, which proved to be an effective strategy for keeping them on track to graduate during the timeframe set by their respective EdD programs. Dr. Bronner spoke about being an early riser and spending the early morning hours working on his assignments and writing. As a busy professional and a newlywed, he found that frontloading his day with his schoolwork freed up his evenings so he could spend them with his new wife. He shared, "I primarily did my schoolwork in the morning. I wanted to spend as much time as I could at night with [my wife]…since we had just gotten married, but I also wanted to…stay on track to graduate." In his interview, Dr. Gregory emphasized the organization and planning aspect of managing his time, stating, "I had to plan…Making time for studies…studies for work, as well as the studies for school, and planning downtime. It was important for me to take care of myself in the program, or I couldn't finish the program."

Dr. Lamont was successful in managing his time as well, which he attributed to working at the institution where he was enrolled, having an understanding supervisor who was also on his

dissertation committee, and having the flexibility to toggle between work and school assignments when necessary. He stated, “I think that's why I got done with the dissertation so quickly. I had a dedicated time. I had a workplace that was very flexible. I also did my dissertation on what I was already working in. So that's really what made things manageable for me…having that flexibility and work, and knowing how to chunk time.”

Conversely, those participants who reported delayed completion of their degrees also reported challenges with time management. For instance, Dr. Bethel discussed that once his coursework ended and he was now responsible for self-regulating his progress and dissertation writing, he “did not make the shift” and found himself falling behind, which ultimately extended his timeline. Having reflected on this, he shared:

> In a master’s structure…undergraduate structure, I was used to things coming to an end. And for the first part of the doctoral program, there were classes…they ended, and you moved on to the next thing. Once we got into the writing and were done with classes is when we started to see variance in people's ability to finish. I came to the conclusion that I am in control of the end of this. The party stops when I stop having to dance.

Although he did not meet his original anticipated graduation date, Dr. Bethel reported that once he synced his progress with the critical deadlines established by his program, he was back on track to completing his program successfully.

Dr. Caswell reported that for him, “Time management was important. So I learned how to really manage my time. Created my own deadlines making sure I was writing consistently; constant communication with chairpersons, following their advice, doing what they asked me to do.” As was previously mentioned, Dr. Caswell unfortunately did experience delays as well.

When he was accused of self-plagiarism by his instructor, he had to repeat the course. Since his EdD program only offered the course once each academic year, he could not retake it until the following year. The ordeal significantly extended his timeline to graduation, but he was determined to do everything he could to finish successfully.

Extenuating circumstances sometimes affected participants' timelines to completion. For Dr. Parker, work responsibilities, school demands, his new marriage, new baby, COVID-19, and the country's racial climate all converged. He found himself in the midst of a pandemic, working from home and taking care of his baby. This was all happening simultaneous to the country's mounting political tensions and recurring news reports of police violence against people of color. He recalled, "All of these horrible things were happening." Dr. Parker specifically mentioned being deeply impacted by the murder of George Floyd, a Black man whose murder by police was captured on video and repeatedly broadcast. He shared that he came very close to abandoning his studies, stating, "Academically, I'm used to being successful. But all of the techniques and skills that I had used to get through my bachelor's and my master's could not work anymore. Your whole identity as a student crumbles at that moment." Although most were circumstances beyond his control, the convergence of all these situations made it increasingly difficult for Dr. Parker to maintain his focus and progress with his studies. This necessitated his decision to step away from school temporarily, which extended his timeline to graduation by a year. Despite the delay to completion, Dr. Parker expressed that stepping away provided him with the mental break and clarity needed to return to school and complete his studies. He shared, "This thing is knotty…things are going to happen, and you need to just keep moving forward." Dr. Parker's experience aligns with the literature on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted doctoral study

for many students. The literature revealed numerous challenges of studying during the pandemic, such as working, studying, and management of family responsibilities all in one space, having to adjust research plans, prolonged timelines to degree completion, diminished communication with advisors, decreased access to institutional resources, and lack of support (Pyhalto et al., 2022; Bukko & Dhessi, 2021; Glorieux et al., 2021).

Dr. Sandler reported that being "lackadaisical" with writing his dissertation very nearly delayed his completion. This turned out to be a pivotal moment for him on his doctoral journey. He recalled the day he learned from one of his cohort members that he was not on track to graduate on time with his cohort. He emailed his program director and said, "I'm not sure what I've done wrong, but I promise you I will do better." Having already written chapter one of his dissertation, he wrote chapter two in three days. He stated, "I would not recommend it because listen. I cried. I was mentally and emotionally, and physically exhausted." Though Dr. Sandler encountered a critical moment that revealed he had not managed his time most effectively, his perseverance spurred him on. This enabled him to catch up on his writing and ultimately defend his dissertation within the prescribed timeframe. He was able to graduate with his cohort.

In summary, these participants' experiences highlight the importance of self-discipline. This was reflected in their perseverance through the typical challenges of the doctoral process, as well as in the face of adversity and unexpected challenges that many encountered. All of the participants had to demonstrate perseverance in order to complete their EdD programs. Their self-discipline was also reflected in their time management. The data revealed that the participants who managed their time most effectively graduated within their programs' prescribed timeframes. Those participants who struggled with time management (due to their

own actions or otherwise) experienced extended timelines to completion. Ultimately, self-discipline was a key factor in their doctoral success.

Support Systems Figured Prominently into Student Success

The third theme that emerged in the study was how the participants' support systems impacted their success. According to participants, their support systems included individuals and entities. Participants repeatedly referenced how their circles supported them. These circles comprised family members, friends, cohort members, mentors, colleagues, students, churches, and even social media communities. Their support systems varied in size, make-up, and presence, with some participants reportedly relying more heavily on their support systems than others. Dr. Caswell described garnering support from multiple sources: “My family, my church, my friends, strangers on the street, the ancestors…People really supported me. I was also in support groups online with people who were working towards their doctorates.”

Despite these differences, each participant expressed tremendous gratitude for their support systems. Most attributed their ability to withstand the challenges of doctoral study to the immense support that they received. Several even questioned whether or not they would have reached graduation had they not received that support. Dr. Bethel shared, “My students, my family, my cohort all played a big role in me getting done.” Similarly, Dr. Coleman stated, “I just thank God that I had a village between my grandparents and my wife, and even mentors to kind of inspire me to keep going on the journey because I couldn't have made it without them.”

Family support emerged as a significant factor in the participants’ doctoral success. The married participants (four out of eight) reported how instrumental and supportive their wives had been. During his interview, Dr. Coleman recalled moments when he was so exhausted from work

and school that his wife offered to have him dictate to her while she typed papers for him. Dr. Gregory credited his wife with ensuring he did not reach burnout by insisting that he get adequate rest, encouraging him to take intermittent breaks, and scheduling vacations periodically. Multiple participants also reported how supportive their parents had been as well. Several of their parents held degrees, including master's and doctorates, so the ability to relate enhanced the support and encouragement they provided. Dr. Bronner shared:

> I've always had a strong support system. My mother being the first to go after her doctorate in my entire family was huge. And so she's always been supportive. My twin sister, my older brother, my dad…we're very close so I always had them. But then my wife also was a big support.

As a first-generation college student, Dr. Lamont spoke of the significance of his doctoral pursuit for his family. He indicated that their support and making them proud helped him persist to graduation. He added, "I know I made them proud with getting a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. I'm the first one in my family to have a doctorate. Everybody else either just stopped at the high school level or dropped out."

Dr. Coleman spoke in great detail about his family's tremendous influence and support. His mother passed away when he was 15, so his grandparents, who had always been a constant presence in his upbringing, continued raising him in her absence. He spoke of their legacy of faith and education instilled in him and their high expectations of him. He shared, "My mother, grandmother, and grandfather were my influences…Those are the shoulders I stood on to walk through my doctoral journey. If it had not been for those individuals, I wouldn't be able to stand as Dr. Coleman today."

Participants mentioned support from mentors several times as a factor contributing to their success. Participants reported that their mentors supported them in a variety of ways. Some of their mentors encouraged them to pursue doctoral study, either by example or by directly impressing upon them the importance of doing so. Mentor support was demonstrated through inspiration to pursue their doctorates and guidance and encouragement provided during their studies. Some participants also had mentors serve on their dissertation committees. Dr. Gregory spoke of two mentors who were very influential to his academic journey, as African Americans, and as scholars. Both were instrumental in his decision to pursue higher education and advance his studies. In speaking of one of his mentors, he shared:

> I was so impressed with her scholarship…I made her one of my advisors. She was an example to me that we as African Americans can pursue higher education and do well at it and encouraged me to further my studies. Awesome lady. Small in stature but big in education and big in scholarship.

Dr. Coleman stated that on the night before his dissertation defense, his nerves overwhelmed him to the point of insomnia, prompting him to call his mentor at 3 am. Fortunately, she answered. She was able to ease his anxiety and encouraged him by saying, "You're always nervous beforehand, then you end up bringing down the house. You'll handle your business. This is your study. You're the subject matter expert. Go in there and handle your business." Several participants said mentor support positively impacted the doctoral experience and contributed to their success.

Cohort member support was cited numerous times by multiple participants as a key factor in their ability to persist to the completion of their studies. Several indicated that their successful

completion was due in large part to the support of their cohorts. Cohort support comprised collaboration on assignments, sharing critical information, interactions via group messaging, providing reminders, encouragement, and establishing friendships and interactions that extended beyond the classroom and school-related matters. Several participants reported having strong bonds with their cohort members. Some participants even reported socializing with cohort members and checking in with each other during the pandemic. Many participants shared that their cohorts were not only instrumental in their doctoral success but that their friendships have also extended well beyond the culmination of their studies. Regarding his cohort's supportive nature and interactions, Dr. Bethel stated, "We were disciplined in our check-ins with each other…not only about the work but just about their well-being. That was important for us. So that kept the motivation up."

In general, positive experiences with their cohorts were reported. Several participants also noted that they had established close bonds with other African American students and students of color. Dr. Parker shared, "Our cohort was extremely fun. A lot of really bright, fun people. The people of color…we made sure to all go out to eat together and do our own little extra things to keep each other motivated."

Multiple participants also referenced workplace support. Some discussed having supportive supervisors, colleagues, and even students and how valuable that support was for them. Some were even influenced or inspired by a colleague to pursue doctoral study. Dr. Parker happened to have a colleague who was coincidentally enrolled at the same institution, in the same program, at the same time as him, emphasizing how impactful that was for him. He shared, "I can't overstate the importance of having a colleague who's in that same stage. Literally, there's

someone right there who, when I'm down, he's up when he's down, I'm up, and that type of thing. That's big." He also spoke of how his leader's support contributed to his success, saying, "…having my boss to have those same conversations with…having those real relational touch points in my professional world made the coursework that much easier."

As thoroughly addressed here, the data revealed that the support participants received from their support systems immensely impacted their success as doctoral students. Although the individuals and entities that made up their support systems varied, it is evident that the participants may have experienced different outcomes, including attrition or extended timelines to completion without their support systems. In alignment with the interview data, the document data also reflected the impact of support. When asked to provide documents representing factors that they felt contributed to their doctoral success, most reflected or referenced the individuals who made up participants' support systems (i.e., family, mentors, and cohort members).

Studying While Black: How Their Black Lives Mattered

The previous themes that emerged in the study were not necessarily race-related or gender-related and could have been true for anyone or any demographic pursuing doctoral study. As was previously noted, the common factors that impact doctoral student success transcend race and gender. Therefore at a cursory glance, this would seem to suggest that the race and gender of the participants had no bearing on their doctoral experience or success. One could infer that being Black and male did not factor into their successful attainment of their EdDs. However, the literature indicates that in addition to the challenges generally associated with doctoral study, African American male students are at risk of encountering additional challenges at their institutions that could potentially threaten their success. Those potential challenges include but

are not limited to racial prejudice, stereotype threat, lack of support, misandry, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue (Beale et al., 2019; Borman et al., 2021; Bryant, 2020; Griffin et al., 2010; Hall, 2017; Okello et al., 2020; Scott & Johnson, 2021; Smith et al., 2011; Whaley, 2018). As Smith et al. asserted (2011), "Education has historically paid off for the majority of Black men in better jobs and income…the questions that are beginning to be raised are about emotional, physiological, and psychological 'costs' associated with their participation in historically White environments" (p. 65). Participant interview data aligned with the literature.

Because race *was* mentioned numerous times by all participants and in various contexts, a theme related to their experience of journeying through the doctoral process as Black men emerged – specifically, how being Black impacted their experience…how it mattered. From a positive perspective, some participants referenced race with regard to the significance of earning a doctorate as a Black male and the potential impact they could have as leaders/change agents in their schools and communities. Since earning his doctorate, Dr. Lamont has been proud to be in a position to reflect diversity in leadership and impact diversity in hiring at his institution. In addition, participants spoke of their doctoral pursuits being bigger than themselves. They were acutely aware of others' vested interest in their success as Black men. A mentor convinced Dr. Sandler to pursue doctoral study because, as a Black man working in education, he simply needed to do it. He and several other participants – Dr. Gregory, Dr. Bronner, and Dr. Parker – discussed the impact of seeing other African Americans they held in high regard achieve their doctorates and the influence on their decision to pursue the EdD. Dr. Caswell spoke passionately about how he drew the inspiration to persevere with his studies from the African American plight and history of survival in his most trying moments.

The subject of race came up in interviews with several participants noting the lack of diversity among students and faculty in their programs. Dr. Bethel saw the lack Black representation among his program's faculty as a disservice to Black students due to its impact on course offerings, class discussions, and some students' ability to identify committee members with similar research foci. Several participants spoke of being the only or one of the few African Americans in their programs or cohorts. Lack of diversity in the workplace also came up, with several participants who spoke of the scarcity of African Americans with doctorates.

Unfortunately, the topic of racism was also broached by several participants. Dr. Coleman and Dr. Caswell reported negative interactions with faculty that threatened their program completion, which they suspecting being racially motivated, even at Dr. Caswell's HBCU. The country's tumultuous political and racial climate impacted some participants during their doctoral studies – hate crimes at Dr. Bethel's predominantly White institution (PWI), and the incessant incidents of police violence against Blacks that Dr. Parker referenced. It is important to note that for Dr. Coleman, Dr. Caswell, and Dr. Bethel, these incidents were relatively isolated and did not reflect their characterizations of their respective institutions. Dr. Parker shared no negative race-related situations at his institution. All four reported overall positive experiences with their schools and programs.

Dr. Parker discussed being deeply affected by the rampant reports of police violence perpetuated against African Americans in the U.S. during his matriculation. He cited this as contributing to his decision to take a break from school. During his break, he wrote and recorded an album of songs that explored race and faith to help him process what he was contending with mentally and emotionally, eventually enabling him to return to his studies. From what Dr. Parker

reported, it could be concluded that he was experiencing racial battle fatigue (Okello et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2011).

The study's other emergent themes were not necessarily race-related or gender-related. However, the fourth theme is consistent with the extant literature, which indicates that African American male students are at risk of additional challenges that could threaten their academic success. Participant accounts – microaggressions, racism on campus, and the national racial climate – supported the existing research. However, in addition to race-related challenges, there were also accounts of positive aspects related to studying while Black. This included the influence of Black mentors and leaders to pursue doctoral study, the camaraderie shared with other Black classmates, their potential impact as African American male EdDs and leaders in their communities, and the sense of obligation to their ancestors. Being Black certainly mattered for these participants.

Summary of Findings

Multiple themes emerged from the data collection and analysis. The first theme that emerged was that relationships with their academic community impacted student success. Participants' interactions with program personnel (i.e., leadership, faculty, and committee members) and their fellow students (i.e., cohort members) directly affected their doctoral experience. Positive interactions and quality relationships fostered their success, while negative interactions threatened it. The second theme that emerged emphasized the impact that student attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors had on their success. Their inspirations, motivation, self-efficacy, liminality, and self-discipline were all contributing factors that could affect their desired outcomes (i.e., to graduate on time and with their cohorts). Though they all graduated, everyone

did not meet their initial timelines or finish with their cohorts. Those timelines were affected by participant attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors. The third theme was that support systems figured prominently in student success. This highlighted the participants' support systems – comprised of family members, friends, cohort members, mentors, colleagues, students, churches, and even social media communities – and how that support contributed to their success. Participants credited their support systems with enabling them to endure the challenges of doctoral study, allowing them to persist to the completion of their programs.

The first research question asked what program/institutional components supported these AAM students in their doctoral pursuits and contributed to the successful attainment of their EdD degrees. The study findings shed light on those components perceived and reported by the participants. The second research question explored the individual factors that enabled these African American male students to persist to the successful completion of their EdD degrees. Again, the study findings highlight those factors perceived and reported by the participants. More specifically, theme 1 (Relationships with Their Academic Community Impacted Student Success) and theme 3 (Support Systems Figured Prominently into Student Success) connect directly to the first research question exploring program/institutional components that supported AAM success. Theme 2 (Student Attitudes, Outlook, and Behaviors Affected Their Success) and theme 4 (Studying While Black: How Their Black Lives Mattered) connect to the second research question related to the individual factors that impacted AAM EdD success. The study's research questions and emergent themes also connect to the study's theoretical framework, Tinto's student retention theory, which asserted that there are institutional and individual factors that impact student success (1993).

This study sought to uncover the factors that promoted the success of these African American male EdDs. The emergent themes did illuminate multiple factors. The study findings align with the literature on doctoral student success in general. The findings also highlighted race as a factor that impacted the participants' doctoral success -- positively and negatively, which is also consistent with the extant literature regarding race and African American male student success.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine factors contributing to African American male doctoral student retention and completion in Doctor of Education (EdD) programs in the United States. This was explored through the lens of AAM educational leaders who successfully completed these programs within the last five years. Doctoral student attrition is an important area of inquiry; however, relatively little is known about attrition among African American male doctoral students, and lesser still among those enrolled in EdD programs. Exploring this topic from the perspective of this specific demographic, and pursuing this particular degree, provided an opportunity to expand the existing body of literature on doctoral student attrition. Learning what these participants perceived as the factors most impactful to their success offers valuable insight to those with a vested interest in African American male student achievement, AAM doctoral success, and increasing the AAM pipeline to educational leadership. This should include school leaders (in K-12 and higher education), faculty, and students. The need for more African American male leadership in education has been well-established (Ononuju, 2016; Wint et al., 2021), highlighting the current pipeline issue and compelling a look into the factors that promote AAM academic success at the doctoral level.

This discussion highlights the connections between the study's findings and extant literature on African American male doctoral student success. Vincent Tinto's student retention theory (1993) served as the theoretical framework for the study. In addition to the emergent themes, this discussion explains how race factored into the doctoral student experience for these participants. It also highlights implications for academia and practitioners, particularly university and program leadership, as well as prospective doctoral students. The crux of Tinto's student

retention theory is that institutional *and* individual factors impact student persistence in college. One of the theory's primary features emphasizes the importance of student connection to and integration with their institution. Tinto's student retention theory provided an insightful lens through which to explore the guiding questions of this study.

The first research question asked what program/institutional components supported these AAM students in their doctoral pursuits and contributed to the successful attainment of their EdD degrees. The study findings shed light on those components perceived and reported by the participants. The second research question explored the individual factors that enabled these African American male students to persist to the successful completion of their EdD degrees. Again, the study findings highlight those factors perceived and reported by the participants. The study's findings support the major tenets of Tinto's student retention theory, answer the study's research questions, and align with the extant literature that indicates individual *and* institutional factors impact student outcomes (Edwards et al., 1990; Gardner, 2009; Gilmore et al., 2016).

Four themes emerged from the study. The first theme demonstrated the impact of students' relationships with members of their academic communities. The second theme encompassed how students' attitudes, outlook, and behaviors impacted their doctoral success. The third theme illustrated how students' support systems contributed to their persistence and completion. The fourth and final theme highlighted how their being Black factored into their doctoral experience. The study's themes and findings successfully answered the research questions, providing deeper insight into the doctoral student experience by illuminating factors that fostered – and in some cases threatened – these African American male EdDs' successful program completion.

The first theme, relationships with their academic community impacted student success, provided a thorough look at how impactful students' relationships were with program personnel and fellow students. Those program personnel consisted of program leadership, faculty, and committee members. The fellow students were primarily their cohort members. Participants provided numerous accounts depicting these relationships' critical nature and the impact on their success. Positive relationships with their instructors and advisors netted positive experiences and outcomes for participants. Similarly, positive relationships with their cohort members also netted positive experiences and outcomes for participants. Again, participants reported the importance of their relationships and interactions with members of their academic communities. Participants described how their instructors, dissertation committee members, and cohort members contributed to their success.

This theme directly relates to the literature that highlights the importance of students' connections with individuals in their academic communities. Consistent with the literature, the student/advisor relationship proved to be a critical component to the success of the study participants (Adorno et al., 2015; Barnes et al., 2010; Brill et al., 2014; Gilmore, 2016; Golde, 1998, 2005; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Pyhalto et al., 2015). Participants referenced their relationships with their dissertation committee members frequently during their interviews. As Mazerolle et al. reported (2015), this support contributes greatly to student satisfaction with their doctoral experience and certainly impacts student persistence, completion, and time to completion (Pyhalto et al., 2015).

Whether their interactions were challenging or favorable from the start, all participants discussed the value their committee members brought to the dissertation process. Dr. Lamont

referred to his chair as “marvelous,” and despite some initial challenges, he praised her for her support and guidance. Dr. Bethel expressed gratitude for identifying a chair whose research focus aligned with his own. Although his chair did not initiate contact often, he was very timely and responsive. Dr. Caswell was so grateful to one of his committee members for how she helped him to submit his best work that he purchased her an expensive thank-you gift at the end of his program. Dr. Bronner was initially frustrated with his chair’s feedback but credited him with helping him to write a solid dissertation, of which he was ultimately very proud. Dr. Coleman expressed tremendous gratitude for his replacement chair and how she streamlined the process for him after experiencing challenges with his first chair. Dr. Parker was initially deflated by his chair’s feedback. However, once they established a system for writing and receiving feedback, Dr. Parker was pleased with their interactions and progress. He also expressed gratitude for another committee member who helped him to present a much more robust dissertation.

Gilmore et al. (2016) discussed how a low-quality student/advisor relationship could be directly attributed to attrition, and conversely, a high-quality student/advisor relationship promotes student success. The value reported by the participants had to do with the quality of those relationships and interactions. That quality was characterized by clear expectations, trust, open communication, as well as timely and constructive feedback, all of which fostered student success. The absence of either of these elements could diminish the value of the relationship, complicate the process for the students, impede their progress, and potentially delay their timelines to completion. In particular, the interactions with their committee chairs (advisors) came up most often. As Rigler et al. (2017) shared, the student/advisor relationship has the great

potential to positively or negatively impact the doctoral student's success. For doctoral students, meaningful, frequent interaction with their advisors is a strong predictor of program completion. The critical nature of the advisor-student relationship is well-established in the existing literature on doctoral student attrition and success (Adorno et al., 2015; Barnes et al., 2010; Bednall, 2018; Gilmore, 2016; Golde, 1998, 2005; Gopaul, 2019). As such, this finding is consistent with the existing research.

Mantai (2019) noted that in addition to advisors, peers and other faculty also impact doctoral student success. He further asserts that peer support contributes most to doctoral students' sense of belonging, which also emerges as a major factor in student persistence. To this point, participants also discussed the importance of their relationships with their cohort members at great length. The benefits of the cohort model have been extensively researched (Adorno et al., 2015; Bagaka's et al., 2015; Gopaul, 2019; Rigler et al., 2017; Schroeder, 2015; Swayze & Jakeman, 2014; Wolfe et al., 2018). Each study participant graduated from cohort-model doctoral programs, supporting Rigler et al.'s assertion that doctoral students enrolled in cohort-model programs experience higher persistence and completion rates (2017). These participants' doctoral success also lends credence to Bagaka's et al.'s finding that the cohort model benefits students because it fosters an environment that promotes program completion (2015).

Most participants spoke positively of their interactions with their fellow cohort members and how those relationships contributed to their success. Adorno et al. (2015) asserted that having cohort members to lean on during the transition to doctoral study and throughout the process is another benefit of the cohort model. According to the participants, the most valuable aspects of their cohorts were camaraderie, frequent check-ins, information sharing, and

collaboration. For most participants, their cohorts were a critical factor in their success, with several expressing doubts about their ability to have graduated without their cohorts. The literature spoke to how cohorts can also diminish the feelings of isolation often associated with doctoral study (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Holmes et al., 2010). The cohort model addresses several factors in the extant literature that are associated with doctoral student attrition. Those factors primarily include lack of support (perceived or actual), lack of belonging, and feelings of isolation. To this point, several participants noted the diminished level of interaction and support among their cohort members when they transitioned from taking coursework together to working on their dissertations solo. As such, this finding is also consistent with the extant literature on the value of cohorts in academic programs.

The second theme highlighted how students' attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors impacted their doctoral success, shifting from institutional-related factors to those related to the individual. This finding also aligns with the extant literature. Brill et al. (2014) noted that students' characteristics greatly impacted persistence. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014) also found that individual characteristics affect persistence rates. Similarly, Lott et al. (2009) stated that several aspects found to influence a student's success were personal in nature. Several factors related to the participants' attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors emerged as impacting their doctoral journeys. One had to do with the participants' inspiration and motivation. Another was their self-efficacy. Self-discipline was also a critical factor. As the literature indicated, many aspects of doctoral success are non-academic and related to the individual's attributes and circumstances (Brill et al., 2014; Dorn et al., 1995; Gardner, 2009; Gilmore, 2016; Peterson et al., 1997).

Also consistent with the literature, participants' inspirations and motivations had a significant impact, first on their desire to pursue doctoral study and in difficult moments during their journeys. In their 2017 study, Rigler et al. speak about the importance of motivation and its direct impact on one's likelihood of meeting and overcoming the challenges of doctoral study. Pyhalto et al. (2012), Gardener (2009), as well as Gilmore et al. (2016), counted motivation among the necessary skill sets that would enable doctoral students to reach the finish line. Gilmore et al. also shared faculty perspectives on student motivation, which they deemed of the utmost importance and necessary to endure the arduous journey of doctoral study. The study participants were all clear about their motivations for pursuing the EdD. Clarity of their "why" seemed to contribute to their ability to persist to program completion.

Participants were driven by their desire to learn, become more effective leaders, make a positive impact in their schools and communities, their professional aspirations, a sense of responsibility to something beyond themselves, and the regard and access that comes with being a doctor in their field. The participants were each clear about their "why" – their reasons for pursuing doctoral study and how achieving their EdDs would positively impact their futures and others around them -- which seemed to undergird their commitment to the process. This finding aligned with the research that points to motivation as a major contributing factor to doctoral student success (Gardener, 2009; Gilmore et al., 2016; Rigler et al., 2017). Motivation and self-efficacy were also expressly noted by Pyhalto et al. (2012) as factors directly impacting doctoral student success and, further, that in their absence, student performance would suffer.

In this study, self-efficacy has to do with each participant's belief in his ability to successfully persist through the challenges of doctoral study and ultimately obtain his EdD

(Bandura, 1997). The prevalence of self-efficacy in the study findings and its impact on doctoral student success aligns with the extant literature. Belief in their ultimate success was a recurring theme among the participants. Inherent to their decision to pursue doctoral study was a belief that they could do what was necessary to achieve the goal. That belief also served as a touchstone in moments of intense challenge or self-doubt. Without their belief, it is doubtful that they would have been able to maintain their progress or complete their studies Further, Varney reported that self-efficacy becomes even more critical to persistence and completion at the dissertation stage when the student is likely beyond coursework and working in isolation (2010).

Another factor related to self-efficacy that came up repeatedly for most participants was their faith in God, which seemed to anchor their faith in themselves. Similarly, Bass shared in her study on Black males serving in educational leadership, "These men clearly exemplify a deep sense of spirituality…these men connected their life, work, spirituality, and their purpose" (2020, p. 379). Dr. Gregory, a pastor, and Dr. Coleman, a minister of music in his church, repeatedly spoke of the impact of prayer during their doctoral journeys. Dr. Bronner was drawn to his EdD program because it was Christian-based and espoused Christian principles. Dr. Sandler attributed his program completion to God. During the most trying moments of his studies, Dr. Caswell leaned on his faith and the scriptures. Dr. Parker wrote songs about his faith as a creative outlet when he took his sabbatical. The importance of self-efficacy as a critical component of achievement is well documented in the existing body of research (Bandura, 1997; Kurtovic et al., 2019; Pyhalto et al., 2012; Varney, 2010). Thus, this finding is consistent with the extant literature.

Also in alignment with the literature, liminality emerged as a factor in the success of the study participants. *Liminality* is essentially the process of becoming. In the context of this study, liminality speaks to the participants' journey to becoming doctors and scholar-practitioners. Undertaking doctoral study is undoubtedly a liminal process because students are transitioning and transforming as they learn and grow (Keefer, 2015). They are becoming researchers and scholars (Mantai, 2019). As such, they were not expected to know or be prepared for everything they would encounter. Garcia and Yao found that many students have no idea what the journey to becoming scholars entails (2019). This process can potentially shake one's identity, particularly if he has been a successful student up to this point in his academic journey. Identity plays a significant role in doctoral students' performance, success, and challenges (Leshem, 2020; Mantai, 2017).

For the participants, it was critically important to understand that they were entering doctoral study as burgeoning scholars engaging in a process. This process would challenge and change them over time. They were *becoming* creators of knowledge. Dr. Caswell spoke of the importance of "trusting the process." As an undergraduate English major, Dr. Bronner initially struggled with the writing feedback from his dissertation committee chair. He eventually came to appreciate it and was ultimately proud of the resulting quality of his dissertation. Some participants made this shift in awareness sooner than others, but all had to adjust, which is understandable and aligns with the literature (Brill et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017). Participants entered their EdD programs as accomplished practitioners and leaders. They had all attained bachelor's and master's degrees, completing dozens of courses and navigating the challenges associated with doing so. As such, it stands to reason that doctoral students often undertake

doctoral studies without understanding that the rigor will require them to develop skill sets they may not have previously mastered (Brill et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017). In addition to being highly educated, these participants were subject matter experts in their professional spaces. The juxtaposition of these competing identities – expert and student – can require a period of adjustment.

As Ramsay and Brown noted (2018), students may struggle with their identity as researchers and academics, resulting in feelings of inadequacy. However, awareness of this liminality eased their transition into doctoral study, made them more receptive to feedback, and ultimately helped them reconcile their shifting identities. This aligns with Bednall's assertion that successful doctoral students tend to understand that the doctoral journey is one of becoming. They must be aware that the tools needed for their survival are developing along the way, such as their growth as researchers (2018). As Garcia and Yao (2019) note, it is important for students to have an understanding of liminality at the outset of their studies so that they are better prepared to persevere. Participants' accounts of their transitions into their EdD programs supported the literature on liminality in the doctoral journey.

Self-discipline was another attribute shared by all of the participants that emerged as a critical component of their success. Self-discipline reflects students' commitment to their goals, which Tinto spoke of in his student retention theory (1993). Interviews revealed that self-discipline was a key factor in their ability to maintain their progress and ultimately graduate. For these participants, perseverance and time management were specific behaviors that exhibited their self-discipline.

Doctoral study requires students to invest a significant amount of their time. Further, the EdD is a doctorate of practice, so programs are typically populated by active practitioners managing work and school obligations, among others. These competing commitments required participants to exhibit a high degree of perseverance as they progressed through their programs. Participants endured coursework, comprehensive exams, proposal presentations, IRB approval, conducting their studies, writing and revising chapter after chapter of their dissertations, and their final defenses. The doctoral journey is wrought with challenges. Several participants encountered additional challenges, which required them to demonstrate their grit and determination to succeed. The data supported the literature related to the demands of doctoral study and the perseverance, initiative, desire, and resourcefulness needed to endure the process (Brill et al., 2014; Gilmore, 2016; Kurtovic et al., 2019).

The data also revealed that behaviors related to time management impacted the participants' success, which also relates to their self-discipline. Even in the face of unexpected challenges, those who reported being more intentional and proactive with managing their time met their expected timelines to graduate. Several participants reported having dedicated time for completing assignments during their coursework and writing during the dissertation phase of their studies, which proved to be an effective strategy for keeping them on track to graduate during the timeframe set by their respective EdD programs. For instance, Dr. Gregory and Dr. Bronner were able to create and adhere to a schedule for doing their schoolwork and writing, primarily relegated to the early morning. Conversely, participants who were not as effective with managing their time had their timelines extended or very nearly had their timelines extended. Dr. Bethel and Dr. Sandler both reported having to make adjustments concerning time management.

The third theme identified was how the participants' support systems impacted their outcomes. This theme provided insight into the various individuals and entities in the participants' environments that aided their successful matriculation. As Breitenbach, Bernstein, Ayars, and Konecny (2019) asserted, "Completing a dissertation requires support from multiple external sources" (p. 762). Consistent with the existing literature, participants reported that their support systems consisted of family members, friends, colleagues, mentors, church members, social networks, and cohort members. The data from the study supported the existing literature, which asserts that social support for doctoral students, or the lack thereof, can impact persistence and graduation rates. In her 2011 study on doctoral persistence, Cohen reports a lack of support – whether family support or peer support – as a major threat to doctoral student success (p. 68). Cohen asserted that a lack of support translates to low persistence (2011). Participants provided numerous examples of the family and peer support they received and how impactful it was to their persistence in completing their studies.

Gardner and Gopaul found in their study on the doctoral student experience that "… [I]t was most often their partners, children, and places of employment that provided them the most support in this endeavor. For these students, family members were the most often discussed source of support in their lives" (2012, p. 70). Consistent with Gardner and Gopaul's findings, the study participants repeatedly referenced the importance of the support they received from their spouses and families and how it was integral to their doctoral success. Dr. Bronner, Dr. Coleman, Dr. Gregory, and Dr. Parker all shared how the support of their wives was instrumental in their success. Dr. Gregory also referenced his children's support. Parental support was noted by Dr. Bethel, Dr. Coleman, Dr. Porter, and Dr. Bronner, who also mentioned his siblings.

This study's results were also consistent with Gardner and Gopaul's finding that colleague support was helpful for those working while pursuing a doctorate. Their study found that "The second most-discussed source of support for these part-time students came from their employers and co-workers" (2012, p. 70). Similarly, several participants referenced their colleagues as being instrumental to their success in various ways, including their decisions to pursue doctoral study, their ability to complete certain tasks along the way, and their ability to see the doctoral journey through to the end. Dr. Parker spoke of how having a colleague in the same EdD program, a supportive boss, and a supportive work environment impacted his success. Dr. Lamont similarly reported that sharing the doctoral journey with other colleagues and having a supportive work environment that allowed him the flexibility to adjust his schedule as necessary was critical to his success. For Dr. Sandler, a colleague first encouraged him to pursue his doctorate, and other leaders around him inspired him to proceed with the decision to do so.

The majority of the participants cited cohort member support as being critical to their success. As Swayze and Jakeman shared (2014), cohort members benefit by growing together as critical thinkers, in knowledge, and motivation. Dr. Gregory, Dr. Bronner, Dr. Parker, and Dr. Bethel specifically attested to the excitement and motivation that resulted from their cohort interactions. Also consistent with the literature, the participants' cohorts reportedly helped them to circumvent common threats to doctoral student success, including isolation, lack of support, and lack of a sense of belonging (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Bagaka's et al., 2015; Holmes et al., 2010). In addition, participants' growth, progress, and ability to maintain their motivation as doctoral students were attributed mainly to the support of their fellow cohort members, which also supports the extant literature (Adorno, 2015; Rigler et al., 2017; Swayze & Jackman, 2014).

Dr. Sandler shared a bond with his cohort members that extended beyond school. They became close friends who interacted socially during their studies and have continued to do so. His accounts of how his cohort members intervened when he wanted to give up and when he nearly missed a crucial writing deadline that would have prevented him from graduating on time are a testament to the power of cohort support. Dr. Caswell discussed the positive aspects of his cohort but credited an enduring bond with one cohort member that helped him persist. Dr. Gregory shared how his cohort members leaned on each other for support and how he was able to continue supporting his cohort members even after he had graduated. Similarly, Dr. Bethel spoke of the bond that his cohort members shared. Despite falling behind, they supported him through his degree completion. They are all continuing to support their last cohort member.

While all the support the participants received was valuable in helping them maintain their progress and motivation, cohort member support was distinct. Having others on the same journey, facing the same challenges, with whom they could share information and encouragement, was a powerful component of their support systems. Whether cohort members, wives, family members, church members, colleagues, mentors, social media networks, or whomever, participants benefitted greatly from their support. It is doubtful that they could have persisted to graduation without the support that they received.

The final theme that emerged had to do with how their race – their Blackness – factored into their journey to doctoral success or, in other words, how being Black/African American impacted their experience as doctoral students. This factor is also found extensively in the extant literature. Smith et al. (2011) assert that “Ironically, it might be the unintended consequence of Black men’s academic achievement that exposes them to increased distress within historically

White environments" (p. 64). During the interviews, participants referenced their race numerous times in relation to their doctoral studies. For them, being Black touched upon several aspects of their doctoral experience, both positively and negatively. Positive aspects included connecting with Black classmates and faculty, the sense of responsibility to their communities, the desire to expand their impact as AAMs in education, increasing black male representation in educational leadership, and pursuing academic and professional opportunities once denied to African Americans. Several of these motivating factors shared by the participants align with the existing research.

The importance of African American male representation in education, and especially in leadership roles, was noted by several participants and addressed by Ononuju (2016), who stated, "Educational leadership plays a vital role in improving the academic outcomes of underserved and minority students. The leadership practices of Black educational leaders have contributed to the theorizing of effective, culturally responsive practices to improve student outcomes" (p. 99). Although more African American men are pursuing doctorates now, historically and currently, they still lag behind other demographics in doctoral pursuit and to an even lesser degree in the field of education (Harper & Wood, 2016; Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2019). Dr. Bronner noted his awareness of the scarcity of African American men pursuing the doctorate, punctuating the pipeline issue in educational leadership. As Robicheau and Krull posited, "Leaders of color are underrepresented…in proportion to the current and growing number of children of color in our schools" (2016, p. 26). Dr. Bronner also shared the lasting impact of seeing his middle school principal – a Black man – earn his doctorate. This supports Wint et al.'s assertion that "Representations of Black males who are succeeding across educational realms, particularly

those who were able to thrive in under-resourced environments, may serve as a method of bolstering the antideficit narrative of educational attainment and success for Black males" (2021, p. 11). Dr. Lamont spoke of his motivations to pursue the doctorate, including a desire to increase the Black male leadership in his institution.

Some participants reported negative race-related experiences, which aligns with the literature on African American male student success that discusses racial prejudice, stereotype threat, lack of support, misandry, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue. Two participants – Dr. Caswell and Dr. Coleman – discussed feeling targeted by a White faculty member attempting to impede their academic progress and felt race to be the motivating factor. Based on their perceptions of those accounts, it is arguable that they were experiencing Black misandry, which Smith et al. (2011) described as "…an exaggerated, pathological aversion toward Black males that is created and reinforced in societal, institutional, and individual ideologies, practices, and behaviors (p. 68).

For Dr. Parker, U.S. race relations, the country's political climate, and police killings of Black men during his studies had taken a mental and emotional toll. Dr. Parker's experience could certainly be related to racial battle fatigue. Smith et al. state that "…racial microaggressive conditions produce emotional, psychological, and physical distress, or racial battle fatigue" (2011, p. 64). Smith et al. further state that racial battle fatigue requires "additional energy redirected from more positive life fulfilling desires for coping and fighting against mundane racism" (2011, p. 67). Dr. Bethel shared that during a rash of hate crimes on his university's main campus as a student, he had to set his feelings aside and maintain his focus on the task at hand – maintaining his progress to graduation. His experience aligns with Smith et al.'s assertion

that "…racism and racial microaggressions operate as psycho-pollutants in the social environment and add to the overall race-related stress for Black men, Black women, and other racially marginalized groups" (2011, p. 67). In other words, these experiences can rob an individual of mental space and energy that should be devoted to more hopeful and productive matters.

It is important to reiterate that though all the participants referenced race repeatedly, half did not report negative race-related experiences during their doctoral studies. Of the four participants who did, two of them were not directly involved. For the two participants who reported having negative encounters that they felt were racially motivated, those incidents appear to have been isolated. That said, this does not minimize or diminish the impact reported by these participants. Further, the four negative accounts reported align with the extant literature that discusses the factors that can potentially threaten the academic success of African American male students – racial prejudice, stereotype threat, lack of support, misandry, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue (Beale et al., 2019; Borman et al., 2021; Bryant, 2020; Griffin et al., 2010; Hall, 2017; Okello et al., 2020; Scott & Johnson, 2021; Smith et al., 2011; Whaley, 2018). The participants' references to race – both positive and negative – illustrated how their Blackness absolutely affected their experiences as doctoral students.

Implications

This study's findings brought valuable insight into the conversation of doctoral student attrition and success. The themes that emerged from the data analysis and findings aligned with the existing literature and also expanded that research by shedding light on additional factors that impacted the success of these African American male EdD participants. As such, this study

highlights several implications for university and program leadership with a vested interest in addressing the issue of doctoral student attrition. There are also implications for school and district leaders and higher education leaders committed to increasing the African American male pipeline to educational leadership. Finally, there are implications for current and prospective doctoral students – African American male and otherwise – interested in gaining insight into navigating doctoral study successfully.

Recommendations for Further Research. This study explored success factors among African American male EdD students who completed their programs. In the future, researchers are encouraged to explore doctoral student attrition among other groups to gain further insight into the phenomenon. For instance, while this study focused on success and collected data from individuals who completed their doctorates, it may be valuable to examine attrition from the perspective of doctoral students who did not complete their programs. Former EdD students who encountered challenges they could not overcome could provide additional insight into the attrition discussion. Both perspectives – graduates and non-completers – could provide valuable insight to help future students sidestep potential pitfalls of doctoral study and help university and program leadership enhance programming to further support their doctoral students.

Recommendations for Practice. The first recommendation for university and program leaders interested in implementing more success strategies for doctoral students is to consider adding a success course to their existing program curriculum. Programs could include it as a prerequisite, one-credit course ahead of the primary coursework, or in the first semester. Another option is to offer the information as required training before starting classes. Similar to how institutions implemented First-Year Experience curriculum to help first-year students have a

smoother transition into college, the doctoral success curriculum could help incoming doctoral students. It would be comprised of helpful information and success strategies for doctoral students, informed by empirical research on doctoral attrition and success factors. This curriculum or training could be delivered in an online format and could be cursory or comprehensive, depending upon existing program needs and resources available. Another option is to pilot such an initiative and start these program offerings conservatively, then scaling as necessary.

The goal of a doctoral student success course would be to ensure that new doctoral students are aware of the potential challenges ahead so that they are not caught off guard to the point of disrupting their progress. Fail-safe strategies and resources should be made available for students who find themselves at risk of falling behind or abandoning their studies altogether. Knowing that certain challenges are typical can build self-efficacy and help students overcome or even avoid feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness. Also, knowing ahead of time that there are strategies and resources to help them could result in increased retention and higher completion rates.

The second recommendation for university and program leadership would be to address post-coursework isolation that many doctoral students face during the dissertation phase of their programs. Students transition from the structure of coursework to having little to no structure. Many struggle to maintain their momentum in the absence of this structure. As such, programs could implement a more structured system for students who have completed their coursework and are in the dissertation phase. Having mandatory check-ins and writing workshops for students who are working on their dissertations could help them to maintain their progress, as

well as their feelings of connectedness. Required outlines and drafts with pre-set due dates that align with critical university and program administrative deadlines could also help students to stay on track, decreasing attrition and promoting success. These check-ins could occur on a scheduled basis with the student's advisor. Additionally, leadership of cohort-model programs could have cohorts check-in periodically as a collective with program leadership or designated faculty even after they have completed their coursework and are primarily working in isolation. Establishing benchmarks, specific deadlines, and expected outcomes with this continued supervision and monitoring could further support doctoral students in progressing towards their degree completion.

The third recommendation is to consider implementing more standardized methods for advisor-student interactions. Advisors have varied approaches to managing timelines and communications with their advisees. This can make for variations in the quality of advisement and level of support that students are experiencing. For instance, one advisor may have a practice of returning feedback within days, while another may take weeks to do so. Additionally, the way that feedback is delivered can also vary. As such, it may be helpful for advisors to communicate feedback consistently and in writing. A rubric for each dissertation chapter may be useful so students are clear about expectations and advisors can more easily relay feedback.

Also, because advisors often support multiple students concurrently, in addition to numerous other competing obligations they manage as faculty, rubrics can streamline the feedback process for them. Advisors can refer students to the rubric's pre-written guidelines, which could reduce the number of drafts the student writes and that the advisor has to read. Rubrics do not replace the dialog that should happen between advisors and students. However,

they can help provide clarity for students and streamline feedback for advisors, which can positively impact timelines for program completion.

The fourth recommendation relates to the study's finding that race factored into the participants' doctoral experiences. As the study mentions, potential challenges include but are not limited to racial prejudice, stereotype threat, lack of support, misandry, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue. Educational leaders and institutions "must realize that there is an emotional, physiological, and psychological cost of gendered racism. These experiences shape identities, motivations, dreams, activities, and the psychological and physiological welfare across the personal and professional lifespan of women and men of color" (Smith et al., 2011, p. 64). Some participants also referenced the country's racial climate and the racial climate on their campuses, which impacted their ability to maintain their academic focus and progress. With this in mind, institutional and program leadership should continue vigilance in combatting the risk factors specific to African American male students and other marginalized groups. Leadership's increased awareness of, proactivity towards, and responsiveness to the additional challenges these students may be contending with, along with intentional support measures, can help foster their academic success. Ongoing awareness building through research, training, and professional development can be effective in this endeavor.

The fifth and final recommendation is a call to action for K-12 and higher education school leaders. Ample evidence exists emphasizing the lack of African American male representation in schools and how impactful this representation is for Black student achievement. There is certainly no simple solution to addressing this complex issue. However, strategic partnerships between school districts and local universities dedicated to building the African

American male pipeline to educational leadership is one possible way of addressing this challenge. This pathway could begin at the undergraduate level, with school districts implementing targeted recruiting of Black male undergraduates into education. Clearly illustrating a path to leadership, their potential impact as Black men in education, and a fulfilling professional future could cause more Black men to consider education as a career. These school districts and universities could also partner to incentivize Black male teachers to pursue their master's and doctorates in education, increasing the pipeline to educational leadership. Programs like AmeriCorps and Teach for America have a proven format for teacher recruitment that includes incentives such as training, placement, support, stipends, and educational grants. These are very robust national programs, but similar programs targeted to Black males with the mission of addressing the pipeline issue in education can be replicated at the local level, even in a scaled-down version.

These recommendations – adding a success course, addressing post-coursework isolation, implementing more standardized methods for the advisor-student interactions, continued awareness-building and support, and school districts partnering with local universities – can all help to foster doctoral student success for African American male students. All of these recommendations correlate to risk factors found in the literature. Implementation could result in reduced attrition and higher completion rates in doctoral programs, ultimately increasing the pipeline of African American male educational leaders, which could positively impact African American males' academic outcomes and experiences at every education level.

Conclusion

This study sought to illuminate the factors that impact doctoral success among African American male EdDs. Based on a review of the extant literature on doctoral student attrition, much of the literature explores the topic in general, but not specifically as it relates to African American males, and not specifically those who pursued the EdD. Because the literature speaks to the factors that generally influence doctoral student success, indicating that these factors impact most doctoral students, including those who happen to be Black men. However, little to no research existed on the factors that promoted the success of African American male doctoral students, specifically those pursuing the EdD. This study endeavored to address that gap in the existing literature by exploring their experiences as they relate to retention and completion, and to provide university, departmental, and program leadership with more insight into those experiences and needs of these students. Adding to the significance of this study is the pipeline issue in education and educational leadership for African American men. The lack of representation of Black male teachers and administrators at the K-12 level and its impact has also received significant research attention (Ononuju, 2016; Wint et al., 2021). As such, the study's goal was to highlight individual and institutional factors that impact retention and completion among this demographic, ultimately providing insight to university, departmental, and program leadership interested in identifying more ways to promote recruitment, foster retention, and reduce attrition among this demographic.

The study explored African American male EdD perspectives on the institutional and individual factors that contributed to their doctoral success. The interview data revealed factors that contributed *to and* threatened their success. These factors included: relationships within their

academic communities; their attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors; their support systems, as well as their Blackness. All of these factors aligned with the data presented in the literature review. The emergent themes were also consistent with the theoretical framework, Tinto's student retention theory (1993), which pointed to specific individual and institutional factors impacting student retention and completion.

Further, for these African American male EdDs, strong connections within their academic communities as well as with their support systems were critical to their success. Their relationships had a tremendous impact on their ability to meet and overcome the ongoing challenges of doctoral study. Additionally, strong connections to their "why" were significant and served as touchstones during the most challenging moments of their doctoral journeys. Their attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors were also major factors in their success.

Finally, participants noted their Blackness as a factor that impacted their doctoral journeys in various ways. Examples include being inspired to pursue the EdD by another African American, the camaraderie between African Americans in their programs, their desire to serve the Black community, an awareness of the underrepresentation of Black leadership in their schools and their programs, racial microaggressions some experienced; race relations on their campus and in the country, and racial battle fatigue.

Stakeholders should consider investigating and implementing this study's findings and implications to increase African American male doctoral success. Increased completion rates among African American EdDs can result in an increased pipeline to educational leadership in K-12 and higher education. Universities could also see increased African American faculty.

Representation is essential to student success at all education levels (Ononuju, 2016; Wint et al., 2021). It is critical for African American male academic achievement.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

Interview Questions
What motivated you to pursue your EdD and how did you maintain your motivation?
Describe how you managed your doctoral studies with professional and personal obligations.
How would you describe the demographics of your school and program?
How would you describe your doctoral journey as an AAM at your institution?
What individual factors do you feel contributed to your success as a doctoral student?
What institutional factors do you feel contributed to your success as a doctoral student?
Describe your relationship with your dissertation chair and committee.
Describe your connection with your fellow students and academic community.
Describe the academic rigor of doctoral study and your ability to manage it?
Describe moment(s) when you thought you may not persist to completion of your degree.
How did finances factor in to your decision to pursue or continue with your studies?
Describe any extracurricular activities that you participated in as a student.

APPENDIX B: Interview Question Matrix

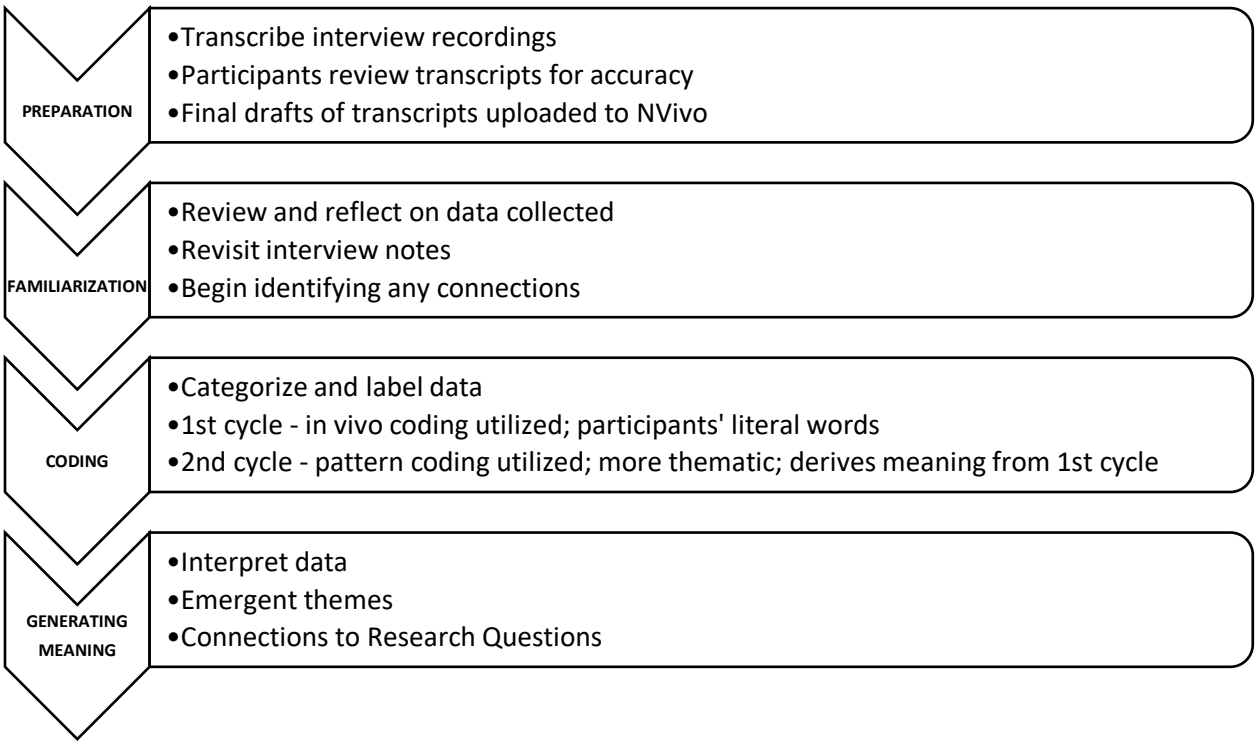
Research Questions	Emergent Themes
RQ1: What were the program and institutional components that supported these AAM students in their doctoral pursuits and contributed to the successful attainment of their EdD degrees?	Institutional Factors Relationships in Academic Community • Program Personnel • Cohort Members
RQ2: What were the individual factors that enabled these African American male students' to persist to the successful completion of their EdD degrees?	Individual Factors Attitudes, Outlook, & Behaviors Support Studying While Black

APPENDIX C: Interview Questions & Links to Literature

Interview Question	Individual and/or Institutional	Link to literature
Q1 What motivated you to pursue your EdD and how did you maintain your motivation?	Individual	Motivation (Gilmore, 2016)
Q2 Describe how you managed your doctoral studies with your professional and personal obligations.	Individual	Personal challenges (Tinto 1975, 1993)
Q3 How would you describe the demographics of your school and program?	Institutional	(Brooks et al., 2013; Hall, 2017)
Q4 How would you describe your doctoral journey as an AAM at your institution?	Individual	(Beale et al., 2019; Borman et al., 2021; Bryant, 2020; Gregory et al., 2010; Hall, 2017; Scott & Johnson, 2021; Whaley, 2018)
Q5 What do you feel were individual factors that contributed to your success as a doctoral student?	Individual	Persistence and self-efficacy (Brill et al., 2014; Gilmore, 2016; Kurtovic, et al., 2019)
Q6 What aspects of your institution or program contributed to your success as a doctoral student?	Institutional	Institutional factors (Tinto 1975, 1993)
Q7 Describe the relationship with and level of support that you received from your doctoral advisor.	Institutional	Advisor (Adorno et al., 2015; Gilmore, 2016; Barnes, et al., 2010; Golde, 1998, 2005)
Q8 Describe the degree to which you felt a sense of "belonging" among your fellow students and academic community.	Institutional	Social Support (Bagaka's et al., 2015; Schroeder, 2015; Wolfe et al., 2018; Swayze & Jakeman, 2014)
Q9 Describe the academic rigor of	Individual	Preparedness (Brill et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2014)

doctoral study and your ability to manage it?		
Q10 Describe moment(s) when you thought you may not persist to completion of your degree.	Individual	Persistence and self-efficacy (Brill et al., 2014; Gilmore, 2016; Kurtovic et al., 2019)
Q11 How did finances factor into your decision to pursue or continue your studies?	Individual	Persistence and self-efficacy (Brill et al., 2014; Gilmore, 2016; Kurtovic et al, 2019)
Q12 What extracurricular activities did you participate in as a student?	Individual	Campus connectedness (Tinto 1975, 1993)

APPENDIX D: Data Analysis Process



Appendix E: Informed Consent

Exempt Informed Consent

Title: African American Males Who Achieved Their Doctor Of Education (EdD) Degree: Perceptions Of Success Factors

Principal Investigator: Dr. Nicholas Sauers
Student Principal Investigator: Felicia Hardin Lewis

Procedures

You are being asked to take part in a research study. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to do the following: Two study related activities: 1) Participate in an interview (60 to 90 minutes); and 2) provide any document(s) related to your doctoral studies that you feel would help shed light on your journey and/or success. The document sharing (electronically) should take no more than 30 minutes.

- Study participation will not span more than one week.
- Interviews will be recorded
- For this study, you will only interact with the Student Investigator
- The interviews will take place virtually via an online meeting platform
- The research will conclude in April of 2022
- Both procedures will be performed once
- Interviews will last 60 to 90 minutes
- Your document sharing should take no more than 30 minutes

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

You do not have to be in this study. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time.

Contact Information

Contact Dr. Nicholas Sauers Primary Investigator/Faculty Advisor at nsauers@gsu.edu and/or Felicia Lewis, Student PI at 404-424-7806 and flewis7@student.gsu.edu

- If you have questions about the study or your part in it
- If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study

Consent
If you are willing to volunteer for this research please begin the interview.