



# Examining Programs for Educators in Leadership: A Scoping Review of Strategies to Address Racial Inequities for African Refugee Students in Secondary Education in the U.S.

**Abijah L Manga\****Lecturer at the University of Vermont and Champlain College, USA*

**\*Corresponding author:** Abijah L Manga, Lecturer at the University of Vermont and Champlain College, USA

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## Abstract

This scoping review study highlights the need to rethink Educator Leadership Preparation Programs (ELPPs) for African immigrant and refugee students in United States schools. The demographic profile of the United States is rapidly changing, with the ratio of African refugee students in mainstream classrooms steadily increasing. However, leadership preparation programs in education still need to be updated under traditional models that may be considered outdated. While there is a need for cultural competency in ELPPs to address cultural diversity in secondary schools, responding to the growing number of African refugee learners in secondary schools is crucial. In search of extending the boundaries of research and practice in teaching and teacher education, the present review aimed to identify critical themes dedicated to the plight of African refugee students in secondary schools in the United States. The findings indicate that despite significant research on the success of ELPPs and cultural integration concerning minority groups in the United States, there was a glaring lack of evidence of ELPPs tailored specifically for African refugee students.

**Keywords:** Refugee Student; Educator Leader Preparation Program; Immigrant Student; Cultural Competency; Teacher Preparation; Culturally Responsive Teaching

## Introduction

Educational leadership preparation programs are strategies and specialized courses designed to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for academic leadership roles [1,2]. These programs typically include educational theory, administration, policy, and instructional leadership coursework. These programs prepare individuals for leadership positions in schools, districts, or other academic organizations,

fostering positive learning environments and driving educational improvement [3,4]. In search of extending the boundaries of research and practice in teaching and teacher education, the purpose of this scoping review is to identify potential research gaps within the existing literature of the Educator Leadership Preparation Program (ELPP) on the academic success of African immigrant and refugee students in United States schools [5]. It

also aims to highlight the pressing need for a shift in focus within these programs to explore how updating traditional models could better address the increasing number of African refugee learners in secondary schools and mitigate racial inequity. Specifically, the study advocates for more research on developing culturally responsive programs tailored to the unique needs of African refugee students, a rapidly growing demographic in our schools.

Many ELPPs typically provide a foundational understanding of educational theories, teaching methods, and leadership principles. Students also gain practical experience through internships and teaching opportunities [6,7]. At the graduate level, there are various specialized programs such as Master of Education (M.Ed.), Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), Master of Arts in Educational Leadership, and Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) programs. These advanced programs delve deeper into educational leadership, policy, research, and curriculum development. They often include opportunities for hands-on experience in school leadership and administration [8].

The demographic profile of the United States has changed significantly over the past three decades. The ratio of African refugee students in American secondary schools is increasing [9,10]. These changes have created a need for responsive ELPPs to address the varying needs of learners with refugee experiences. Unfortunately, there is limited evidence on evaluating ELPPs to determine their effectiveness in a multicultural society like the United States. This does not mean ELPPs are not achieving or driving towards their goals, but that the programs may be too broad to the extent that the strategies involved might be rethought to make them culturally responsive to specific minority populations.

Therefore, this scoping review illuminates the issues by identifying studies that have evaluated the effectiveness and success of ELPPs for African refugee students in American secondary schools. Specifically, the review discusses the efficacy of preparing the graduates of leader programs to respond to the changing demographic profile of African refugee students in secondary schools nationwide. The role of leadership preparation programs in promoting equity and inclusivity in education cannot be underestimated. School leaders have a direct impact on school culture. Leaders shape school culture through their communication, enforcement of school policies, and relationships with teachers and parents within and outside the school environment. Gist et al. [11] discussed the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, where a combination of knowledge and disposition centers on diversity issues such as race, ethnic background, experiences, language, and other forms that could affect student learning opportunities. In this case, school principals can determine and affect the experiences of African refugee students who have found their way into a non-dominant classroom in the United States.

Traditional ELPPs in the United States have often centered on multicultural issues facing general learners, with little focus on African refugee learners [11]. According to some scholars, classroom teachers can transfer responsive pedagogies to the school learning

environments to accommodate African refugee students whose needs are different from the ones faced by non-African minority students. Creating and nurturing culturally competent educator leader's rests on the knowledge of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogies in schools, the importance of diversity in schools, and the knowledge of the roles that school principals play in shaping school culture. Once the stakeholders understand these three components, it becomes easier to champion and align the ELPP to fulfill this goal, especially for the target learners who are refugees from the African continent. This study aimed to survey published scholarly literature on this topic and pave the way forward to fill the gap and bring to attention the need to rethink educator leadership preparation programs in the context of African immigrant and refugee students in United States schools.

## Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

A growing body of literature indicates that the population of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa is expected to double by 2060 [12-15]. Schools in the United States need to be prepared to receive and accommodate these learners whose lived experiences in their home countries are pretty different from what they encounter when they are enrolled in classrooms in the United States [16]. A qualitative study by Johnson and Fournillier [17] investigated the impact of diversity in education on female school leaders in the United States. The qualitative research revealed that diversity in secondary school education and leadership could be transformed if reforms were introduced to address the prevalent inequalities and injustices in schools.

## Defining the Educator Leader Preparation Program (ELPP)

Understanding the ELPP is necessary to determine the program's role when addressing social justice and equality in education. First, according to Woulfin et al. [18], an educator leader in the context of schools refers to an individual who possesses strong teaching skills and demonstrates exemplary leadership qualities within the educational setting. They guide and inspire students and educators by fostering a positive learning environment and implementing effective strategies to improve academic outcomes [18]. It is important to note that school leadership may encompass many individuals, including the superintendent, principals, vice principals, department heads, and other administrative staff. However, the focus of this study was primarily on the principal, as this role significantly influences the overall school environment, instructional practices, and student achievement [19]. Studies demonstrated that principals are pivotal in shaping the school culture, setting academic standards, managing resources, and engaging with the broader community [20-22].

Second, many universities in the United States offer educator-leader preparation programs, and they are expected to equip learners with practical leadership skills for working in challenging and demanding school environments [23]. Grissom et al. [24] used the term principal preparation program interchangeably with the educator leader preparation program, defining these programs

as a primary means of providing pre-service principals with the necessary tools to lead schools. Clement et al. [25] and Lash and Sanchez [26] also echo a similar definition. Therefore, the leader program aims to prepare competent potential leaders for work in multicultural school environments. During the leadership practice, the teacher leader may encounter or face situations that challenge their personal views and values. Culturally competent leaders can respond to such situations in a manner that promotes the well-being of students while also creating supportive environments for healing. The efficacy of the ELPP ought to be measured against the outcomes in terms of response to cultural issues they were designed to address.

### Understanding the Challenges and Traumas Unique to Refugee Students

As McBrien [27] stated in their review of educational needs and barriers for refugee students in the United States, refugee students face many unique challenges and traumas in many U.S. schools. Many refugee students have experienced extreme hardship and trauma in their home countries, including war, violence, and persecution [28-30]. These experiences can profoundly impact their mental health and ability to focus on their studies [31]. In addition, resettlement in a new country can result in further challenges for refugee students [32-35]. Many may struggle with language barriers, cultural adjustment, and a lack of familiarity with the U.S. education system [27,36,37]. These challenges can lead to feelings of isolation and difficulty forming connections with their peers. Likewise, the uncertainty and instability of their refugee status can also weigh heavily on their academic achievement [28]. The constant worry about their family members being left behind, coupled with the challenges of adapting to a new environment, creates significant stress and anxiety for refugee students [38]. This can ultimately impact their ability to engage in their studies and perform to their full potential.

### The Gap Between ELPPs and Practice

Studies have shown that a direct relationship exists between Ps and the issue of social justice and equity for African refugee students in secondary schools [39-42]. School principals have a direct impact on shaping school policies and cultures in receiving immigrant African refugee students, some of whom are victims of civil war and regional conflicts from their home countries [43]. These students may require treatment that is different from other immigrant students who may be seeking asylum or economic immigrants [26]. Critical awareness and consciousness of the social issues that could have compelled African refugee students to cross the border to the United States would help school principals prepare a welcoming environment that provides physical and emotional support to these learners [44]. These leaders are capable of challenging racist attitudes that could undermine the academic achievement of immigrant learners. They can enhance opportunities to improve the quality of education for African refugee students in schools.

### Methods

I conducted the scoping review following Arksey and O'Malley's

[5] methodological framework, which involved identifying the research question, searching for relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. This approach enabled me to encompass a variety of study designs and explore questions beyond those concerning teaching effectiveness.

I conducted this scoping review to investigate what the ELPP means for African immigrant and refugee students' academic success in United States schools and how updating the traditional models may help respond to the growing number of African refugee learners in secondary schools and prevent racial inequity. Relevant databases (i.e., Taylor and Francis Online, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and ResearchGate) were searched from August 2023 to January 2024. The following key terms were used: immigrant student, educator-leader preparation, immigrant student, African refugees, cultural competency, teacher preparation, and culturally responsive teaching. These terms were searched in combination with racial inequity, racism, African refugee students, education of refugees in the United States, Integration of African students in the United States schools, academic challenges of African refugee students, cultural adaptation of African students in the United States education, support for African refugee students in the United States schools, language acquisition of African refugee students, trauma-informed education for African refugee students, educational barriers for African refugees, and resettlement experiences of African students in the United States schools.

These search terms were selected to capture variations in understanding the current literature. Relevant references were hand-searched. The search was limited to English articles and research involving ELPP. The search included articles focused on the African immigrant and refugee student population. Articles were excluded if they did not address the topic of ELPPs in the United States, if they did not focus on the education of African immigrant students in the United States, or if the study's findings raised concerns about the impact of the ELPPs on school principals and students. I reviewed abstracts for associations between the ELPPs and African immigrant or refugee students' academic success in United States schools. Articles that were unclear whether they met the criteria for inclusion based on the abstract were reviewed in their entirety. Sources that mentioned an attempt or implication to address education inequalities concerning African immigrant students in secondary schools were included in the final review. The findings were classified into four broad themes that emerged from the review.

### Findings

The search returned approximately 369 articles, of which 57 were considered relevant as assessed by the inclusion/exclusion criteria. In exploring the literature on the ELPP, I located evidence that there are significant gaps between ELPPs in the United States and the African immigrant learners seeking to join secondary schools. A substantial number of the research studies identified in the first reading generally referenced immigrant learners, with few

explicitly mentioning the word “African,” even when discussing the role of ELPPs. The remaining sample of the research articles made casual reference to immigrant students or the topic of diversity/cultural competency in education, and there was little to no mention of or link to African immigrant students. The following subsections outline emerging themes of ELPPs concerning the issue of African immigrant students in the United States.

### **Equity and Social Justice in Education**

Equity and social justice in education were identified as the emerging themes, even though the two themes were separate from the quality of leadership education for African immigrant students. However, they paid significant attention to the issue of diversity in ELPPs. For instance, the study by Barakat et al. [45] examined the relationship between leader preparation programs and the cultural competency of graduates. The study revealed key themes associated with the ELPPs in the United States, where there is a need to reform the programs to bring to attention issues of race and social justice for marginalized students. Another study by Johnson and Fournillier [17] addressed the topic of diversity, which directly impacts educator leadership in secondary schools across the country. Even though the study did not target the issues faced by African immigrant learners, the findings from the study challenged masculinity in the United States leader preparation programs and the quality of educational outcomes. This was a relevant finding because challenging masculinity in a leader preparation program requires a multifaceted approach targeting various masculinity aspects that can relate to the issues of racism or other forms of oppression. One of the key strategies the authors mentioned was to create a safe space where participants can openly discuss and challenge their assumptions and biases about gender and masculinity. The same strategy can be achieved if leaders incorporate exercises and activities encouraging introspection and self-reflection, such as journaling and group discussions on topics related to equity in schools, specifically for students from diverse backgrounds. Another essential strategy was to offer education and training that addresses how masculinity can be harmful and oppressive, particularly for marginalized groups. This strategy can be used to prevent racial inequality for African refugee students in secondary education if the programs involve examining the historical and cultural roots of racism and its impact on power dynamics and social inequality.

### **Self-Reflection and Cultural Competence**

The topic of self-reflection and cultural competence was also addressed in most studies. In qualitative research by Martinez [46], the author found that self-reflection improved the efficacy and competency of educator leaders in preparation for service. Warren and Parker [47] discussed the importance of self-reflection, explaining that it helped people to develop new knowledge and attitudes toward a subject. Self-reflection entailed learners' thinking about their assumptions or predetermined thoughts about the topic. Individuals who engage in self-reflection can develop critical thoughts toward a subject and develop the ability to view problems from another point of view. This is essential in the context

of secondary education and cultural diversity in a multicultural nation such as the United States. This article highlighted education reforms in the United States, even though it did not directly reference African immigrant learners. The author was more concerned with reforming the leader preparation programs to address inequities linked to cultural diversity and competence and create room for African American learners living in the country. Similar observations were noted in Suarez-Orozco [48] regarding the experience of immigrant learners when the classroom environment does not reflect diversity. The author examined the experiences of immigrant students in the United States to develop new perspectives about how immigrant student experiences affect teaching. The author noted that few teachers have been exposed to educational programs covering classroom diversity.

### **Classroom Climate for Immigrant and Refugee Students**

Another theme that emerged from this analysis focused on the classroom settings, the classroom environment, and the role of the educator when dealing with immigrant learners. It is important to note that the studies examined in the context of this theme were not specific to the population of African refugee students. Jones and Ringler [49] analyzed and examined the impact of shifting the attitudes of school leaders regarding diversity in education. Diversity entails acknowledging unique differences in learners while capitalizing on these differences to enrich learners' experiences. The authors found that school principals who acknowledged diversity can create conducive learning environments for all learners, regardless of ethnic background or race. The evidence presented in this review resonates with the findings from another scholarly resource by Woodford et al. [15] regarding the need for cultural competence for immigrant refugee students from sub-Saharan Africa. In both cases, the author contends that there is a need to transform the quality of education, challenge the existing assumptions, and prepare school leaders in the United States through educator preparation programs to address the varying needs of immigrant learners, even though not specific to the African refugee students.

The reviewed literature underlined the need to reform educator preparation programs in the United States. The ELPPs fail to address cultural competency, diversity, and inclusion of refugee students intending to join secondary schools from Africa. The experiences of African refugee students are not similar to those encountered by non-African refugees from neighboring countries in the Americas [50]. African refugee students are victims of war and discrimination at home, others are victims of gender discrimination, and some are orphans who have lost their parents to social ills and diseases. The fact that they have entered the United States, a land of opportunity, should be considered to enhance their experiences and improve their social standing within the country.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this scoping review reveal significant implications for leader preparation programs in relation to African immigrant and refugee students' academic success in United



States schools. Indeed, as the title of this paper suggests, there is a considerable need to rethink the leader preparation programs, specifically the programs that have been preparing principles for service. The country's demographic profile is already undergoing tremendous change, requiring culturally competent school leaders ready to adapt and provide responsive leadership that resonates with the learner's expectations. It is no longer a matter of "when" but "how" the ELPPs are being aligned or should be aligned to respond to these changes. Fairman and Mackenzie [51] discussed how teacher leaders influence followers, which is true in the context of school principals. Leadership entails influencing followers, and when school principals are not prepared to influence the school culture, their actions and leadership risk creating a hostile environment for immigrant students from Africa. They can do this by failing to provide learning resources that support immigrant students or explicitly setting and enacting policies that discriminate against African immigrant students. Therefore, four areas got our attention as the review unfolded:

First, there was limited discourse on the issue of equity and inclusion for African immigrant students in many of the research articles reviewed. Only the research article by Woodford et al. [15] mentioned refugee students from sub-Saharan Africa. Though included in the review, the remaining studies generally reference equity and inclusion concerning leader preparation programs. This signifies the need for more research to evaluate the efficacy of principal preparation programs in the context of African refugee learners who have made their way to the United States. For instance, the lack of preparation of school principals who are aware of the lived experiences of African refugee students may create room for discrimination, isolation, and exposure to bullying because the students in the United States classrooms may not have experienced what the African learners encountered.

Second, the findings from this review reinforce the notion that educator preparation pedagogy in the United States is color-evasive when it comes to the plight of African refugee students. This becomes even worse when one finds a limited body of research that has dedicated efforts toward understanding the neglect of African refugee students. For instance, many of the reviewed studies suggested the aspect of equity and social justice in education. However, only a single study highlighted the impact of educator-leader preparation on outcomes in the context of African refugee students [52]. The lack of research on this area indicates the impact of racism on the leader preparation programs because there is little concern or attention of scholars to the reality of what is happening in the classrooms. Unless the ELPP directors and policymakers are challenged to reconsider their actions, they may continue boasting of impacting communities when they are widening the inequality gap.

Third, studies above have identified that teacher leaders are agents of change. They can change the school culture, as Jacobs et al. [53] discussed. They can change the future of learners by influencing school policies and advocating for change, and they can change the system when they advocate for minorities such as

African refugee students. Unfortunately, the qualitative research publications examined for this study did not meet this expectation. The study shows that those who could have influenced change must prepare to comprehend the issues they must address [54]. They lack familiarity with the issues they are expected to address and confront when they return to practice. For many teachers, this becomes a barrier because they did not receive sufficient training in strategies for combating racism or inequalities when they were preparing for service. The potential outcome of this lack of preparedness is that the very leaders who are expected to change the system may inadvertently perpetuate racism in schools or create barriers to academic achievement for refugee students. One of the studies by Farley et al. [55] explored how teachers can be prepared to address complex and challenging situations in the context of their practice. The authors noted concern regarding how the reformed ELPPs are expected to address or change the quality of education for education leaders in the country. Unless changes are made to make the programs culture-specific, they will remain a barrier even when they are expected to impact educational outcomes directly.

Finally, many of the articles reviewed stated that classroom and barriers in school environments have direct adverse outcomes on academic performance, and one of the potentially effective interventions begins with the preparation of the school leaders. In this case, my focus was on school principals because they directly influence the school environment and communicate with teachers, learners, and parents regarding the direction in which the school is guided. Any attempt to change and address the problem in the school is, therefore, directed at preparing the leader. Changing the method of preparing the leader will transfer the desired change to the school because school principals can communicate the values, beliefs, and attitudes to their subordinates.

### **Rethinking ELPP to Accommodate the Needs of African Refugee Students**

Research on ELPP or Principal Preparation Programs (PPP) underlines the need for restructuring the ELPPs to accommodate the varying needs of African refugee students [56-59]. Cosner [57] explored attributes that make leader preparation programs exemplary, even though the study was not specific to African refugee learners. In answering the research question, the author examined ELPPs from a process-oriented perspective, where the need to reform the programs to address cultural diversity and competency was a revolving theme. In another study, Clement et al. [25] explored the efficacy of highly diverse leader preparation programs. The authors used an in-depth interview method of data collection on a pre-determined sample of an ethnic and diverse sample of participants and programs across the United States. The authors found that social justice and equity-focused aims make the programs effective. In addressing the needs of African refugee students, the findings from this study can be used to redirect efforts toward making the programs specific to African refugee learners when directors prepare to create welcoming environments for African refugee students in secondary schools.

Socially just and culturally competent school leaders are required to create equity in schools and alleviate cultural conflicts common in schools today. When socially just and culturally competent school leaders learn to create equity in schools, they prioritize inclusivity and respect for diversity [43]. They ensure that the curriculum is culturally responsive and relevant to the students' backgrounds. Teachers are trained to recognize and address cultural conflicts that may arise in the classroom [3]. These leaders also work to create safe and welcoming environments for all students, regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds. This may involve providing language support services, promoting cross-cultural understanding and communication, and addressing discriminatory or prejudicial behaviors among students or staff [55]. Additionally, socially just and culturally competent school leaders recognize the unique challenges faced by refugee students, such as trauma and displacement, and work to provide appropriate support and resources to help these students succeed academically and socially. When these leaders prioritize equity and cultural competence in their schools, they create a positive and inclusive learning environment that benefits all students, especially refugee students from diverse cultural backgrounds [9,11,41,44,53,61,62].

### Recommendations for the Future of ELPPs

The present study did not attempt to address the academic outcomes for African refugee students, even though pursuing this topic could have revealed new themes concerning the leader preparation programs and educational outcomes for African refugee learners.

As mentioned in the literature, the unique challenges faced by refugee students stemming from their traumatic past experiences, resettlement process, and uncertain refugee status can have a profound impact on their academic achievement and overall well-being in United States schools. Therefore, the ongoing neglect of African refugee students poses a significant threat to the future of their education in the United States. The evidence of limited literature on educator preparation for African refugee students indicates that learners are being included in the general context of minority students. Education preparation programs should be aligned with the unique needs of refugee students because the experiences of these students are quite different from those of their counterparts in other areas of the world. The physical and emotional challenges that they have encountered cannot be treated in the general context. As a result, there is a need for the enforcers of leader preparation programs to consider the unique needs and challenges of African refugee students. The findings from this study also challenge scholars to extend their view and evaluate the impact of ELPPs or PPPs on specific groups. The programs are indeed preparing leaders, but there is also a need to assess and determine if the programs are creating culturally competent leaders to respond to the needs of modern issues requiring school leaders' attention.

Whether one agrees that there is a need to redesign and realign the ELPPs with the needs of African refugee learners or not, it is evident that the time to reform these programs is now. The programs need to create culturally competent leaders instead

of preparing school leaders with limited knowledge of diversity in school management and classroom experience when it comes to challenging racism, social justice, and inequalities in education. It is, therefore, important that scholars stand in position and challenge traditional views that will continue undermining the success of education in the United States.

### Conclusions

In search of extending the boundaries of research and practice in teaching and teacher education, this study identified potential gaps within the ELPP literature on the academic success of African immigrant and refugee students in United States schools. It has also highlighted the need for reforming educator preparation programs by outlining the pressing need for a shift in focus within these programs. The study suggested exploring other ways to update traditional models to address better the increasing number of African refugee learners in secondary schools and alleviate racial inequity. Additionally, the study advocated for more research on developing culturally responsive programs tailored to the unique needs of African refugee students, a rapidly growing demographic in our schools. The existing body of literature has yet to consider the plight of African refugee students. While there is an attempt to bring up the issue of social justice and inequalities in education, most studies have generalized the content on education leadership. Culture-specific interventions will make sure that learners get the attention they deserve. Educators need ELPPs to consider the unique challenges faced by African refugee students seeking to join U.S. secondary schools. The traditional approach of providing general education to school principals is no longer required; as such, school principals should identify with the needs of learners to create welcoming environments that improve students' learning experience.

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### Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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