

Racial Justice in Multilingual Education



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Recognizing and Valuing Immigrant and Refugee Background Students in U.S. Schools: A Research Brief for Teachers, Families, and School Leaders

Lydia Kananu Kiramba and Alex Kumi-Yeboah

Abstract

This research brief highlights the educational experiences of African immigrant and refugee background students in U.S. schools, highlighting the intersecting challenges of race, language, culture, and migration status that shape their educational trajectories. Despite bringing rich multilingual skills, cultural knowledge, and resilience, African immigrant and refugee background students frequently encounter deficit-based perceptions from peers and educators, at times leading to misplacement in ESL programs, social isolation, and marginalization. Such experiences contribute to “hidden dropout” phenomena, where students remain physically present in school but are disengaged academically and socially. Drawing on over a decade of sustained research with African immigrant and refugee background children and youth, the brief illustrates how students exercise agency to navigate and resist systemic inequities, while also highlighting the emotional and cognitive toll of these efforts. The brief proposes an intersectional, asset-based framework for practice, offering practical recommendations for teachers, families, and school leaders to affirm students’ linguistic and cultural assets, foster inclusive and anti-bias classroom environments, and restructure educational policies. By centering the voices and lived experiences of all students, schools can better support equitable learning and meaningful engagement for multilingual immigrant youth.

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Recognizing and valuing the full humanity of all students is central to equitable teaching in U.S. schools. Research shows that general education teachers often lack awareness or understanding of effective instruction for multilingual learners, despite being expected to teach them. Their beliefs and attitudes are frequently limited or even stigmatizing (Rubinstein-Avila & Lee, 2014). Studies also highlight that immigrant students are often underserved and overlooked, contributing to higher dropout rates (Smith, 2023). One group particularly affected is African immigrant and refugee background (AIRB) students who have been shown to be frequently misunderstood, rendered invisible, or stereotyped in both educational practice and discourse. African immigrant and refugee background students face layered challenges stemming from the intersections of race, language, culture, and migration status.

These dynamics are vividly illustrated in the experiences of Ayessa (pseudonym), a fourteen-year-old immigrant background student, whose story reflects the daily emotional labor of countering deficit views in school, (Kiramba, et al., 2025). Ayessa, narrated his experiences at school and how much time he spent trying to counter stigmatizing and inaccurate information about himself, his family and Africa as a continent from his peers, and in classrooms. In one such encounter, Ayessa described having to refute his now-current best friend's false ideas about himself as a disease carrier as a prerequisite to being friends. Ayessa also noted how classroom materials about Africa not only were false or skewed in their depictions but directly misinformed peers: *"we sometimes watch videos about African places and everywhere is just dry. Kids are skinny, hungry... diseases."* From these depictions of Africa, Ayessa had to contend with one of his peers, who in Ayessa's words; *"This one guy...every time he sees me, he says, man... go get water."* Although Ayessa framed his peer's comment as a joke, he noted that it still hurts. Ayessa already understood that the ways Africa and Africans are perceived in the U.S. is inherently racist as he noted, *"what they don't realize is that the things that they say might make some people want to kill themselves."* As innocuous as these expressions might seem, or assumed as teenage jokes, they have lasting impact on youth self-image or sense of identity.

Such deficit discourses impact the experiences of many African and refugee immigrant background youths in schools and communities. And unfortunately, deficit narratives abound regarding Black immigrants in the U.S. (Shapiro, 2014). Despite teachers' good intentions, their efforts often fall short without the knowledge to challenge deficit narratives and affirm the strengths these students bring to school. African immigrant students bring rich multilingual skills, cultural knowledge, and resilience to U.S. classrooms, yet they face barriers that impact their educational experiences. Teachers

and schools often fail to recognize their linguistic assets, reinforcing English-only policies that marginalize these students.

This research brief is grounded primarily in our unique positionality as scholars who have engaged in sustained research with African immigrant and refugee background children and youth over the past 10–15 years. Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive review of existing scholarship, we draw intentionally from our own body of work and long-term collaborations with AIRB youth and their communities. Our in-depth research allows us to highlight how AIRB students exercise agency in navigating U.S. schools and to argue for an asset-based, intersectional approach that centers their voices and lived experiences. Building on these insights, the brief offers practical recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers to reimagine schools as more inclusive and affirming spaces.

What Does Research Say about AIRB Students?

African immigrant youth in U.S. urban schools experience profound challenges as they navigate linguistic, cultural, and educational transitions. Frequently positioned within deficit-based perspectives that frame their multilingualism as a barrier rather than an asset, these students must contend with linguistic discrimination, cultural marginalization, and systemic inequities in schooling. However, research on African immigrant and refugee background students (Habecker, 2012, 2017; Kiramba 2020; Kiramba & Oloo, 2019; Kiramba et al., 2020, 2021, 2022; Watson & Knight-Manuel, 2020), among others, demonstrates that African immigrant youth are not passive recipients of these conditions; they exercise agency, draw on their rich linguistic and cultural resources, and resist deficit narratives that undermine their potential.

Research studies report the following:

- African immigrant and refugee background students often command multiple languages and dialects, yet U.S. schools often don't recognize these linguistic assets.
- Many students are misplaced in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs even when they have strong academic backgrounds, because they speak dialects of English that are different from standard American English.
- Assumptions that erase students' rich multilingual identities and lead to social isolation.
- Racial and cultural identity navigation—African students exist in a racialized space where they navigate their relationships with Black American peers while also negotiating familial expectations surrounding culture and heritage.
- Educational barriers, bias, and misplacement—due to linguistic misunderstandings, racial biases, and lack of awareness of African schooling backgrounds, students are often placed in ESL classes they do not need, impacting their academic trajectories.

- Parental involvement and expectations—families bring diverse cultural expectations regarding discipline, education, and success, but often do not fully understand U.S. educational structures, leading to invisibility in school decision-making processes.
- African immigrant and refugee background students are resilient.

A wide range of research shows that many African immigrant and refugee background students encounter challenges in school that limit their opportunities to succeed. For this reason, we describe them as “potential hidden dropouts” (Wurku-Mengisto & Horenczyk, 2019). Several intersecting factors create compounded barriers that impact their academic achievement, social belonging, and personal identity development, which contribute to “hidden dropouts.” Hidden dropouts are students who are physically present in classrooms but mentally disengaged. Consistent with research showing that challenging relationships with teachers, peers, or the school community contribute to disengagement (Makarova & Herzog, 2013), Wurku-Mengisto and Horenczyk (2019) found that perceived discrimination increases the likelihood of becoming a hidden dropout. NCES (2024) reports that students of color who are foreign-born and between the ages of 16 and 24 face higher dropout rates than those born in the US. While traditional dropouts leave the education system, hidden dropouts remain in school but face barriers that prevent meaningful participation and learning. Notably, hidden dropout students face these challenges due to a web of intersecting factors, including but not limited to anti-Black racism, socioeconomic conditions, deficit views of Black students, institutional racism, and other social inequities that contribute to disengagement. Their disengagement *is not due to a lack of ability* but stems from being made to feel invisible or disconnected due to systemic inequalities and cultural insensitivity. Most importantly, despite facing these systemic barriers, AIRB as potential hidden dropouts often demonstrate resilience and agency by engaging in multiple adaptive strategies to navigate their educational experiences and affirm their identity. However, they face the unfair burden of continuously negotiating, resisting, and confronting systemic issues. This ongoing struggle can take an emotional and academic toll, hindering their full potential. see Figure 1 below for an illustration of the concept of AIRB students as hidden dropouts.

Understanding hidden dropouts: Intersecting issues contributing to African immigrant and refugee background (AIRB) students as potential hidden dropouts

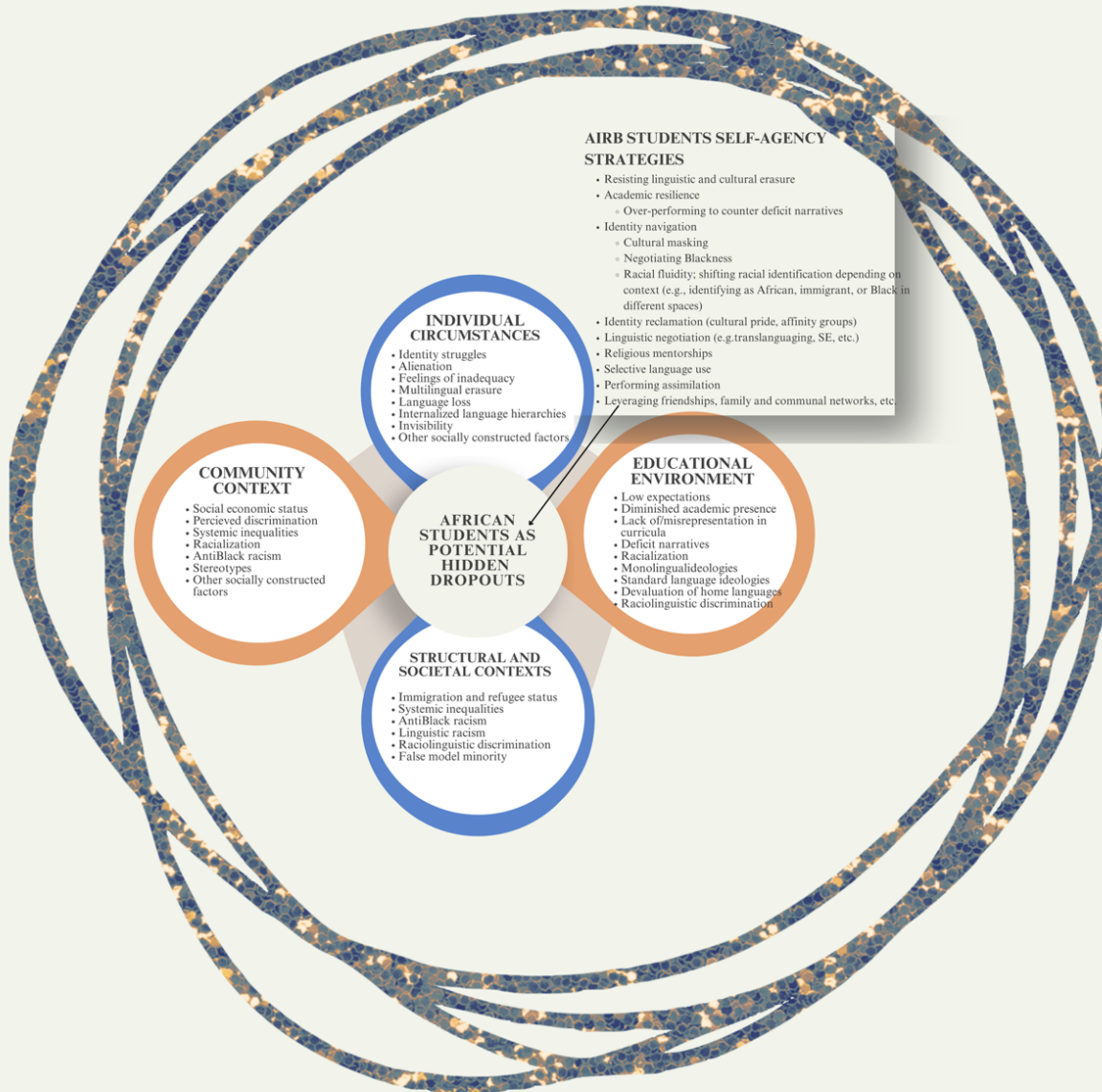


Figure 1 created on Canva: Understanding hidden dropouts
Nested circles bounded by an intersectional spiral, (Kiramba, forthcoming)

Intersectional Experiences

The experiences of African immigrant youth, as noted above in figure 1, do not stem solely from language barriers but are compounded by their racialized identities and their positioning as immigrants in U.S. schools. Kiramba et al. (2020) document how African students experience marginalization both linguistically and culturally, often being placed in ESL programs that fail to recognize their prior educational backgrounds, English dialects or multilingual competencies. These students, who may already be fluent in multiple languages, are often treated as linguistically deficient simply because they are not yet proficient in American Standard English.

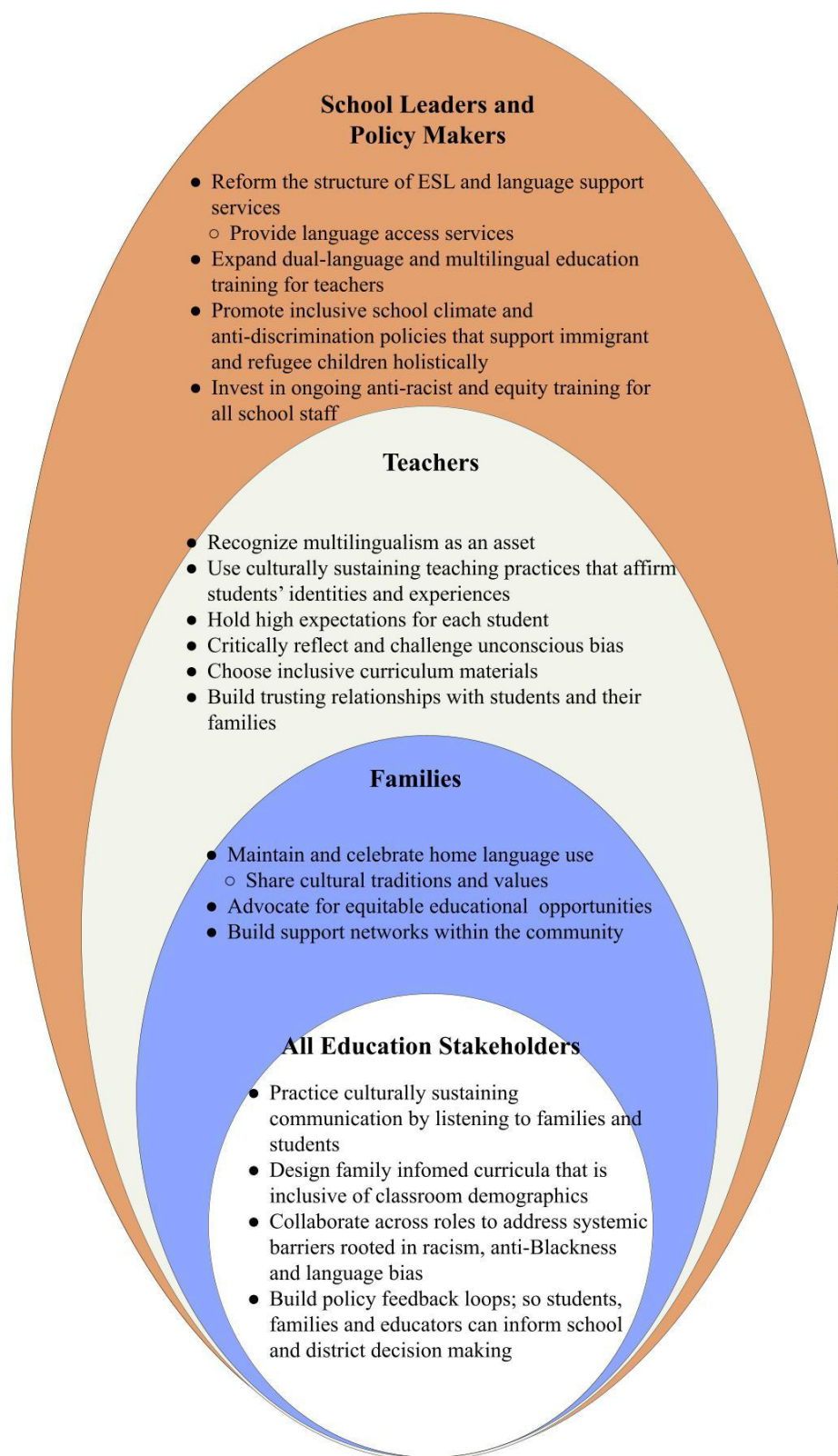
Simultaneously, as Black students, they frequently experience racial discrimination, being subjected to stereotypes and lowered expectations that impact African American students within predominantly white educational systems. This racialization of language means that African immigrant youth are doubly marginalized; both as learners of English and as students perceived through racialized deficit lenses. The intersection of race, culture, and immigrant status further complicates these experiences.

Implications for Practice: What Can We Do?

African immigrant and refugee background students as potential hidden dropouts face the daily burden of resisting and negotiating systemic barriers like language discrimination, anti-Black racism, and identity erasure, which take a toll on their emotional and academic success. To support them, the education system needs to be restructured to respect their identities, validate their languages, and affirm their full humanity. A holistic, intersectional approach is essential for addressing these challenges, engaging teachers, counselors, students, families, and policymakers.

We recommend an intersectional approach that brings together all education stakeholders (families, teachers, and school leaders) to recognize and value the unique strengths of African immigrant and refugee background students. These recommendations are grounded in the understanding that African immigrant and refugee background students face multiple, overlapping forms of marginalization. Meaningful support, therefore, requires shared responsibility across the entire educational network. The intersectional framework (Figure 2) illustrates both the distinct contributions of each stakeholder group, and the overlapping responsibilities and shared practices needed to create inclusive, affirming, and equity-driven school environments.

Figure 2: Intersectional approach to recognizing and valuing African immigrant and refugee background students' assets



Teachers: Leveraging Linguistic and Cultural Strengths

Teachers play a critical role in shaping African immigrant students' educational experiences. First, educators must move beyond a deficit mindset that sees these students primarily in terms of what they "lack," whether English proficiency, cultural familiarity, or conventional academic preparation. Instead, teachers must recognize what students bring: linguistic dexterity, global perspectives, and resilience cultivated through cross-cultural adaptation (Kiramba et al., 2020).

One concrete approach is culturally sustaining teaching (Alim & Paris, 2017) which acknowledges students' diverse backgrounds and integrates those experiences into classroom instruction. Teachers can incorporate African literature, history, and cultural knowledge into curricula, allowing students to see themselves reflected in their education. Additionally, professional development in critical language awareness can help teachers understand how language hierarchies operate in schools and learn strategies to support multilingual learners without reinforcing linguistic discrimination.

Teachers can leverage linguistic and cultural strengths in the classroom by:

1. Recognizing multilingualism as an asset, not a deficit
 - Avoid placing students in remedial programs solely based on language proficiency. Many African immigrant students are already proficient in multiple languages, and their literacy skills may transfer across languages.
 - Assess students' full academic potential, not just their English skills.
2. Using culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive teaching approaches
 - Incorporate African literature, oral storytelling traditions, history, and current events into the curriculum to affirm students' cultural identities.
 - Allow students to use their home languages as a support when writing, reading, or discussing complex ideas.
 - Consider using translanguaging strategies, where students integrate English and home languages to express understanding in a fluid way.
3. Facilitating social and academic inclusion
 - Pair African immigrant students with bilingual peer mentors who can provide guidance on both language and cultural adaptation.
 - Proactively check for signs of isolation or bullying—many African students face racial and linguistic biases even from other immigrant groups.
 - Create discussion spaces where students can share their cultural backgrounds with classmates, reducing stereotypes and enhancing inclusion.
4. Challenging unconscious bias in instruction and expectations

- Ensure that African immigrant students have access to honors or advanced courses, rather than being funneled into ESL pathways that may limit future opportunities.
- Regularly assess and reflect on implicit biases, ensuring that educators do not assume that accents, code-switching, or non-standard English indicate a lack of intelligence.
- When grading participation and writing, consider linguistic diversity—students may express themselves differently due to cultural differences in communication styles or prior schooling models.

Parents & Families: Supporting Students at Home and in Advocacy

For many African immigrant parents, navigating the U.S. education system can be complex, particularly if they come from different schooling traditions with varied expectations regarding parental involvement. Kiramba et al. (2021) note that parental advocacy plays a crucial role in how students experience school, with students often feeling more empowered when they have parents who actively engage with educators. Equally important is supporting children in navigating bicultural identities. African immigrant youth frequently report feeling caught between the expectations of their home culture and U.S. school culture (Kiramba et al., 2020). Parents can help by affirming the value of maintaining home languages and cultural traditions while also validating their children’s adaptive strategies in school. Encouraging bilingualism at home, rather than prioritizing English exclusively, can reinforce students’ linguistic confidence and academic success, advocate for advanced course placement if school expectations are too low, stay involved in parent-teacher conferences, etc. Parents can:

1. Affirm and maintain students’ multilingual identities at home.
 - Encourage children to continue speaking and reading in their home language alongside learning English. Bilingualism has been shown to enhance cognitive ability and improve long-term academic success.
 - Share family histories, traditional stories, and cultural knowledge that may be missing from their school experience.
2. Advocate for equitable educational opportunities:
 - Attend parent-teacher conferences and proactively ask about academic placement, ensuring that students are not being placed in unnecessarily low-track classes.
 - Speak up about school policies around bilingual education—if no language support programs exist, inquire about teacher training in working with multilingual learners.

- If you feel your child is facing bias or misplacement, seek support from school counselors, parent organizations, or even legal aid groups specializing in immigrant rights and education access.
3. Build support networks within the immigrant community:
- Connect with other African immigrant families, particularly those who have navigated the U.S. education system before.
 - Form community groups or advocate for parent inclusion councils dedicated to multilingual education and diversity.

School Leaders & Policymakers: Restructuring Education for Equity

School leaders have a role in building educational spaces that value multilingual identities.

African immigrant youth in U.S. urban schools face challenges that extend beyond learning English; they must also navigate racial, cultural, and linguistic discrimination within educational systems that often fail to recognize their full potential. However, as research by Kiramba and colleagues demonstrates, these students are not passive in their adaptation; they employ agency, resilience, and cultural knowledge to succeed despite systemic barriers. For educators, parents, and policymakers, the responsibility lies in creating environments where these students' multilingualism is seen as an asset rather than a deficit. By fostering culturally responsive teaching, supporting bilingual education, and shifting policy structures that perpetuate linguistic marginalization, schools can move toward a more equitable educational landscape, one that fully embraces the strengths and contributions of African immigrant youth. Thus, school leaders can:

1. Reform the structure of ESL and language support services:
 - Avoid treating all immigrant students as English-deficient. Instead of segregating them into remedial ESL-only tracks, integrate them into mainstream classrooms with bilingual or linguistic support when needed.
 - Invest in heritage language classes where students can develop literacy in their home languages alongside English.
2. Expand Dual-Language and multilingual education training for teachers:
 - Train teachers in critical language awareness so they understand the linguistic and cultural strengths of African immigrant students many of whom come with strong literacy in multiple languages.
 - Offer professional development in anti-bias education, so that teachers learn how to challenge assumptions about students based on accents or language choices.
 - Implement district-wide policies that encourage translanguageing, allowing bilingual students to use multiple languages for comprehension and learning.

3. Promote inclusive school climate and anti-discrimination policies:
 - Recognize that language discrimination is often tied to racial discrimination. African immigrant youth report being marginalized both for their Black identity and linguistic differences (Kiramba & Oloo, 2019).
 - Implement restorative justice programs that address racial and linguistic bullying and microaggressions.
 - Establish diverse leadership teams that include Black and immigrant educators, students, and parents in decision-making processes related to curriculum and language policy.
4. Ensure immigrant families have access to resources
 - Provide school materials in multiple languages and hire bilingual liaisons to serve as support for non-English-speaking parents.
 - Make sure immigrant families understand their rights, including access to bilingual education and equal placement in academic programs.

Conclusion

African immigrant and refugee background children and youth are not merely adapting to U.S. schools; they are actively shaping them. Addressing the intersectional issues that affect their academic potential requires an intersectional framework for educational equity that involves students and their families, teachers and other education stakeholders. While systemic inequities contribute to the hidden dropout phenomenon, educational systems must acknowledge and address these challenges to create an environment where multilingual African immigrant and refugee background students can thrive.

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