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Where's the Reciprocity? Advocating for Marshallese COFA Migrants in Hawaii

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## **Background**

Pacific Islanders have become a rising population in the United States (Hagiwara, 2016). The projected amount of Pacific Islanders living in the states will reach two million by the year 2030 (McElfish et al., 2019, p. 1302). One example of this increase can be seen in the Hawaii Department of Education community. Currently, the state of Hawaii serves a large portion of multicultural students, with 9% of the entire student body classified as English Learners. Of those 9%, nearly 6,000 students identify as Marshallese. The history of how Marshallese students have migrated to the United States over the last several decades is unique through a series of treaties called the Compacts of Free Association (COFA), where citizens of the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau are granted a unique status as legal nonimmigrants who may work and live in the United States indefinitely without a visa.

This “gray area” of immigration status had led to complex systemic and educational experiences for the Marshallese community living in the United States. While the COFA policy has facilitated tens of thousands of these nations’ citizens migrating to the United States, this migrant population has been repeatedly affected by policy decisions overlooking or excluding their experiences. This roundtable examines strengths and weaknesses in the existing COFA policy toward students migrating to the United States from climate-affected areas such as the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Lastly, this roundtable highlights possible models to pursue in response for more equitable educational experiences in the larger multilingual, multicultural educational arena.

Education is presented as an area of focus in the COFA. This roundtable seeks to initiate a dialogue of the different factors of Marshallese education constructed in the COFA treaty using a critical race theory discourse analysis technique. This research will interpret the policy as a treaty bound by the United States constitution in order to implement an evocative and immersive educational and political analysis that will engage educational and political stakeholders and allow readers to interact with the COFA policy in innovative and meaningful ways to advance multicultural education both in the United States and abroad. The roundtable includes both educational and political goals that will be driven by principles of critical race theory to lead the analysis of qualitative data. Analyzing the policymaking discourse of the COFA can inform pedagogical practices for educators of students from nations belonging to the COFA and demonstrate how laws may work to foster collaborative communities or perpetuate inequality within educational institutions.

## **Research Questions**

- I. What is the relationship between the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands represented to be in the COFA?
- II. Which primary critical race theory tenets, if any, appear in the COFA law and to what extent?
- III. How is Marshallese education represented to be in the COFA policy?

## **Methods**

Critical discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019) will be a key methodological in this qualitative study, aiding in the problem identification, solution formulation, and implementation of the policy discourse. To answer these research questions, we chose a narrative inquiry qualitative case study because it can help organize and interpret embedded case data regarding the impact of the COFA policy agreement using a critical discourse analytical technique. Narrative inquiry uses various methodological approaches to analyze how stories are constructed including a linguistic approach to policy called discourse analysis (Yin, 1994; Gee, 2014). Language, and thus critical discourse analysis, is largely implicit but no language is benign.

### **Significance**

Conducting a policy discourse analysis of the COFA using a CRT framework positions researchers in a collaborative study to investigate this policy in hopes of understanding how policymakers and educational stakeholders can assist in supporting the learner's multicultural identity in America's classrooms. The significance of this proposal is to indicate whether the policy should be continued, and what course corrections might improve the experience of English learners in the education system. This work raises concerns around equity and access in the educational landscape, and how stakeholders should take next steps to account for the growing cultural and linguistic diversity within our schools.

Investigating the political discourse, specifically on the disposition of education within the COFA treaty, can push the multicultural agenda for English learners and validate multilingualism as an asset for learning and a competitive advantage in future careers. If the United States is committed to ensuring access to equitable education for all multicultural students including those from nations belonging to the COFA, then educational stakeholders must have a more inclusive dialogue of the Marshallese and other nations belonging to the COFA treaty in order to create learning environments responsive to students and families' cultural and linguistic strengths and needs (Yosso, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Allen-Handy et al., 2020).

### **Author Biography**

Karena Alane Escalante is a Philadelphia-based doctoral student at Drexel University's School of Education. Originally from Pomona, California, she earned her B.A. in psychology from Grinnell College and her M.S. from Johns Hopkins University. As a graduate assistant in the Justice Oriented Youth (JoY) lab, her research entails community-based urban and youth studies to advocate for collective leadership practices. After teaching in Hawai'i for several years, she found her passion in emancipating indigenous perspectives through education, specifically for English learners. She seeks to produce research that is ethically moral, celebrating diversity and illuminating cultural relevance within the education system. As a woman of color and first generation Ph.D. candidate, Karena also serves on the Diversity Advisory Council at Drexel. She describes herself as a passionate, de-colonial ethicist committed to advancing sustainable equity through dismantling systems of oppression within academia.

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