

EMPOWERING U.S. MARSHALLESE STUDENTS TO ENGAGEMENT AND
ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING

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The U.S. Marshallese population is one of the fastest growing Pacific Islander populations in the United States. The purpose of this study was to identify how U.S. Marshallese students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools. The indicators have been established on a historical, cultural, and linked perceptions of student learning as identified by U.S. Marshallese students and teachers. Pacific Islanders consisted of a variety of populations with varying cultures and ethnic diversity. This study has been conducted using a postpositivism worldview, Marshallese migration is not a limited phenomenon of displacement, but a migratory change that must be embraced by communities and educators. Educators must understand how to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. This study was designed utilizing an interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnography qualitative research design with middle school students and teachers to gather qualitative data from U.S. Marshallese students that will lead to a contextual understanding of empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. The findings of this qualitative research study can be applied by educators to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning on a daily basis in schools and classrooms. Culture understanding, positive relationship building, and the design of culturally connected intrinsically student motivated learning activities is the foundation and critical component of empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in school and classrooms for improved student learning.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The United States (U.S.) Marshallese population continues as one of the fastest growing Pacific Islander populations in the United States. U.S. Census Bureau (2016) data indicated the U.S. Marshallese population from 2000-2010 grew from 6,650 to 22,434 people. This was an increase of 15,784 people or 237% over a 10-year period. A population of 22,000 may seem insignificant, but in Enid, Oklahoma, a Marshallese population of 2,000 in a community of 51,000 people was a significant percentage of the population.

The Marshallese are moving to the U.S. for so many varied reasons, adding that under a Compact of Free Association with the United States, the people of the Marshall Islands may come to the U.S. to find work and live, with no timeline. They can exit the U.S. and return with no limit, and no visa is required. (Miller, 2016, para. 4)

It is this sudden influx of Marshallese adults and students into Enid that has necessitated a need for educators to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning?

Recent academic data from the Oklahoma State Department of Education (2017) indicated an identifiable need for educators to look more closely at how to engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students in their learning in order to raise student achievement and to improve student learning. Allen (1997) identified the important need for the classroom to continue to be a place for immigrant children to learn curricula as well as assimilate to American society in general. It remained important for educators to allow U.S. Marshallese students to continue to embrace their culture. Through the work of U.S. schools, U.S. Marshallese students could not only be empowered and engaged to improve student learning, but would need to maintain their cultural identity because of the potential opportunity of U.S. Marshallese students to return to the Marshall Islands and not necessarily remain in the United States as U.S. citizens through a unique agreement between the U.S. Government and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Compact of Free Association

In 1986, the Marshall Islands gained independence through the Compact of Free Association with the United States government in exchange for the Republic of the Marshall Islands to allow the United States government exclusive use and its military strategic positioning in the Marshall Islands (T. Mote, personal communication, November 1, 2016). The Compact of Free Association was established by the United States in 1986 and was reauthorized by U.S. President Bush and the U.S. Legislature in 2003 (R. A. Underwood, 2003). For more than 70 years the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands have been coherently connected through the financial support and promotion of educational opportunities through the access of U. S. federal student loans and Pell Grants for Marshallese students (Carpenter, 2011). The United States continued to provide protection, financial aid, and free trade between the Marshall Islands and the United States. The U.S. government's unique agreement with the Marshallese government through the Compact of Free Association is to promote the economic advancement and self-sufficiency of the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands (Niedenthal, 2001). The association between the United States government and the Republic of the Marshall Islands continues to grow within the United States as citizens of the Republic of the Marshall Islands migrated to the United States for greater educational and economic opportunities.

Pacific Islanders

Student diversity in public schools has been identified by the racial categories established by the United States Census Bureau. The racial categories were White American, African American, Native American, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, and people of two or more races. The purpose of this study was to identify how U.S. Marshallese

students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools. The indicators have been established on a historical, cultural, and linked perceptions of student learning as identified by U.S. Marshallese students and teachers. Pacific Islanders consisted of a variety of populations with varying cultures and ethnic diversity. The cultures and ethnic diversity of the Pacific Islands was unique and individually identifiable as any other culture and human population on the Earth. Based on U.S. Census data from Hixson, Helper, and Kim (2012), Pacific Islanders include Micronesian, Polynesian, and Melanesian populations of people identified in a regional area of the Pacific Ocean. These distinctions are based on geographical regions of the Pacific Ocean and the locations of the islands to each other within the Pacific Ocean.

The three regional areas of the Pacific Islander racial group could further be identified as 19 independent and unique cultural populations as shown in Table 1. The information in Table 1 was acquired from the (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

While it was possible to engage students in their learning from a broad based approach of racial diversity, it is important to identify the smaller sub-populations of a racial or ethnic group. Identifying and understanding the cultural differences of U.S. Marshallese students could allow educators to target specific learning strategies and specific cultural understandings to engage and empower students as active learners in their education.

Positionality

It was my positionality within the context of the study to act as a research participant observer from the position as the principal of the research middle school. My positionality as an ethnographic researcher placed me in a unique position to observe and study the interactions of

students with other students, teachers with other teachers, and student/teacher interactions within the research middle school and classrooms. As an ethnographic researcher, I made observations and participated in conversations as a participant researcher with the position as the campus principal. This unique perspective allowed for a more inclusive and interpretive analysis based on school access that would have possibly limited an outside researcher's perspective conducting the same research study.

Table 1

Pacific Islander Regional and Independent Populations

Pacific Islander Sub Groups	Island Name	Population Name
Micronesian Group	Saipan	Saipanese
	Guam	Guamarian or Chamorro
	Marshall Island	Marshallese
	Kosrae	Kosraean
	Kiribati	I-Kiribati
	Pohnpei	Pohnpelan
	Palau	Palauan
	Yap	Yapese
	Chuuk	Chuukese
Melanesian Group	Solomon Islands	Solomon Islander
	Papa New Guinea	Papa New Guinean
	Vanuatu	Ni-Vanuatu
	Fiji	Fijian
Polynesian Group	Hawaii	Native Hawaiian
	Tokelau	Tokelauan
	Samoa	Samoan
	American Samoa	Samoan
	Tonga	Tongan
	Tahiti	Tahitian

Statement of the Problem

The Marshallese population of Enid, Oklahoma was growing and distinctively unique, culturally and linguistically. The Marshallese population might be relatively small when compared to other ethnically diverse U.S. populations and populations within Enid, Oklahoma. Isolated pockets of significant Marshallese population growth that were stimulated by Marshallese cultural and migration traditions required educators and communities to be prepared to create a learning environment that not only empowered U.S. Marshallese students to be engaged and actively participating in their education, but also one of compassion and acclamation to U.S. traditions and expectations for education. If schools continued their historical role of indoctrinating immigrants into American culture, then schools must move students beyond the limits of cultural and economic boundaries that separate immigrant students from other students (Allen, 1997). Oklahoma State Assessment data as identified in Table 2 indicates U.S. Marshallese students in Enid are not achieving at the same rate as their white, non-Hispanic peers.

The numbers of Marshallese students, while relatively small compared to the overall student population, still provided a unique challenge to educators. Marshallese students need to have the highest level of education possible just as all students within the Enid Public Schools deserves. The classroom must provide the Marshallese student with a neutral environment that balances native culture and state curriculum for assimilation and academic learning. Waiting for generational changes to empower Marshallese students could potentially take up to two generations or longer depending upon the attitudes and cultural influence of the larger community and Marshallese community. It was important for U.S. Marshallese students to retain

their cultural heritage and cultural identity, while being engaged and empowered in their learning to becoming lifelong learners and productive citizens of the United States.

Table 2

Marshallese Student Achievement as Compared to White Non-Hispanic Peers in Grades 6-8: Oklahoma Research Middle School 2015-2016 Data

Race	Grade	Student Score of Proficient or Higher	
		Reading %	Math %
White Non-Hispanic	8	56	26
	7	58	40
	6	34	43
Pacific Islander	8	29	13
	7	23	33
	6	23	24
Campus Enrollment	515		
White Non-Hispanic	145		
Pacific Islander	81		

Note. Reading/Literacy Achievement (% of students achieving proficient or higher by state standards); Math Achievement (% of students achieving proficient or higher by state standards).

Purpose of the Study

Student empowerment provided an essential component to student learning and student social growth. In order to create an environment of learning that meets the learning needs of minority student populations, specifically students of Marshallese descent, student empowerment and academic engagement in schools must be a part of the school and classroom culture. The purpose of this study was to identify how U.S. Marshallese students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools. The indicators have been established on a historical, cultural, and

linked perceptions of student learning as identified by U.S. Marshallese students and teachers. The empowerment of students led them to be more actively engaged in school.

Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) proposed students with high levels of school engagement tended to be actively involved in their schoolwork and identify with the roles and responsibilities of being a student. In alignment with this premise, U.S. Marshallese students must be engaged in school in order to meet their learning needs both academically and socially. Marshallese student empowerment and engagement as with other empowered minority populations has the power to motivate and create self-determined individuals who could succeed in a multitude of challenging academic situations. The empowerment of students has the possibility to take many forms, but the best place to begin with empowerment was through inclusionary practices within the school (O'Brien, Kuntze, & Appanah, 2014).

In order to sustain an environment of inclusion to empower minority students, it is up to school leaders and classroom teachers to establish a relationship of trust with students and parents. Sugata Mitra's (2003) "hole-in-the-wall" research indicated students would seek to learn with very little adult intervention when trusted to do so. It was up to educators to empower students who might have traditionally been mistrusted to seek their own learning.

By applying a framework of inclusion without limits, as opposed to a cultural proficiency framework, Marshallese minority students were not just culturally accepted, they were empowered to be a part of the overall learning process through engagement and active learning participation. Student empowerment was a process by which students gained power within a setting to meet their individual needs (Kirk Lewis, Brown, Karibo, Scott, & Park, 2015).

Utilizing a self-developed conceptual framework of inclusion without limits to empower and

engage minority students in their learning, schools will have created an environment of improved student learning for minority students.

Inclusion without limits required teachers to include all students in all activities through ordinary classroom practices. Those practices need to have a balance of cultural connectedness that allow students to interact with peer students of the same culture moving to inclusion within the classroom to active participation with students of other cultural backgrounds. Inclusion without limits does not require students to be “pulled out” or to have special modified lessons provided to them that are culturally separate from other students, but rather is a blended cultural learning approach in which all students are exposed to various cultural activities allowing the minority student population to become bicultural. “In both new and well-researched areas, there are potentially unlimited theoretical perspectives, or ways of approaching and understanding a research area. Many established methodologies come packaged with a particular theoretical background (Kahlke, 2014).

Research Questions

In order to identify how U.S. Marshallese students can be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators can apply within their classrooms and schools, the following research questions were utilized for the interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnography qualitative research study.

1. How can teachers engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students in active learning and participation?
2. How can teacher perceptions impact U.S. Marshallese student engagement and empowerment in a middle school?

Significance of the Study

Educators must understand how to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. This study was designed to gather qualitative data from U.S. Marshallese students that would lead to a contextual understanding of empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their learning thereby allowing them to grow academically and to a greater extent participate as active citizens of the Marshall Islands and or U.S. citizens. When educators have relevant data gathered in a method that was replicable, the findings of the study could be applied by educators to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning on a daily basis within schools and classrooms.

Educators with a research-based understanding of Marshallese culture; school leaders, teachers, and communities utilized specific tools, empathy, and created school settings that embrace and empower Marshallese students to be engaged and successful in academic learning. U.S. Marshallese student populations continued to increase due to environmental, political, and cultural influences on the Marshallese population, including the extension of the Compact of Free Association. U.S. Marshallese students must be engaged and empowered in their learning at the same level as their other student peer groups in order to reach and improve student learning for this unique and increasing student population.

Organization of the Study

The study of empowering Marshallese students to be engaged as active participants in their learning focused on the historical context of the U.S. Marshallese population and the current migration of Marshallese students from the Marshall Islands. As part of the problem of study, it was important to understand the cultural history of the Marshallese people as it relates to

education. Data has been generated through a naturalistic ethnographic study of the Marshallese culture and history. Sandelowski (2010) wrote “naturalism, the typical theoretical foundation for qualitative descriptive studies” is defined as “entailing a commitment to studying a phenomenon in a manner as free of artifice as possible in the artifice-laden enterprise known as conducting research” (p. 79). An interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnography qualitative research study has been used to answer the research questions through U.S. Marshallese student focus groups, one-on-one teacher interviews, and my personal ethnographic positionality as a research participant observer.

Interpretive description was developed by Thorne, Kirkham, and MacDonald-Emes (1997) in order to meet a need in nursing research for a pragmatic and highly contextualized qualitative approach that would draw on experience and evidence from clinical practice, and translate easily back into the practice setting (Hunt, 2009). It was important for the current researcher to include Marshallese culture and the role culture played on Marshallese students through their experience within the current system of education within the public school system of Oklahoma. The qualitative data has been analyzed and reported in a narrative that describes the findings and implications of the findings based on student responses to the student focus groups, teacher interviews, and my personal perceptions as researcher participant observer.

Conducting research that was related to student empowerment and engagement would provide specific details and insight to a limited knowledge base and under studied population of the greater Pacific Islander population. By examining and researching Marshallese culture and student thoughts on education, educators created an environment that not only empowers Marshallese students to take charge of their education, but also engaged students in meaningful

learning that advances them to being productive citizens of the larger democratic society of the United States.

Conceptual Framework

Marshallese students appeared to have a drive to learn, but it was reaching students and parents through shifting lines of culturally embedded attitudes that needed to be understood by educators and communities. As part of the problem of study, it was also important to understand the cultural history of the Marshallese people as it related to education. Further data was generated from the naturalistic ethnographic study of the Marshallese culture and history that could be added to the contextual analysis of the student focus groups and individual teacher interviews. Sandelowski (2010) wrote “naturalism, the typical theoretical foundation for qualitative descriptive studies” is defined as “entailing a commitment to studying a phenomenon in a manner as free of artifice as possible in the artifice-laden enterprise known as conducting research” (p. 79). The questions shown in Table 3 were asked to three student focus groups with five to six students per group.

Table 3

Marshallese Student Focus Group Questions

Personal	
1.	Male or Female
2.	Age
3.	Parents’ educational level
General Questions	
1.	What does having an education mean to you?
2.	What role does family culture and Marshallese heritage play in your education?

(table continues)

General Questions	
3.	Identify how you feel valued and important in your school and classes?
4.	Is education important to you? Why or why not?
5.	Do you value making good grades? Why or why Not?
6.	What makes learning meaningful to you?
7.	Is having your cultural history discussed and taught in school important to your overall learning? Why or why not?
8.	How far will go with your education? (High School, Trade School, College)
9.	What is one thing you would change about school?

The questions identified in Table 4 were asked to four teachers in a one-on-one interview setting. The focus group questions and individual teacher interviews questions were utilized for a qualitative textual analysis to answer the research questions through a narrative analysis.

Table 4

Teacher Interview Questions

Personal	
1.	Male or Female
2.	Age
3.	Educational level
General Questions	
1.	What does having an education mean to you?
2.	Describe your understanding of Marshallese culture.
3.	How do you engage Marshallese students through embedded culture in curriculum?
4.	How do you make U.S. Marshallese students feel valued and important in your classroom?
5.	How do you see Marshallese students valuing or not valuing education.
6.	How are grades discussed with U.S. Marshallese students in your classroom?
7.	How do you make learning meaningful to U.S. Marshallese students?
8.	How do you effectively communicate with U.S. Marshallese students' parents?

(table continues)

General Questions

9. What challenges do you face when teaching U.S. Marshallese students?
 10. Do your interactions with U.S. Marshallese students differ from those of other students?
-

An interpretative descriptive qualitative research study was utilized to answer the research questions through U.S. Marshallese student focus groups, one-on-one teacher interviews, and my personal ethnographic positionality as a research participant observer. Interpretive description was developed by Thorne et al. (1997) in order to meet a need in nursing research for a pragmatic and highly contextualized qualitative approach that would draw on experience and evidence from clinical practice, and translate easily back into the practice setting (Hunt, 2009). Although this approach was developed with the needs of nurse researchers in mind (Thorne, 2008), it had applications across disciplines that were closely linked to practice settings, including those in other health science disciplines and education.

An interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnography qualitative research study provided the best approach to answering the research question of how to empower U.S. Marshallese students to be engaged active participants in their learning. In addition to utilizing a naturalistic ethnographic study, utilizing a conceptual framework of inclusion without limits to empower minority students in schools created an environment of improved student learning for students. By applying a framework of inclusion without limits, as opposed to a cultural proficiency framework, U.S. Marshallese minority students were not just culturally accepted, they were empowered to be a part of the overall learning process through engagement and active learning participation. Student interactions were internalized and intrinsically processed by the student, then over time become the individual's own thoughts. "Since social interaction is principally constituted and mediated by speech, what gets internalized into the child's stream of thought are

the meanings and forms generated in verbal exchange which themselves are products of the broader cultural-historical system” (Bruner, 1997, p. 68).

Empowering Marshallese students required a competent understanding of culture and leveraging culture to engage and empower Marshallese students in their learning. By utilizing interpretative descriptive qualitative research to study and ask the research questions (Thorne et al., 1997), the study results revealed a systems approach that worked to create a replicable study capable of giving educators the tools necessary to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students as active participants in their learning.

The qualitative analysis of the focus group responses led to further individual inquiry based on the focus group responses. My current positionality as a campus administrator working with Marshallese students allowed me to hypothesize that the U.S. Marshallese student focus groups would be culturally connected to their responses regarding their empowerment and engagement in their learning through connected school and classroom activities. Observations as a campus administrator provided an opportunity to have a developed notion of the cultural link to family and island cultural as being historically linked to Marshallese student attitudes towards being engaged in their learning. The research allowed school leaders and classroom teachers to create learning environments that could meet the cultural and learning needs of U.S. Marshallese students with specific descriptors and influences on education and Marshallese cultural connections that were given directly from ethnographic naturalistic research with U.S. Marshallese students. The research findings had the potential to guide district policy and personnel training that could empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning for improved student mastery of content.

Definition of Terms

- Atoll—"A coral island consisting of a reef surrounding a lagoon" (Atoll, 2018, para. 1).
- Compact of Free Association—An international agreement establishing and governing the relationships of free association between the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands formerly composed the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. The Trust Territory was a United Nations trusteeship administered by the United States Navy from 1947 to 1951 and by the Department of the Interior from 1951 to 1986 (Legal Information System of the Federated States of Micronesia, 2017).
 - Engagement—Schlechty (2002) viewed student engagement as students attracted to the work, continuing to persist in their work despite any obstacles or challenges, and students taking visible delight in completing their work.
 - Empowerment—"A personal and social process, a liberating sense of one's own strengths, competence, creativity, and freedom of action; to be empowered is to feel power surging into one from other people and from inside, specifically the power to act and grow" (Robinson, 1995, p. 19).
 - Marshall Islands—Islands in the western Pacific; capital Majuro; part of former Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands; internally self-governing (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018a).
 - Micronesian—Islands in the western Pacific east of the Philippines and north of Melanesia including the Caroline, Kiribati, Mariana, and Marshall groups" (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018b).
 - U.S. Marshallese—A native of the Marshall Islands who is resided in the United States as a part of the Compact of Free Association between the Marshallese government and the U.S. government.

Summary

The U.S. Marshallese population is one of the fastest growing Pacific Islander populations in the United States. The purpose of this study was to identify how U.S. Marshallese students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools. The indicators have been established on a historical, cultural, and linked perceptions of student learning as identified by U.S. Marshallese students and teachers. Marshallese migration is not a limited phenomenon of displacement, but a migratory change that must be embraced by communities and educators. Educators must understand how to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. This study was designed utilizing an interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnography qualitative research design with middle school students and teachers to gather qualitative data from U.S. Marshallese students that will lead to a contextual understanding of empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. The findings of this qualitative research study can be applied by educators to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning on a daily basis in schools and classrooms. Culture understanding, positive relationship building, and the design of culturally connected intrinsically student motivated learning activities is the foundation and critical component of empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in school and classrooms for improved student learning.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marshallese History

The Marshall Islands, officially the Republic of the Marshall Islands, is an island country located near the equator in the Pacific Ocean, slightly west of the International Date Line. The World Fact Book identified the Marshall Islands as being a part of Oceania, two archipelagic island chains of 29 atolls, each made up of many small islands and five larger single islands in the North Pacific Ocean, about halfway between Hawaii and Australia (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018a). The islands and atolls consisted of about 180 square kilometers of land, roughly the size of Washington, DC with a population of just more than 53,000 people living in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The average elevation above sea level was two and half meters above sea level with the highest point being 10 meters above sea level (World Fact Book, 2017).

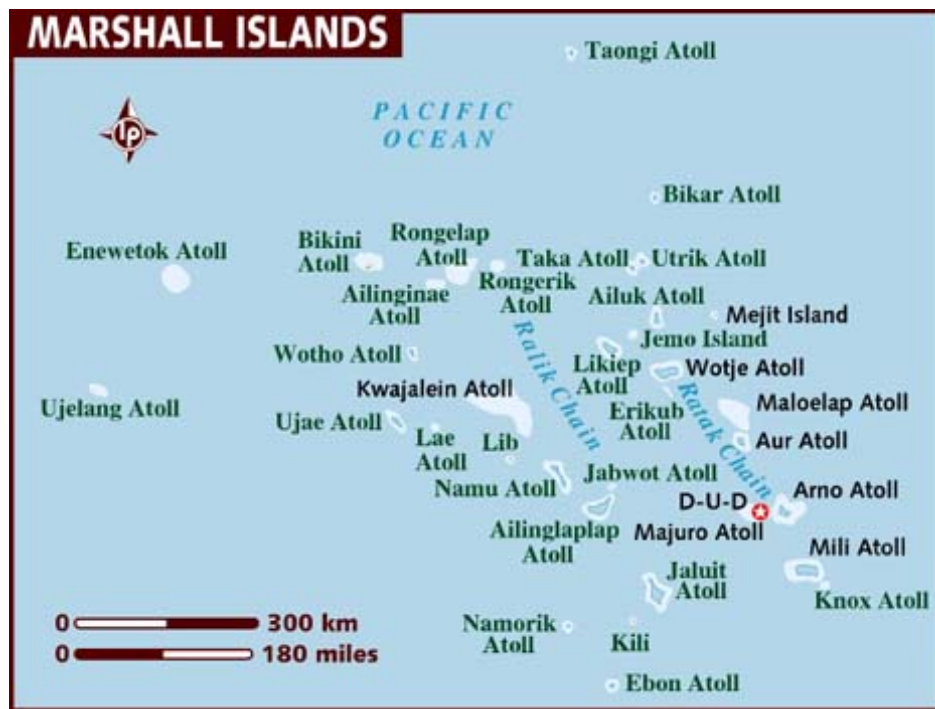


Figure 1. Marshall Islands (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018a).

The Marshall Islands were first inhabited over 2,000 years ago as part of the eastern migration of Austronesian and Micronesian peoples from the Malay Peninsula of Southeast Asia (T. Mote, personal communication, March 2, 2017). Just as physical migration has been a part of the historical context of the Marshallese people so has the development of their language. Just as the environment and shifting priorities have influenced the Marshallese people, the Marshallese language has changed to meet the needs of the Marshallese who have been impacted by outside colonial powers for more than 200 years.

For generations, Marshallese called their home *Aelōñ Kein Ad*—“these islands of ours.” The islands derive their name from British explorer John Marshall, who visited in 1788. A few ships passed by, but the islands’ culture evolved in relative isolation until 1857, when the first wave of outsiders arrived: Christian missionaries bearing clothing, disease, and religion. (Langolis, 2015, para. 4)

Spanish, German, and Japanese colonist and missionaries influenced the Marshall Islands from the mid 1500s to 1943.

In 1874, Spanish sovereignty over the Marshall Islands was officially recognized as part of the Spanish East Indies. The German Empire acquired the Marshall Islands in 1884 through a direct purchase from Spain, making the Marshall Islands a part of German New Guinea (Spennemann, 1998). The Empire of Japan took control of the Marshall Islands during World War I through military occupation. At the conclusion of World War I, the League of Nations granted control of Marshall Islands, along with other German Pacific Territories to the Empire of Japan for governance. In 1943, during World War II, the United States invaded the Marshall Islands during the Gilbert and Marshall Islands campaign to remove the Japanese from the occupation of these islands.

At the end of World War II, the U.S. was given total control over the Marshall Islands. From 1945-1986, the Marshall Islands were under U.S. administration as part of the United

Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (World Atlas, 2016). From 1946 and 1958, the U.S. detonated 67 atomic bombs on the Marshall Islands and permanently ruined entire communities that were forced into exile on other, less livable, islands (Langolis, 2015). Today, through the Compact of Free Association, Marshallese citizens were allowed to work and live in the U.S. without a visa or green card for an indefinite amount of time. Even if Marshallese citizens resided abroad, in their hearts and customs they were still members of their home societies (Carpenter, 2011).

The Marshallese people originated from a group of people who left South East Asia to gradually settle across the Pacific Ocean. The Marshallese were historically connected to the sea and island life because of their long history of Pacific navigation and life associated with living on small islands and atolls. Life in the Marshall Islands has been traditionally defined by the ocean and the events of the ocean (Carpenter, 2011). The Marshallese language had more than 50 words describing fishing techniques. Instead of using “right” and “left” to give direction on land, the Marshallese language used “ocean-side” (the outer edge of the atoll) and “lagoon-side” (the protected interior) (Langolis, 2015). The Marshallese were different because of their ancestor’s decisions to settle on atolls. They developed specialized skills related to the atolls and living and prospering on the islands and atolls of the Marshall Islands.

Understanding the unique history of the Marshall Islands and the uniquely developed relationship with the United States provided an important part of understanding the educational context of empowering U.S. Marshallese students. Based upon a historical context, Marshallese people and the United States have developed a history of support and need based on the outreach of the government and the intuitive navigational drive of the Marshallese to move across the earth.

Marshallese Culture

Through almost 500 years of European influence and colonization, the Marshall Islands saw very little regarding change to culture and influence on Marshallese society and organizational structure. The Marshallese developed excellent navigational skills and were able to navigate by the currents and stars to other atolls of the Marshall Islands (T. Mote, personal communication, November 1, 2016). Prior to the arrival of western missionaries in the 1700s, the Marshallese people paid little attention to western ideas of modesty and material possession. The Marshallese gave very little value to most goods and possessions. Land in the Marshall Islands was and to this day remains the measure of a family's wealth. Unique to the Marshallese is the inheritance of land through the maternal family line. Throughout the history of the Marshallese people and even through today, the Marshallese were viewed as friendly and peaceful (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018a). Marshallese culture called for strangers and visitors to be warmly received because it was important in Marshallese society to have consideration for others.

Matrilineal inheritance became a significant aspect of the Marshallese culture that connected Marshallese people's rights and responsibilities to each other and to their ancestral land in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The female family line provided the heritage connection of Marshallese people with the female lines, mother, and the land as the sources of life and substance (T. Mote, personal communication, March 2, 2017). Every person born to a Marshallese mother had land rights with its own special histories, personalities, responsibilities, and stories as part of Marshallese lineage endowment. All Marshallese inherited land, wealth, and identity from their mothers. The female connection and matrilineal inheritance was a transcendence of Marshallese culture to ensure a solid foundation and calming presence of

Marshallese society, while helping to ensure family cohesiveness (T. Mote, personal communication, March 2, 2017).

In the Marshall Islands, society was based on a historical structured hierarchy with two classes of people (T. Mote, personal communication, March 2, 2017). The first class of people was the *Irooj*. The Irooj (Royal/Cheifs) come from the Marshallese Irooj lineages. They held the greatest and final power while being responsible for maintaining the overall peace and harmony among the people. The Irooj also had the responsibility to protect life, protect the rights of the people, and to promote the advancement of the Marshallese people's livelihood. Additionally the Irooj settled disputes among the people and took land for reassignment for the landless. All Irooj were treated with great respect amongst the Marshallese people (G. Underwood, 2002).

The *Kajoor* (Commoners) were the second class of people in the Marshall Islands. They were the followers of the Irooj and traditionally had special abilities as warriors, navigators, medicine men, and workers of the Irooj lands (G. Underwood, 2002). The practice of Irooj and Kajoor provided an understood and practiced hierarchal structure of present day Marshallese culture. While students in school did not openly discuss the societal hierarchy, it was present and is demonstrated through various gatherings amongst the U.S. Marshallese adult population in the United States (T. Mote, personal communication, March 2, 2017).

Marshallese culture was strongly driven by a system of chief/royalty, commoner, and mother. The Marshall Islands cultural society was significantly based on system of clans and lineage based on the Marshallese mother's ancestry. Marshallese culture has been traditionally predominantly by a clan-based culture. Chiefs or Irooj were primarily responsible for governing an atoll, waging war, and choosing the best land (G. Underwood, 2002). Each Marshallese family was part of a clan, which owns all land. The clan then followed the lead of the chief who

was the head of the clan. The chief was supported by the commoners or Kajoor and oversaw the daily maintenance of the land and activities.

The Marshallese have identified eight original clans identified in Marshallese culture and history as the original eight (T. Mote, personal communication, March 2, 2017). Over many years and generations new clans have branched out from the original eight clans of the Marshall Islands. Some clans were identified for their skills or special roles within the Marshall Islands. Every person born of a Marshallese mother had a clan with its own special history, personalities, responsibilities, and stories (T. Mote, personal communication, March 2, 2017).

Art was of significant importance to the Marshallese people (L. Tommy, personal communication, 2016). Marshallese men and women were viewed as creating beautiful tools and everyday items they artistically craft from centuries of practice and skilled craftsmanship. Items known and valued for their artistic beauty in the Marshall Islands included weaved baskets and bags, wall hanging weaved decorations known as an *obong*, woven flowers, woven sleeping mats, and the design and creation of traditional dress correlated with modern fabrics and contemporary design (T. Mote, personal communication, September 22, 2017). The Marshallese people could be easily identified through the art they wear and create to share with others. The cultural attachment to art by U.S. Marshallese students was evident in the clothing, handmade leis, and weaved bags students could be seen with in the school and community.

Educators must understand the cultural past and the continued connectedness of U.S. Marshallese students to their culture. Understanding the change in culture and the intrinsically embedded cultural practices of the Marshallese community is important for creating a school and classroom environment that empowers and engages U.S. Marshallese students. Through the embracement and inclusion of Marshallese cultural practices, better communication, and student

empowerment could be employed by educators to improve student learning while engaging and empowering Marshallese students in their education through Marshallese culturally accepted practices that were blended with United States ideas of education and democratic practices that did not alienate other cultures within the school.

Marshallese Cultural Family Fluidity

An important Marshallese cultural component involved the fluid notions of a Marshallese family. The cultural phenomenon of a fluid notion of a family was important to be aware of when empowering Marshallese students to be engaged as active participants in their learning, because of the cultural difference between traditional U.S. families and those of Marshallese descent.

A matrilineal system wherein all related members of a generation is considered the joint parents of a child. “[Kids] will show up [to school] one day with someone and say, ‘This is my mom,’” said Sandy Hainline--Williams, an American nurse who has become a cultural liaison for Springdale’s Marshallese. “And the next day, a different woman: ‘This is my mom.’” These attitudes, anthropologists believe, were born of the ethos of extreme generosity necessary for crowded island life. “There’s a general idea that things belong to everyone, as opposed to specific people. (Joyce, 2015, para. 18)

With land ownership being maternally inherited, land ownership in the Marshallese culture bound families together through grandparents, parents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, and cousins thereby making family groups and gatherings big events (Ratliffe, 2010). This cultural phenomenon of Marshallese society played an important role in school with student movement and engaging family members who might or might not be the parents, but extended family members of a U.S. Marshallese student. Knowing the family structure and cultural dynamics of the family could help educators to create empowering lines of communication that effectively engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students.

It was culturally acceptable for Marshallese parents to allow other Marshallese neighbors and family members to adopt their children. This might not be problematic on a small island when the adopted family was only three houses away; however, this could be very difficult when the adopting family was located in the U.S. (Joyce, 2015). The adoption of non-biological children was not unique to the Marshallese community, but it was unique in the local community of Enid, Oklahoma. Family structure of Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American families in Enid, Oklahoma were based primarily upon traditional family structures of one or two biological parents and almost no adopted siblings. The same was true of many Marshallese families, but it was the uniqueness of the Marshallese culture regarding adoption that was necessary for educators to understand for empowering students and creating education systems that supported the adoptive families and students. The uncertainty of a new family and multiple family members living within one house led to difficult transitions along with limited adult or parental involvement in the education of the many possible children living within the household.

An important cultural phenomenon of interest to educators was to understand the Marshallese cultural perspective of biological parents and adopted parents. This unique role of adoption led to U.S. Marshallese students living with adopted families who have biological children also living in the home. The adopted students still had the opportunity to stay in contact with their biological parent. This created a conflict in parent identification and sometimes facilitated issues with the student when the adopted family began to treat the student differently from other children in the residence.

Joyce (2015) examined Marshallese adoption processes in her research titled, *Do You Understand That Your Baby Goes Away and Never Comes Back*. This research was more in association with Marshallese families in Arkansas who had misleadingly entered into closed state

adoptions. However, her research pointed to an important Marshallese culture component of adoption that illustrated a need for community and school involvement to engage students to be empowered to understand their communities better and to question and understand state laws and processes. Marshallese culture was embedded with shared families and children between relatives. Educators must embrace this cultural difference when empowering Marshallese students and families to be engaged in their learning. Joyce (2015) identified that up to 25% of Marshallese children were raised by someone other than their biological parent. Adoption in the Marshall Islands was approached very differently than in the United States.

Many adoptions in the Marshall Islands took place because an older relative has actively solicited for the child or children of their younger siblings (Joyce, 2015). By United States tradition, adoption was typically utilized as a result of unprepared parents or parents who do not want to be parents.

Older family members will approach expectant relatives and, in a telling linguistic formulation, say, “Give me my child.” And because an adopted child usually just moves a few doors down, adoptees almost always know their biological parents. If a birth mother suspects her child is being mistreated, she has the right to take him back. There’s even a Marshallese phrase for this: *Jined Ilo Kobo*, which refers to the unbreakable connection that a mother has with her children; it can’t be severed no matter who raises them. (Joyce, 2015, para. 19)

It was important for educators to understand this cultural phenomena being practiced in the United States when biological parents are thousands of miles away or adopted parents were raising multiple children from various biological parents. Students might have feelings of detachment or long periods of absenteeism when they visited their biological parents (L. Tommy, personal communication, September 22, 2016). These things have the potential to affect the traditional education approach used in schools and could hinder student learning.

While the Marshallese culture had remained relatively unchanged for more than 2,000 years, change did begin to take place within the Marshallese culture through U.S. military liberation and occupation of the Marshall Islands. The cultural impact was minimal by the U.S., but with intentions to westernize the Marshallese people as part of the U.S. government's post war, cold war strategy (Langolis, 2015).

Marshallese Migration to the United States

As part of the United States involvement during World War II in the Marshall Islands, Marshallese culture was impacted by the Cold War cultural diplomacy of the United States. The Marshall Islands figured prominently in the use of cultural diplomacy by the U.S. to spread its ideology inside and outside of the islands (Langolis, 2015). This was afforded by historical contingencies, such as the 1944 defeat and expulsion of the Japanese by U.S. troops and the promises of freedom and protection by the U.S. government.

Drawing from previous cultural connections established by American protestant missionaries in the 19th century in efforts to maintain distinctions from the Japanese who prohibited the Marshallese from Christian worship, President Harry S. Truman encouraged Americans who occupied the islands to emphasize Christian practices and impart U.S. educational values and patriotic ideals by playing country and western songs (Schwartz, 2015).

The United Nations Security Council in 1947 established the area of Micronesia including the Marshall Islands as being designated as United Nations Strategic Trust Territory to be administered by the United States (Niedenthal, 2001). It was the only trust territory to ever be established by the United Nations. Through the Strategic Trust Agreement, the U.S. government agreed to promote the economic advancement and self-sufficiency of the inhabitants, while

protecting the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands from the loss of their lands and resources (Niedenthal, 2001).

This initial Strategic Trust Agreement led to more than 40 years of cooperation between the Marshall Islands and the United States government until the official formation of the independent nation of the Republic of the Marshall Islands in 1986. Because of the U.S. government's unique agreement with the Marshallese government through the Compact of Free Association, the U.S. government had an agreement to promote the economic advancement and self-sufficiency of the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands (Niedenthal, 2001). This in effect included the advancement and encouragement of formal learning.

Davenport (2015) reported for the New York Times that most of the Marshall Islands are less than six feet above sea level with only a few being more than a mile wide. For the Marshallese, the destructive power of the rising seas was already an unavoidable part of daily life. Changing global trade winds raised sea levels in the South Pacific about a foot over the past 30 years, faster than elsewhere. Scientists have studied whether those changing trade winds have anything to do with climate change. The United States was obligated through the Compact of Free Association to continue to support the Marshallese people and the Republic of the Marshall Islands in their struggle with rising sea levels.

On defense matters, the Marshall Islands strategic value to the United States no longer rests on the Pacific nuclear testing grounds but on Kwajalein, the largest of the Marshall atolls, which is home to the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site. The 1,200 Americans who live on the base launch missiles, operate space weapons programs and track NASA research, supported by an annual budget of \$182 million. About 900 Marshallese workers take a ferry to the base every day to support them. The Pentagon, which has a lease on Kwajalein until 2066, has commissioned scientific studies on the impact that rising sea levels will have on the base's mission. In 2008, a tidal wash flooded the base and destroyed all the freshwater supplies on the island. The military responded with expensive desalination machines and heavy-duty sea walls made of riprap, and fortified granite used in hydraulic engineering. That is the kind of adaptation

Mr. DeBrum wants to see on the islands where his people live, and it would not be cheap. (Davenport, 2015, para. 25)

Due to rising sea levels and apparent cost of creating barriers to prevent ocean flooding on the atolls and islands of the Marshall Islands, the Compact of Free Association could lead to a significant increase in the U.S. Marshallese population through the displacement of the Marshallese because of rising sea levels. This influx of displaced Marshallese citizens would facilitate a need for schools to help in continuing their historical role of indoctrinating this new generation of immigrants who were fleeing a disappearing homeland into American culture and American systems.

The Marshall Islands have faced many challenges over the past 70 years. Struggles with the U.S. military, nuclear testing, and increasing ocean flooding of the atolls have led many Marshallese peoples to migrate to the U.S. for better jobs, education, and health care (Carpenter, 2011). To date almost 25,000 Marshallese have left the Marshall Islands to live in the U.S. (Langolis, 2015). Almost a third of the total Marshallese population now resides in the U.S. Many Marshallese have relocated to the U.S. through the work of missionaries, family, and the individual pursuit of seeking a better life through inherent Marshallese migration (T. Mote, personal communication, November 1, 2016). The single largest Marshallese population in the U.S. remains in Springdale, Arkansas. The population of Marshallese natives began to grow in the early 1980s.

The Marshallese credit a man named John Moody with bringing them to northwest Arkansas. Moody arrived from the Islands in the '80s to work for Tyson Foods, and soon spread the word among his tightly inter-woven network that there were jobs to be had in Springdale. Within ten years of Moody's arrival, the city had become "the Springdale Atoll": the largest diaspora community outside the Islands, with anywhere from 5,000 to 15,000 Marshallese. In 1999, the Marshallese community in Springdale awarded Moody an honorary plaque, thanking him "for his pioneering efforts to bring us to our adopted homeland. (Joyce, 2015, para. 13)

The migration of Marshallese natives was not unique to Springdale, Arkansas. The migration of Marshallese natives began with the outreach of the former Phillips University located in Enid, Oklahoma. The first Marshallese citizens to move to Enid, Oklahoma moved to earn seminary degrees from Phillips University (T. Mote, personal communication, November 1, 2016). As the cost of tuition, room, and board began to rise at Phillips University and the need for employment began to present itself. Both, university studies and employment formed the foundation of continued migration to Enid, Oklahoma. Opportunities for employment first existed through Advance Pierre Foods. Advance Pierre Foods was a local food processor in Enid, Oklahoma, specializing in pre-portioned, ready to cook and fully cooked beef, pork, chicken, and turkey. The processing plant was located to the east of downtown Enid. As Marshallese men and women found work in Enid, they began to invite family and friends to move from other areas of the U.S. and the Marshall Islands to be a part of the local community.

As the Marshallese population has grown in Enid, so have the various occupations from small business ownership to state agency positions. The Marshallese population in Enid, Oklahoma has more than doubled, and the Marshallese population was expected to double to more than 4,000 people by 2026 (Langolis, 2015). Because of this anticipated growth of the Marshallese population and U.S. Marshallese student population, it was necessary that schools were more prepared than before to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students through inclusionary practices within the school.

Marshallese Educational Migration

It was the desire of most humans to pursue improving the quality of life and opportunities for improving the living conditions of their family. With this thought in mind many Marshallese

people left the Republic of the Marshall Islands through the Compact of Free Association to pursue opportunities for employment and education in the United States (T. Mote, personal communication, November 1, 2016). In the early 1980's the Marshall Island leadership began to demand better educational opportunities for their children (Niedenthal, 2001). This demand in the early 1980s corresponded with John Moody and the initial migration of Marshallese people to the U.S. in significant numbers. The primary motivation identified by Allen's (1997) Enid, Oklahoma research indicated U.S. Marshallese migrants moved to the U.S. to help their children to acquire a quality American education. It was also identified in Allen's (1997) research that U.S. Marshallese people in Enid, Oklahoma believed a college education was necessary to find quality employment if they were to return to the Marshall Islands. With the creation of the Compact of Free Association in 1986 and again with its reauthorization in 2003 additional monies were made available to the Marshallese people that detracted from the Marshallese leaderships earlier desire to improve their children's education.

Niedenthal (2001) in his ethnographic study indicated the Marshallese still believed an American education was important because of the need to give meaning to the lives of the Marshallese people through hard work and acquisition of an education. This unique development in Marshallese culture of the educational beliefs about the changing importance of education could benefit educators in building on the thoughts and process of Marshallese leadership to encourage students to excel and to be engaged in furthering their education at all levels of their educational development. Inclusion of U.S. Marshallese students through active participation in their education could help to foster a sense of pride and importance regarding education in the United States.

Inclusionary Practices

Everyone was allowed to participate in inclusionary practices regardless of sex, race, or national origin. Inclusionary practices were those of valuing student differences and cultures. Educators must embrace those differences and applying them to student learning. Educators could not assume difference or stereotype differences in students of minority backgrounds. They must empower students to communicate and participate by creating learning environments that not only meet the curriculum standards, but also listen to students and create student-learning activities that embraced student cultural learning needs. It was important for school leaders and teachers to understand the nine guiding principles of cultural proficiency (O'Brien et al., 2014), as they empowered and built empowering relationships with minority students with cultural and language differences. O'Brien et al. (2014) identified nine guiding principles of cultural proficiency identified in Table 5.

Table 5

Nine Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency

1.	Culture is always present.
2.	People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.
3.	It is necessary to recognize that people have group identities as well as personal identities.
4.	There is diversity within cultures.
5.	Each group has unique cultural needs that must be respected and met.
6.	The family is the primary system of support in the education of children.
7.	People who are not part of the dominant culture have to be at least bicultural.
8.	Educators should be aware that in cross-cultural interactions they must be on the outlook for different social and communication dynamics and respond to them appropriately.
9.	School systems also have to incorporate cultural knowledge of their students into policymaking and practices of the organization.

The nine guiding principles of cultural proficiency when utilized provide the foundational support necessary to empower students from a minority background, thereby providing an essential component to improving student learning for all students. “Educators receive children and youth into their classrooms and schools who are impacted by many historical forces” (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009, p. 47). It was important for teachers to understand student backgrounds in order to facilitate student learning that supports cultural difference while maintaining the required subject learning objectives. Student surveys or consultations as a means of collecting student data was a key piece that schools used to better understand student learning needs. When looking at the data, it was important to not discount the cultural differences of minority students.

Kennedy and Datnow (2011) pointed out student consultations could be both formal and informal in nature, ranging from spontaneous to structured surveys. When teachers listened to student voices and applied their voices into practice, then student empowerment and inclusion was taking place. It was important for educators to not overlook the significance of what students have to say regarding their culture and education. Fielding (2001) pointed out the purpose of including students needs to be established to avoid co-opting student voices to validate an agenda that might unintentionally betray student interest. This idea was important for educators to apply towards minority students. If minority students shared their voice and then they believed it to not be heard, the teacher has begun to exclude the minority student intentionally or unintentionally through their inaction or inattentiveness.

Educators and schools needed to value minority student inquiry into education. When minority students asked the “why” question a direct answer from the adult might not be the best way to address the student inquiry. In the article, *How do I Teach Mathematics in a Culturally Responsive Way? Identifying Empowering Teaching Practices*, Ukpokodu (2011) stated:

Often students' inquiry can be a great teachable moment. Today, even though much has been written about culturally responsive teaching, I am often surprised to find that the notion of culturally responsive teaching does not resonate with urban teachers and when it does, they do not know how to teach their specific subjects from that pedagogical stance. (p. 47)

It was important for school leadership to create learning environments where teachers were trained to teach from a culturally competent perspective as related to their subject matter. More importantly teachers needed to build positive relationships with minority students and utilize these relationships to create teachable moments from inquiry, based on student cultural perspectives. An important piece of inclusionary practice was for the school to create a setting of empowering, inclusionary practices. "Student empowerment [is] a process by which students gain the power to meet their individual needs" (Kirk et al., 2015, p. 3).

Empowering U.S. Marshallese Students

Student empowerment in their education was a critical piece to creating authentic engagement for all students regardless of their ethnic and cultural background.

Empowerment is a personal and social process, a liberating sense of one's own strengths, competence, creativity, and freedom of action; to be empowered is to feel power surging into one from other people and from inside, specifically the power to act and grow. (Robinson, 1995, p. 19)

An empowering school and classroom environment was essential to sustaining U.S. Marshallese student empowerment and engagement in their learning. Student empowerment would not be limited to a single function, time slot, or activity. Empowerment must be a part of the larger school and localized classroom setting. "Empowering settings for adolescent youth are characterized by shared power and decision-making, positive sense of community, quality activities, and mutual goal achievement" (Kirk et al., 2015, p. 830). It was important for minority students to feel appreciated and valued beyond just being an attending student in school or

classroom. Students in general and more importantly minority, U.S. Marshallese students needed to be valued and understood. Their cultural backgrounds are appreciated within context of their learning. It is important for U.S. Marshallese students to have their values and ideas understood and applied when necessary into the daily learning of the classroom and larger school.

Failure by school leaders and classroom teachers to create an empowering environment would lead to a breakdown of sustainability for inclusionary practices. Kirk et al. (2015) identified five classroom characteristics that define an empowering classroom environment as shown in Table 6. Kirk et al. went on to state that each of the classroom characteristics was viewed as helping students develop motivation and self-determination to succeed. When an empowering student environment was created, student relationship building can truly begin. Relationship building appeared to be the common focus between environment and inclusionary practices for empowering minority students.

Table 6

Classroom Characteristics of an Empowering Classroom Environment

Characteristic	Definition
1. Teacher Belief in Student Success	Teaching staff take a positive stance toward students, emphasizing their abilities, not their faults.
2. Classroom sense of security	Students and teachers build positive relationships, work together toward common goals and meet mutual needs.
3. Equitable teacher student roles	Teaching staff share power with students, approaching them on a personal level and allowing students to share their opinions.
4. Engaging classroom practices	Teaching staff use a style of instruction that keeps students interested and learning.
5. Shared decision making	Key decisions about course are made in collaboration between teacher and students.

Note. (Kirk et al., 2015).

Data and Technology

Empowering U.S. Marshallese students through data was an approach that was often overlooked by educators. In my own personal experience as a principal, students were not given enough credit for wanting to improve their own learning. Middle school, Marshallese students demonstrated a significant interest in one-to-one technology at the research middle school. Leveraging this connection and attraction to technology had the potential to create an engaging school and classroom environment that could significantly empower U.S. Marshallese students to be empowered in their own learning. It was important to empower students to review their own educational data and make judgments and give feedback to improvement. Nichols (2004), stated:

Student data feedback informs the learner about how well they are doing and begins to develop the qualities or attributes that influence future success or failure. Positive student engagement and feedback results in a valued classroom environment, while rejection or negative relationships can result in negative student feelings of self-worth and poor self-efficacy. (p. 154)

Allowing students to have empowerment towards goal setting and the direction of their own performance could lead to greater student achievement and improved student learning. Self-management and goal setting emphasized the learners' willingness and capabilities to regulate their learning (Li, Pow, Wong, & Fung, 2010). A personal data review could be as simple as examining ones own grades as a student on a weekly basis to an in-depth data review that allowed a student to examine their past academic performance and charting growth or decline in performance. This would be followed up with digital goal setting for future school and career planning based on aligned academic goals.

Self-directed learning and reflective goal setting referred to learner autonomy rather than to learning as a solitary personal exercise (Li et al., 2010). While not all students might embrace

the idea of personal data review, it was a practice that must be taught, practiced, and repeated to meet the needs of students. In addition to this practice of empowering student decision making, a specific focus on the cultural needs of minority students populations might be required to further empower students as participants in their own learning. Nichols (2004) viewed students who had learning goal orientations based on their success on internal gains as opposed to comparisons of others. Creating a positive environment of academic goal setting, schools could not only empower students, but moved from a place of negativity regarding academic performance based student academic scores. “Current classroom practices that are in place in public and private schools often serve to encourage negative relationships among teachers and students, therefore resulting in a negative learning experience for many children” (Nichols, 2004, p. 149).

By leveraging student goal orientation for minority students, empowerment could begin to be established internally for students as opposed to an outside force facilitating an environment or purposefully including the student in classroom practices. Self-directed learning and goal setting established both a goal and a process to enhance a learners’ readiness and capacity to take the responsibility to manage their own learning activities thereby empowering and engaging the student learner (Li et al., 2010).

Technology could play a pivotal role in data review and also in empowering students to learn in a medium where they are most comfortable and adapted. When teachers utilized technology to deliver instruction through multimedia applications, they were able to meet the cultural learning needs of minority students. Hispanic minority student’s language might be an issue with learning, but multimedia technology could bridge the language barrier that would create a learning environment that embraces language and empowers students to utilize various technology language applications. “Online multimedia is becoming object-oriented and data-

driven enabling applications with collaborative end-user innovation and personalization on multiple forms of content” (Thamarasseri, 2014, p. 12).

Collaboration in technology was empowering to students because it allows minority students to bridge learning gaps while creating equal access to education and ideas of student peer groups. The utilization of technology empowered students in a multitude of ways (Thamarasseri, 2014). Technology creates an empowering environment while at the same time allowed for inclusionary practice that was available to all students regardless of language or racial/ethnic backgrounds.

According to Thamarasseri, (2014), students were motivated and engaged, multiple learning styles were addressed, and learning was student centered. These were all important attributes geared toward student empowerment. When technology and data were aligned as part of student empowerment, Nichols (2004) described the empowerment dimension as being characterized by two features, organization, and stimulation. Students were stimulated through goal setting and empowered by the responsibility of self actualizing their learning. The organization of thought is technology further empowers students to focus on what is important and the ideas of the learning at hand. Technology could help the teacher bridge the gap with students between cultural blindness and cultural competence through applications geared toward student cultural backgrounds.

When teachers empowered students through relationship building and positive student feedback, they were further empowering the student to be an active participant in his or her learning. Engagement informed the learner about how the teacher viewed him/her as a person (Nichols, 2004, p. 154). In order to empower the learner, the teacher must have appreciation and apathy for student’s ethnic background and have embraced the strengths as part of the students

learning environment. When teachers utilized technology for learning, minority students were given a wider array of tools to be empowered within the school.

Data review and technology application could further enhance minority student enhancement by allowing students to take charge of their own educational priorities that were aligned by school and classroom learning objectives. “Self-management emphasizes the learners willingness and capabilities to regulate their learning” (Li et al., 2010, p. 173). Empowered students who created positive academic goals were not empowering themselves, but were empowered to move from the negativity often associated with academic grades. Technology brings inclusionary practice, empowering student environment, and informative data to the central hub of creation and output of student learning. Technology bridged the gap of language and opportunity that might or might not be associated with minority students. When technology was used as an instructional tool of student creation and learning, then students, specifically minority students, were able to achieve at higher levels without individual adult cultural biases.

Positive Relationships

In order to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning, the critical step was for educators to establish positive student teacher relationships. Student motivation could be supported when classrooms promote student-teacher relationships (Nichols & Zhang, 2009). In order to practice inclusionary teaching practices and create an empowering school and classroom environment, it was essential that positive relationships be established between educators, students, and parents (Kirk et al., 2015). The fostering of relationships was guided by inclusionary practices in the school setting including U.S. Marshallese students in the student-to-teacher and teacher-to-student conversation was an important component. To go to the next step

of listening and creating learning applications around minority student learning needs, based on cultural awareness, educators could create an inclusive learning environment that values minority student social backgrounds. It was through this appreciation and apathy toward students that U.S. Marshallese students were truly empowered to be active participants, engaged and motivated to achieve at higher levels of learning and retention.

When teachers understand student cultural learning needs, then they can begin to empower minority students in pedagogical lesson design (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). As teachers and school leaders understood cultural difference and moved from cultural blindness to cultural competency, they could create empowering learning environments that foster equity and inclusionary practices without limits. Within the empowering school environment, U.S. Marshallese students must feel valued and appreciated both culturally and as individual students. Empowering school environments must possess the five characteristics defined in Table 5 by Kirk et al. (2015).

The adult/student educational relationship and cultural awareness of minority students was crucial to empowerment. As students were empowered within the school, it was then the idea of the moral parity and continuation of American democracy can be secured. When minority students were empowered as learners, it was only then public education has taken a positive step towards higher levels of learning for all students.

Current Research

Research was limited on empowering and engaging Marshallese students in their learning. Research did exist on Marshallese culture and the health of Marshallese citizens based on long-term health effects of more than 12 years of nuclear testing. The limited educational and

cultural research related to the Marshallese population was primarily based on qualitative studies that have utilized naturalistic observations, studied mostly in the Marshall Islands and similar research that has followed students from the Marshall Islands to various locations within the U.S. Carpenter (2011) conducted and published the most extensive qualitative research as a video documentary titled, *A New Island*.

Educators must have an understanding of how other educators have engaged U.S. Marshallese students in their learning along with the practices that have engaged and those that have failed to engage students in their learning. Carpenter (2011) through his documentary examined challenges facing Marshallese students and their teachers, somewhat through the voices of students, but more so through accounts of teachers who took a particular interest in bridging the divide between Marshallese and American cultures. These segments introduced the topics of migration for education, the fosterage of students by relatives, and the dilemmas of youth in deciding whether to pursue higher education.

Educator viewpoints of teachers were critical to empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. Carpenter (2011) studied the largest population of Marshallese citizens outside of the Marshall Islands in Springdale, Arkansas. Carpenter's documentary not only examined Marshallese culture, but also examined the cultural impact on Marshallese students. Just as with other minority student populations it was important to utilize Kirk et al.'s (2015) five classroom characteristics that define an empowering classroom environment listed in Table 5. Kirk et al. (2015) went on to state that each of the classroom characteristics was viewed as helping students develop motivation and self-determination to succeed. When an empowering student environment was created it was then that student relationship building could truly begin.

U.S. Marshallese students faced many challenges, such as language barriers, family cultural conflict with that of western society, and the challenge of affiliation with a larger population. New migrant students brought new challenges to education such as unfamiliar languages, different value systems, and new cultures (Heine, 2002).

Heine (2002) examined challenges faced by Micronesian students in Hawaiian schools. Heine identified three educational challenges to student engagement on Micronesian student success in schools. The first, *limited English language*, skills were inadequate because often times English was the second or third language spoken or acquired by the student. The second was the Micronesian *student familiarity of school system expectations*.

Many families come to the U.S. with inadequate understanding of community and classroom expectations and other procedural requirements of the American school systems. For example, while compulsory education to age 14 is often the case in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the laws are not strictly enforced and daily school attendance is not given much attention. Students and parents are often surprised to learn that in Hawaii and the continental U.S., school attendance is taken seriously and can even warrant the involvement of law enforcement agencies in extreme cases. Instructional approaches are also new and different in the U.S. Where students may be expected to problem solve and make decisions independently in any American classroom, island students may be reluctant at first to step outside of normal family practices in which problem solving and decision making are shared. (Heine, 2002, p. 6)

The third challenge to Micronesian students identified by Heine (2002) was a *cultural mismatch*. Many students in the study found cultural norms and attitudes that worked on their home islands did not work with westernized students or within the context of westernized schools.

Heine (2002) concluded that in order to meet the learning needs of students, schools needed to be culturally responsive. Teachers and students must get to know the Micronesian students and appreciate the assets they bring to school, regardless of any language differences. Heine's (2002) research provided an important examination of the role apathy and cultural

understanding could play in engaging and empowering students. If educators and communities understood Marshallese students and family culture and educational history, then true student empowerment could begin to take place within the school.

To date, no single study has examined student achievement as it relates to U.S. Marshallese students. Typically, U.S. Marshallese students were identified as a sub group of the larger student demographic population of Asian American and other Pacific Islander students. This created a much larger population of students that encompassed a broad and culturally diverse student population. Pang, Han, and Pang (2011) examined quantitative data on student achievement in a broad study that examined Asian American and Pacific Islander students' equity and the achievement gap. Pang et al.'s examined racial complexity in examining achievement of American Asian and Pacific Islander students in a very broad and general evaluation. The research pointed to the fact that some populations of Asian and Pacific Islander students out performed their White peers. However, the outcomes of this study demonstrate the importance of identifying American Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic membership when collecting achievement records and using disaggregated data in research on the achievement gap. American Asian and Pacific Islander children and young people must be treated equitably in schools and society (Pang et al., 2011). The study of achievement of U.S. Marshallese students was very limited; oftentimes, the student data was difficult to disaggregate unless there were specific schools with a concentration of U.S. Marshallese students over other Pacific Islanders or American Asian student populations.

Cultural understanding by educators could play an integral part in empowering U.S. Marshallese students. If teachers were to build positive relationships with students, then understanding Marshallese cultural phenomenon was an important component of empowering

and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. The research of Hess, Nero, and Burton (2001) examined the cultural and migration theory of the Marshallese people in the late 1990s from the Marshall Islands. Their research provided a contextual glimpse into the culture and acclimation of Marshallese natives into U.S. culture. Gaining an understanding of Marshallese thought processes regarding migration and movement can provide educators greater insight to meeting the learning needs and empowerment of Marshallese students. Hess et al. examined the difference between Marshallese populations born in the Marshall Islands and the 30% of the California Marshallese population born in the U.S.

Hess et al. (2001) stated the communities of Marshallese populations within the United States originated with Marshallese students moving for the opportunity of higher education. The original movement of Marshallese citizens to the United States could be leveraged for student empowerment by relating the historical perspective of the importance of education in the United States to that of current U.S. Marshallese students. It was important for educators to understand what Hess et al. identified as a historical perspective for Marshallese migration as being largely related to peoples personal investment in social relationships that may yield social, political, economic, or physiological returns. Understanding this and applying it to school and classroom culture created an engaging learning environment for Marshallese students by fostering a creation of meaningful peer-to-peer interactions and teacher-student relationship building.

In 1997, Allen studied Enid's Marshallese population as part of her doctoral dissertation. Allen examined the migration of Marshallese immigrants to the U.S. and more specifically to Enid, Oklahoma. Part of her study was the questioning of educators at Enid High School and naturalistic observation of students in middle and high school. Through Allen's questioning of teachers and her observations, it was discovered teacher perceptions of the small and new

Marshallese community were quite different from the reality of actual student participation in school. Allen (1997) through a qualitative study identified Marshallese parents as repeatedly indicating they had wanted their children to get a “good American education” (p. 129). The disconnect identified by Allen between educators and Marshallese students was that of perception and failure of educators to understand and embrace the Marshallese culture through establishing relationships and embracing an understanding of the historical context of Marshallese migration. While Allen’s (1997) research was not intended to examine educational practices, it did uncover a unique fact of the need for educators to understand the cultural historical impact of immigrant students.

Empowering U.S. Marshallese students could not only allow students to overcome misperceptions, but could also bring an awareness of culture and historical understanding to educators to create an enhanced curriculum for greater student engagement and learning. To further expand on student empowerment and engagement, engaging U.S. Marshallese students, parents, and community members could create a high level of student, parent, and educator relationship building that could allow schools to continue their historical role of indoctrinating immigrants into the American culture. Schools must then move students beyond the limits of cultural and economic boundaries that separated immigrant students from other students (Allen, 1997).

In order to engage immigrant students, such as U.S. Marshallese students, educators must understand the family obligations of Marshallese families as they relate to Marshallese culture. Family obligations play an important role in the daily lives of Marshallese students. The degree of obligations could vary between families and adopted family members. Understanding the role family played in education and participation in school and community events is an important

component of student engagement and empowerment for U.S. Marshallese students. Ratliffe (2010) identified family obligations as a collection of values and behaviors related to the provision of assistance, support, and respect as it relates to parents and siblings. “Micronesian people, a new group of immigrants to the USA, have a strong system of responsibilities to family members that guides their priorities and actions. When family obligations clash with school priorities, conflicts can occur” (Ratliffe, 2010, p. 671). In “Family Obligations in Micronesian Cultures: Implications for Educators,” Ratliffe examined 26 Micronesian families. Ratliffe’s qualitative examination of Micronesian families provided cultural insight into Islander families that looked to be beneficial to engaging and empowering Marshallese students.

The precedence of family obligations in the lives of Micronesian children and their families might at times appear to be impediments to achievement in school when children missed school and parents missed meetings (Ratliffe, 2010). If students could be empowered through cultural appreciation and valued beyond just being an attending student in school or classroom, U.S. Marshallese students and parents needed to be valued and understood. When their cultural backgrounds were appreciated within context of their learning, then students and their families could make a cultural shift in accepting school and school obligations as priority equal to that of family obligations.

Those current research trends and previous studies were directed at understanding the cultural significance of the Marshallese people and U.S. Marshallese students. The greatest concentration of Marshallese immigrants in the United States was located in Springdale, Arkansas. Understanding the challenges and success of the Springdale Marshallese community and school system was an important place of study when examining Marshallese culture and empowerment. Schwartz (2015) conducted a qualitative study to examine the Marshallese

population in Springdale, Arkansas and the largest population of Marshallese away from an Oceanic setting. Schwartz's study results provided cultural prospective as well as community acceptance of Marshallese immigrants to a land locked state.

Away from other Oceanic communities, Marshallese have to overcome many obstacles when relocating to Springdale. Language barriers and low levels of educational attainment leave few employment opportunities for Marshallese beyond entry-level positions, and very few Marshallese fill supervisor or management roles. Discrimination, at work and in schools, given a lack of cultural or situational understanding is compounded by different modes of communication. Americans tend to be more confrontational than Marshallese, and outward criticisms can be taken harshly. (Schwartz, 2015, p. 790)

Schwartz's (2015) research provided a unique perspective into a specific Marshallese population that grew by more than 200% from 2000-2010 in Springdale, Arkansas. For example, some public school officials vocally criticized what they perceived as parents' lack of interest or support for their children's education, going so far as to show up at Marshallese houses and berate parents, who, without command of the English language themselves, were left feeling ashamed and without recourse.

The cultural diplomacy between the Marshallese and U.S. Government examined by Schwartz (2015) provided compelling evidence of a need for continued research and understanding of how to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students within the current educational system. Schwartz (2015) argued that as representatives of their country and region, Marshallese movements—musical, bodily, social, and political—in Springdale become extensions and negotiations of their home in the Marshall Islands. This recent research and cultural observation would provide significant insight into a population closely associated with the Enid, Oklahoma Marshallese population.

Embracing the navigational history and cultural acceptance of the Marshallese movement was unique to Micronesian, but widely experienced by most communities of Marshallese within

the United States. *Micronesians On the Move: Eastward and Upward Bound* was a research study by Hezel (2013). Hezel examined Micronesian migration from Micronesia, specifically Guam to Hawaii and the U.S. mainland. Hezel's examination was important to gain a better understanding of the Micronesian cultural migration. This understanding was important for the greater application of empowering a community of learners who were displaced culturally and over great distances from family and cultural surroundings.

Micronesian migrants may have left their home islands, but they clearly have not abandoned their kin ties, their culture, or their language. The survey data show that Micronesian migrants generally prefer to use their native language at home with their families, even if they must speak English most of the time in school or the workplace. (Hezel, 2013, p. 37)

Schools need to not contend with the movement of U.S. Marshallese students, but rather embrace it and work to create intervention strategies to help U.S. Marshallese students acclimate to these movements. Because of the multiple Marshallese communities already established across the United States, Marshallese migration and movement was a cultural need necessitated by better opportunities and family togetherness (Hezel, 2013). Opportunities for education, employment, and new opportunities for family members would continue to be a driving force for Marshallese immigration and can be exploited by schools for engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their education. No major study has been conducted to examine and question U.S. Marshallese students about engagement and empowerment in their formal education. Cultural understanding and historical understanding of the Marshallese community is an important component for educators to have.

Educators must have a Marshallese foundational understanding if they are to create engaging classrooms and lessons that stimulate and empower U.S. Marshallese students to higher levels of learning. Research of the U.S. Marshallese population over the past 25 years pointed to

culture and migration as being the significant factors in local U.S. communities to engage migrant Marshallese citizens in higher education and local workforce development. Creating a study that seeks to gain greater insight to student thoughts and perceptions could create an educational cultural shift to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning.

Cultural understanding and previous research into culture and education of Marshallese students was an important component of my research for engaging and empowering Marshallese students in their learning. Examining previous research and adding to the existing body of knowledge was an important under taking to improving the teaching and learning strategies needed to empower Marshallese students in Enid, Oklahoma.

Summary

In the literature review, I provided an examination of Marshallese history and culture identified in research and in personal interviews and presentations from U.S. Marshallese adults. Understanding the history and cultural background of U.S. Marshallese students was essential for educators to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. The unique phenomenon of Marshallese maternal lineage connected to the possibility of a matrilineal family where the idea of family is very fluid and can easily extend beyond the biological parents when referring to the mother and father of a U.S. Marshallese student. Research was very limited on the U.S. Marshallese population, however research on inclusionary practices, student empowerment, and student engagement existed for other populations of students. Although there was a limited amount of research, there was a need to create a knowledge base of information for a growing U.S. Marshallese student population that was migrating for political and environmental reasons to the continental U.S. from the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Student empowerment is an essential component of student learning and student social growth. In order to create an environment of learning that meets the learning needs of minority student populations, specifically students of Marshallese descent, student empowerment and academic engagement in schools must be a part of the school and classroom culture. The purpose of this study was to identify how U.S. Marshallese students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools. The indicators have been established on a historical, cultural, and linked perceptions of student learning as identified by U.S. Marshallese students and teachers. The empowerment of students could lead them to actively engaging in school. Fredricks et al. (2004) proposed students with high levels of school engagement were inclined to be actively involved in their schoolwork and identified with the roles and responsibilities of being a student. In alignment with this premise, U.S. Marshallese students must be engaged in school in order to meet their learning needs both academically and socially. Marshallese student empowerment and engagement as with other empowered and academically engaged minority populations had the power to motivate and create self-determined individuals who could succeed in a multitude of challenging academic situations.

Problem Statement

The Marshallese population of Enid, Oklahoma was growing and distinctively unique culturally and linguistically. The Marshallese population might be relatively small when compared to other ethnically diverse U.S. populations and populations within Enid, Oklahoma.

Isolated pockets of significant Marshallese population growth, stimulated by Marshallese cultural and migration traditions, required educators and communities to be prepared to create a learning environment that not only empowers U.S. Marshallese students to be engaged and actively participating in their education, but also one of compassion and acclamation to U.S. traditions and expectations for education. If schools were to continue their historical role of indoctrinating immigrants into American culture, then schools must move students beyond the limits of cultural and economic boundaries that separate immigrant students from other students (Allen, 1997).

Research Questions

In order to identify how U.S. Marshallese students can be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators can apply within their classrooms and schools, research questions were utilized for the interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnography qualitative research study.

1. How can teachers engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students in active learning and participation?
2. How can teacher perceptions impact U.S. Marshallese student engagement and empowerment in a middle school?

Research Design

U.S. Marshallese students appeared to have a drive to learn, but it is reaching students and parents through shifting lines of culturally embedded attitudes that need to be understood by educators and communities. It was important to understand the cultural history of the Marshallese people as it relates to education. Data was generated through a naturalistic ethnographic study of the Marshallese culture and history. Sandelowski (2010) has written that,

“naturalism, the typical theoretical foundation for qualitative descriptive studies,” and defined it as “entailing a commitment to studying a phenomenon in a manner as free of artifice as possible in the artifice-laden enterprise known as conducting research” (p. 79). An interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnography qualitative research study has been used to answer the research questions through U.S. Marshallese student focus groups, one-on-one teacher interviews, and my personal ethnographic positionality as a research participant observer.

Interpretive description was developed by Thorne et al. (1997) in order to meet a need in nursing research for a pragmatic and highly contextualized qualitative approach that would draw on experience and evidence from clinical practice, and translate easily back into the practice setting (Hunt, 2009). Although this approach was developed with the needs of nurse researchers in mind (Thorne, 2008), it had applications across disciplines that were closely linked to practice settings (Hunt, 2009), including those in other health science disciplines and education.

It was important for me to include Marshallese culture and the role culture plays on Marshallese students through their experience within the public school system of Oklahoma. The qualitative data has been analyzed and reported in a narrative that describes the findings and implications of the findings, based upon student responses from the student focus groups, teacher interviews, and my personal perceptions as researcher participant observer. The questions identified in Table 7 were asked to three student focus groups with five to six students per group.

The questions identified in Table 8 were asked to four teachers in a one-on-one interview setting. The focus group questions, individual teacher interviews questions, and my personal ethnographic positionality as a research participant observer were utilized for a qualitative textual analysis to address and answer the research questions.

In order to sustain an environment of inclusion to empower minority students, it was up to school leaders and classroom teachers to establish a relationship of trust with students and parents. Mitra's (2003) research indicated students would seek to learn with very little adult intervention when trusted to do so.

Table 7

Marshallese Student Focus Group Questions

Demographic Information	
Male or Female	
Age	
Parents' education level	
Focus Group Questions	
1.	What does having an education mean to you?
2.	What role does family culture and Marshallese heritage play in your education?
3.	Identify how you feel valued and important in your school and classes.
4.	Is education important to you? Why or why not?
5.	Do you value making good grades? Why or why not?
6.	What makes learning meaningful to you?
7.	Is having your cultural history discussed and taught in school important to your overall learning? Why or why not?
8.	How far will you go with your education? (High school, trade school, college)
9.	What is one thing you would change about school?

It was up to educators to empower and engage students who might have traditionally been mistrusted to seek their own learning (Mitra, 2003). Student empowerment was a process by which students gain power within a setting to meet their individual needs (Kirk et al., 2015). Utilizing a self-developed conceptual framework of inclusion without limits to empower minority students in schools could create an environment of improved student learning for students.

Table 8

Teacher Interview Questions

Demographic Information	
	Male or Female
	Age
	Education level
Interview Questions	
1.	What does having an education mean to you?
2.	Describe your understanding of Marshallese culture.
3.	How do you engage Marshallese students through embedded culture in curriculum?
4.	How do you make U.S. Marshallese students feel valued and important in your classroom?
5.	How do you see Marshallese students valuing or not valuing education.
6.	How are grades discussed with U.S. Marshallese students in your classroom?
7.	How do you make learning meaningful to U.S. Marshallese students?
8.	How do you effectively communicate with U.S. Marshallese student's parents?
9.	What challenges do you face when teaching U.S. Marshallese students?
10.	Do your interactions with U.S. Marshallese students differ from those of other students?

By applying a theoretical framework of inclusion without limits, as opposed to a cultural proficiency framework, Marshallese minority students were not just culturally accepted, they were empowered to be a part of the overall learning process through engagement and active learning participation. “In both new and well-researched areas, there are potentially unlimited theoretical perspectives, or ways of approaching and understanding a research area. Many established methodologies come packaged with a particular theoretical background” (Kahlke, 2014). Creswell (2014) described an emergent design as being one where the initial research could not be tightly prescribed and some of the process might change after the researcher begins data collection. It was possible that based upon the research findings, the theoretical framework

of inclusion without limits could be modified or adjusted based upon the research findings. The practice of interpreting findings while making sense of those findings requires both artistic and political ability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

If researchers were to think in new ways or examine new things, then it became necessary to work outside of existing methodologies in order to support new theoretical approaches.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) famously called for a theoretical “seventh moment” in qualitative research, where “the move is toward pluralism, and many social scientists now recognize that no picture is every complete – that we need to employ many perspectives, hear many voices, before we can achieve deep understandings of social phenomena” (p. 1054). Research in the “seventh moment” was flexible in order to adapt to new kinds of knowledge and theory and to respond to the needs of researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 1054).

Study Participants and Sample Selection

Research study participants were volunteer middle school students ages 12-14 in Grades 6, 7, and 8 of Marshallese ethnicity with varying behavioral and academic backgrounds. I interviewed four teachers individually who taught in the research middle school as well as my own ethnographic positionality as a research participant observer. The questions identified in Table 7 were asked to three student focus groups with five to six students per group. Sample size of the student focus groups was between five and six students equally distributed by age and gender. I asked the questions identified in Table 8 of the four teachers in one-on-one interview settings. Teacher selection was based on variation of experience designated by teachers who have taught U.S. Marshallese students for more than 5 years, 3-5 years, and less than 3 years. The focus group questions and individual teacher interviews with my ethnographic positionality

as a research participant observer was utilized for an interpretative descriptive qualitative analysis to answer the research questions.

Instruments

Student Focus Groups

Student focus groups were utilized to gain first hand perceptions of U.S. Marshallese students. The student focus groups consisted of three separate focus groups, each with five to six students participating. The student focus groups provided significant data for the study that was utilized as data for the narrative analysis to answer the research questions to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. The student focus groups provided a unique perspective with a group approach that made the students feel less vulnerable, informal and conducted in a relaxed state to better understand their verbal responses and physical facial expressions to the focus group questions. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described the focus group as being useful for capturing people's responses in real space and time with face-to-face interactions. Focus groups were also important for focusing interview prompts on themes that were generated for face-to-face interactions that were perceived as important to the researcher. A copy of the student focus group protocol is in Appendix A. The focus group questions were designed to gather specific information regarding U.S. Marshallese student perceptions towards engagement and learning in school. The questions were also been designed to identify how U.S. Marshallese students believed they could be or were currently being engaged and empowered in school.

Teacher Interviews

I conducted teacher interviews in a one-on-one setting to gain an understanding of

teacher perceptions regarding U.S. Marshallese students' attitudes towards learning and classroom expectations. Teacher interviews provided significant data for the study that was utilized as data for the narrative analysis to answer the research questions to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. The teacher interviews were semi-structured interviews using a protocol that allows for data collection through written documentation of the interviews. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) identified an unstructured interview as a calamity, but a need to reorganize based on recognized and late emerging developments.

The semi-structured interviews provided the researcher with the authority to deviate from their previous established question protocol based on the participants responses (Glesne, 2011). A copy of the teacher interview protocol is in Appendix B. The teacher interview questions were designed to identify individual teacher perceptions of U.S. Marshallese students in order to align the teacher responses with the student focus group responses for a qualitative interpretative analysis to understand how to engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students in their learning better.

Ethnographic Positionality, Research Participant Observer

As the research participant observer, my positionality as the campus principal within the research middle school allowed for an analysis of personal ethnographic observations of the larger student population and staff population. Sociologist Elijah Anderson (1976) utilized his personal experiences in a poor Black neighborhood in South Chicago, in a bar he referred to as "Jelly's Place" that was regularly visited by unemployed and working Black males. Anderson (1976) performed his ethnographic research as a participant observer in his research of an American subculture whose activities and lives were not well represented in the normal view of

society. My positionality allowed for affirmation and differentiation of topics and concepts discussed by students and teachers through the focus groups and individual teacher interviews, just as Anderson (1976) was allowed an internal view of working and unemployed Black males in Chicago, so to is my ethnographic positionality with the research middle school. My positionality as a research participant observer provided a unique experience to observe both students and teachers and their interactions with one another within the research middle school.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnography qualitative research study utilized data collected from the U.S. Marshallese student focus groups, teacher interviews, and my ethnographic positionality as a research participant observer as well as my background regarding the contextual historical literature review of Marshallese culture, was analyzed using Alexander (2005) effective performance ethnography. “Performance ethnography highlights the concern in performance studies with how cultural practices shape identity and the concern in ethnography of how identity shapes the practice of cultural performance” (Alexander, 2005, p. 427). Analyzing the collected data through the lens of effective performance ethnography allowed for a critical interpretation of the data that was analyzed and written into a narrative analysis for clear articulation of ways to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. Alexander (2005) derived that performance ethnography allows the researcher to critically reflect on the studied population while examining active resonant points of junction and disjunction within the studied group. “This learning engagement is specific to the represented culture and to ways in which such knowledge can be extrapolated to broader issues of social and cultural interaction” (Alexander, 2005, p. 429).

Validity of the Research

As the researcher conducting an interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnographic qualitative research study, I assumed an active role in collecting and interpreting of the research participants' perceptions and observations of the studied phenomenon as a researcher participant observer. Threats to validity of the study could have been student and researcher bias based on the researcher's connection to the school and the U.S. Marshallese students wanting to give pleasing answers based on perceived correct answers, as compared to answers of reality and culture truths. Maxwell (2005) described research validity as not being a product, but rather a goal to not necessarily be proven or taken for granted. To give research participants an opportunity to answer questions in a manner consistent with cultural norms, a video recording of the focus groups was utilized for data collection accuracy and word transcription analysis. To make the research findings free of bias it was important for me as the researcher to apply what Maxwell (2005) described as eliminating variance by explaining the researchers biases and how those biases would be dealt with as they appeared in the research process.

Limitations

The depth of the study was limited to research within one school with a significant percentage of the population being U.S. Marshallese students. The study was made up of a naturalistic ethnography utilizing historical and cultural references from a limited number of sources because of the limited knowledge base associated with the Marshall Islands. The study was also limited to 15-30 students in three focus groups and four teachers through one-on-one interviews. Bias might exist within this small sample group of students and teachers based on what the participants were willing to share with the researcher. My own positionality as the

research participant observer and as the middle school research campus principal could have created limitations with sample population students and teachers. To address the limitations of this study, I developed questions that did not require the participants to express viewpoints that could be perceived as negative towards a campus or campus leadership.

Ethical Considerations

All research practices were maintained with an ethical approach applicable to all research studies involving minors and adults. The University of North Texas requires all students to complete training in the protection of human research subjects and gaining approval the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting research. I completed the National Institutes of Health's online training course and obtained certification on August 24, 2015. I assigned pseudonyms to all research participants and the methodology and the purpose of the research study were explained to the participants prior to the focus groups and one- on-one interviews. All participant identities remained confidential. Each participant maintained the right to leave the study at any time if they decided they no longer wanted to participate. Consent forms were given to all student participants and teacher participants to clearly identify the confidentiality and purpose of the study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify how U.S. Marshallese students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools. The indicators have been established on a historical, cultural, and linked perceptions of student learning as identified by U.S. Marshallese

students and teachers. The qualitative analysis utilizing an analytic lens of effective performance ethnography allowed for a narrative dialogue of findings that can be used by educators to effectively engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students in their education through a clearly articulated narrative of research findings.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to identify how U.S. Marshallese students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools. The indicators have been established on a historical, cultural, and linked perceptions of student learning as identified by U.S. Marshallese students and teachers. The empowerment of students led them to be engaged in school more actively and in their own learning. In this chapter, I provide the results and findings of the interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnographic qualitative research study by examining the data collected through my positionality within the U.S. Marshallese community, student focus groups, and individual teacher interviews.

My positionality as a campus administrator and resident within the Enid community allowed for a unique perspective on the examination and visual recognition of U.S. Marshallese students in the research middle school setting as a researcher participant observer. I conducted three student focus groups with a total of 18 students ages 12-14 in Grades 6, 7, and 8. In this chapter, I also examine the perceptions of four teachers regarding U.S. Marshallese students' attitudes towards learning and classroom expectations. I present the collected data in a narrative through the lens of effective performance ethnography for a critical interpretation of the data analyzed and written for clear articulation of ways to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning.

In order to identify how U.S. Marshallese students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools, I utilized two research questions.

1. How can teachers engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students in active learning and participation?
2. How can teacher perceptions impact U.S. Marshallese student engagement and empowerment in a middle school?

Student Focus Groups

Students were selected at random in an initial meeting with more than 30 students to discuss the research study. The initial U.S. Marshallese students meeting provided an opportunity to discuss the research study and the help that was needed from the students to participate in discussing the series of questions in the student focus groups. The students were all given the University of North Texas, Student Informed Consent form. Students who wished to participate were required to obtain permission from their parents/guardians and to return the signed informed consent forms prior to participation in the student focus groups.

Student focus groups were conducted over a period of 3 days with the focus groups lasting for no more than one hour. The focus groups were conducted in the research middle school office conference room with six or fewer students participating in each student focus group. Focus groups were made up of students from the same grade level (Focus Group 1—sixth grade, Focus Group 2—seventh grade, and Focus Group 3—eighth grade). Table 9 provided a detailed examination of the student makeup of each student focus group.

Recording of the student focus groups was through the use of an iPad placed on a Swivl iPad stand, that was located behind the focus group researcher facilitator, Sam Robinson. The primary purpose for the videoing of the student focus groups was for the ease of transcription of student responses utilizing REV transcription services. Through the facilitation of the focus groups there was no identified difference in male and female responses. Responses were identified as being correlated equally between male and female students, including those related

to school interest. Follow up and clarification of questions for the students was made as needed or indicated by the students within each U.S. Marshallese student focus group.

Table 9

U.S. Marshallese Student Focus Groups

Focus Group	Grade	Student	Gender	Age	Parents Education Level
1	6	1	Male	12	High School
		2	Male	12	High School
		3	Male	12	College
		4	Female	12	No High School
		5	Female	12	No High School
2	7	1	Male	12	High School
		2	Male	12	College
		3	Female	13	College
		4	Female	12	High School
		5	Female	12	College
		6	Female	13	College
3	8	1	Male	14	High School
		2	Male	14	High School
		3	Female	13	No High School
		4	Female	14	High School
		5	Female	14	High School
		6	Female	14	High School

What Does Having an Education Mean to You?

The term education could be viewed as broad and unspecific. This question required students to think and look within themselves for understanding. A significant amount of wait time was needed for students to process and develop a response to this question. Common

amongst all three focus groups, U.S. Marshallese students identified that an education would make for a better future. Most students within the focus groups also indicated an education meant getting a job you wanted to reach your goals. One student in Focus Group 2 indicated an education would help you learn, while another student in Focus Group 3 identified an education as making things better for them. All students identified school as being important because their parents wanted them to do well in school.

What Role Does Family Culture and Marshallese Heritage Play in Your Education?

U.S. Marshallese students identified their family as playing a significant role in their education. All three-student focus groups indicated without hesitation that their parents and families encourage them to do well in school in order to have a better life after school. Parents and families were stated as encouraging their students to work hard in school and to make good grades to ensure a better life than the parents had. A student in Focus Group 3 indicated their family encouraged the demonstration of the Marshallese heritage to others through learning and being a good student in school.

Identify How You Feel Valued and Important in Your School and Classes

The student focus groups began to give different answers, but when critically analyzed and further questioning of students was carried out, the discussion essentially led to the same common factor of students feeling value through teachers taking an interest in them as individuals and having an opportunity to play basketball in school. Student Focus Groups 1 and 3 both indicated the importance of being with friends and an opportunity for conversation as being important. A student in Focus Group 1 indicated teachers listening to them as an individual was

very important. Having other U.S. Marshallese students in class to help with work and translation was discussed as a valuable indicator of value and importance for a student in Focus Group 3. Focus Groups 1 and 2 only indicated time with friends as being important in school and classes as giving value and importance to school.

Is Education Important to You?

All students involved in the student focus groups overwhelmingly indicated education was important. Every student who participated in the focus groups clearly indicated education was important. The students in the three focus groups further expanded on the idea of education being important because their families thought education was important and students wanted to make their parents proud. The other identified indicator from the three student focus groups of education being important was for going to college and playing sports, specifically basketball. Student Focus Group 1 was the only focus group that discussed the aspect of learning. The students stating they would be smarter through education made this connection to education being important. Focus Group 3 had a male student who indicated the importance of education was to help them to fulfill their dreams. Other students followed this with conversation regarding playing basketball and going to college as the primary importance of education.

Do You Value Making Good Grades?

All student focus group participants identified making good grades as being very important. The driving force for making good grades identified by students was to make their parents proud. The majority of students identified making good grades as being related to playing sports, getting rewards, and for going to college. A student in Focus Group 3 indicated you would not be able to get into college without good grades; therefore they had to make good

grades. Focus Group 2 had a student that identified making good grades as being related to getting an allowance from their parents. The student indicated if they made good grades, then their parents rewarded them with a payment for each A, B, or C grade. There was not a single student in any of three student focus groups who indicated a disinterest in making good grades.

What Makes Learning Meaningful to You?

Making learning meaningful varied by individual and not all individual students agreed on every response, but they did not disagree with the idea presented by the other students in the focus group as possibly making their learning more meaningful. Teacher explanation of new information was the single common point of discussion between all three-student focus groups. Focus Group 3 indicated they wanted their learning to relate more to life lessons, and lessons that directly applied to things they know or would need to know about in the world.

Student Focus Groups 1 and 2 both gave strong responses to the use of Chrome books and the need to write on paper physically at times to make learning meaningful. Focus Group 1 was the only student focus group to talk about their need to explain to the teacher or class the things they were learning. Each focus group had at least one student who indicated the importance of a particular teacher who helped to make learning meaningful to them through a personal connection with the student such as knowing their family or talking to them about a specific activity in which the student participates.

Is Having Your Cultural History Discussed and Taught in School Important to Your Overall Learning?

U.S. Marshallese students participating in the student focus groups responded with all the same response; culture and Marshallese history would be very valued in school. This discussion

led to students stating the teaching of Marshallese culture and history would not only benefit them, but would be a benefit to all students to understand better who they are as Marshallese students and the historical perspective of why they have migrated to the United States. The discussion with all three-student focus groups was extended to the cultures of other student populations such as Hispanic and African American. All three-student focus groups were very clear that learning about other cultures was important because of their own lack knowing and understanding about other student groups. Student Focus Group 2 was the only focus group to talk about the importance of Marshallese food as part of the learning process. They thought it was important for not only other Marshallese students to know about the history of Marshallese food, but for other students to understand the cultural importance of food. Students in all three focus groups discussed the limited knowledge they had about the Marshall Islands and how they would like to learn more just as they learn about U.S. history in classes.

How Far Will You Go with Your Education?

A common theme regarding education and the finality of education for U.S. Marshallese students centered around a common theme of all students wanting to continue their education into college. Only one student deviated from college, but through the discussion with student Focus Group 2 thought college was required to become a baker. An interesting point of emphasis was made by a student in Focus Group 3 about going to college, joining the U.S. Marines, and returning to the Marshall Islands to serve on a military base there. All students talked about making their parents proud by continuing on to college. Playing basketball in college was common amongst all three-student focus groups with both male and female students talking about college as being predominately connected with athletics. The conversations all pointed to

an expectation of college with the students showing no doubt in their current decision to attend college after high school.

What is One Thing You Would Change about School?

The students in the focus groups very well received the ability for U.S. Marshallese students to make a change in the school day. Their responses varied somewhat, but carried a common theme of more time to be with friends and to play basketball. Every student focus group shared they wanted more recess time and more time during the school day to play basketball. Student Focus Group 2 talked more about time for culture experiences with food. This conversation centered around food being served in the cafeteria as being related to Marshallese food and to have days dedicated to ancestral dress at school. The older students in Focus Group 3 uniquely asked for more space in the halls and classrooms to move around without being too close to other students. Time with friends and time for leisure school activities dominated the conversation of change in school with no student talking about traditional academic school activities or class.

Student Focus Group Summary

The student focus groups have provided a unique perspective that U.S. Marshallese students care about their history and culture as well leisure activities with friends and other students. Basketball appeared to be a common theme of what engaged and provided interest to U.S. Marshallese students. Basketball was mentioned by more students and across more levels of the student focus group than any other discussion point. Parent and family motivation was second most identified measure of promoting student engagement and drive to do well and move

forward in education. This provided significant value to family and parents as being a driving force of U.S. Marshallese student education in line with the importance of the positive relationships teachers develop with students.

U.S. Marshallese students through the student focus groups did appear to have well defined motivators for being engaged and empowered in school. Like many other U.S. students, U.S. Marshallese students clearly wanted positive interaction with their teachers through assignments that are relevant and meaningful to them. The importance of making good grades and making their parents and families proud of their school achievements was discussed with the majority of the focus group questions. U.S. Marshallese students appeared to be more engaged and empowered in school through their responses to the student focus group questions when learning was based on their local lives and most importantly basketball.

Teacher Interviews

Teachers were selected on a voluntary basis based on two factors of having experience with teaching U.S. Marshallese students and teacher responses as volunteers to participate in the research study. The teachers were presented with the interview questions to insure their interest in participating and all participating teachers were given the University of North Texas, Informed Consent form. Before participating in the interviews, all teachers were required to complete the informed consent.

Teacher interviews took place over a period of two weeks with the interviews lasting for no more than one hour in time. The interviews were conducted in the teacher classrooms of the research middle school, with the interviews taking place with four teachers individually. The teacher interviewees ranged in age from 26-51 and consisted of two males and two females, all

with one or more college degrees. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured interview format to ensure additional questioning could take place if the interview dialogue required clarification or more in-depth questioning to further explain the teacher interviewees response.

Table 10 provides a detailed description of the teacher interview participants.

Table 10

Teacher Interview Participants

Teacher	Gender	Age	Education Level
1	Male	40	Bachelor's degree
2	Male	51	Master's degree
3	Female	26	Bachelor's degree
4	Female	44	Bachelor's degree

What Does Having an Education Mean to You?

The interviewed teachers all responded to the question of, what does having an education mean to you in the same manner. They similarly stated an education gave them an opportunity to better themselves as individuals. Responses also included the ability to acquire knowledge through learning. One teacher interviewee indicated education was an expectation set for them by their parents and they in turn have done the same for their children. Another individual teacher indicated an education had provided them an opportunity to move from one social structure to another.

Describe Your Understanding of Marshallese Culture

Communal living and living with large extended families was the only common response by the teacher interviewees regarding their understanding of Marshallese culture. Teacher 1

identified their understanding of Marshallese culture as most U.S. Marshallese students demonstrating little attention to the importance of time and timely task completion. Teachers 2 and 3 identified religious faith as being very valued in Marshallese culture and of importance to U.S. Marshallese students. Teacher 4 was the only teacher to include education in their response by indicating that Marshallese parents did not appear to perceive education as being important within a culture context. When asked to explain further, Teacher 4 responded, “In my experience over the past 3 years, Marshallese parents have been minimally involved in phone conversations and direct dialogue as compared to other parents who I have reached out to.” All four teachers interviewed acknowledge through the conversation the importance of sport and play with U.S. Marshallese students. Examples from the teachers included basketball, volleyball, and other group activities such as wall ball and playful actions between each other.

How Do You Engage U.S. Marshallese Students through Embedded Culture in Curriculum?

Teacher responses varied greatly regarding embedded culture within the curriculum, but an important finding was all four teachers did in some way attempt to engage U.S. Marshallese students through embedded cultural aspects even though they varied significantly. Teacher 1 allowed U.S. Marshallese students to work in groups as part of what was perceived by the teacher as being communally connected. Teacher 2 made connections to learning for U.S. Marshallese students by using Native American experiences as related similarly to the experiences of Marshallese historical events. Teacher 3 utilized identified values given to them by U.S. Marshallese students throughout the school year as connections to curriculum and purposely embedding those student identified values into weekly student learning. Teacher 4 talked to

students and incorporated the use of pictures and stories directly related to the Marshall Islands or to stories similar to those Marshallese natives could relate to.

How Do You Make U.S. Marshallese Students Feel Valued and Important in Your Classroom?

Teacher responses to making U.S. Marshallese students feel valued and important in the classroom all yielded a common and distinct response from all four teachers interviewed. All teachers responded that they openly talk to students about their interest and then attempt to engage students in those interest through periodic conversations in the those areas. A personal connection to students was a common response by all four interviewed teachers. Teacher 1 talked about engaging U.S. Marshallese students in discussion and presentation of work around basketball and basketball related topics. Teacher 1 also discussed U.S. Marshallese student interest in music and how discussion around music topics was of interest to U.S. Marshallese students and seemed to create a sense of community in the classroom. Teacher 3 discussed a unique approach that varied from the other three teachers through the use of character development and pushing U.S. Marshallese students academically while building on character development at an individual level with students. Going to U.S. Marshallese events such as basketball games and community events outside of schools was identified as being an important part of what Teacher 4 identified as valuing U.S. Marshallese students. Teacher 4 was the only teacher to include the participation in attendance at extracurricular activities and providing snacks in class that U.S. Marshallese students indicated through conversations they liked as part of valuing U.S. Marshallese students.

How Do You See U.S. Marshallese Students Valuing or Not Valuing Education?

The perceptions of teachers interviewed regarding U.S. Marshallese students value of education all resulted in the same answer as U.S. Marshallese students not appearing to value education as a whole. Each teacher did present a unique reason as to why they believed U.S. Marshallese students struggled with valuing education. Teacher 1 thought the education system and structure of education created an environment that made it difficult for U.S. Marshallese to give an exact answer as to why U.S. Marshallese students appeared to not value education. Teacher 2 did not see most U.S. Marshallese students as valuing education, but did identify a recent perception of seeing U.S. Marshallese students who were staying in the United States permanently with no anticipation of returning to Marshall Islands as appearing to give more importance and valuing their education. Teacher three and four gave very similar responses regarding the value of education U.S. Marshallese students having very little family and native exposure to the power of education. Teacher 3 believed this limited exposure created a very passive feeling regarding education by U.S. Marshallese students.

How are Grades Discussed with U.S. Marshallese Students in Your Classroom?

All four teachers interviewed actively discussed grades with U.S. Marshallese students, but in the same manner they discussed grades with other students. All interviewed teachers believed U.S. Marshallese students had an understanding of grades just as other students did about grades and their meaning towards content mastery, work completion, and an overall measure of academic success. Teacher 1 was the only teacher to go further into the answering of the grade discussion with U.S. Marshallese students. Teacher 1 stated, “It is important for me to discuss the percentage grade more than the letter grade, “Marshallese students seem to have a

general understanding of the letter grade, but struggle with understanding the numerical percentage and how they equate to A, B, C, D, and F's."

How Do You Make Learning Meaningful to U.S. Marshallese Students?

Making academic content being learned relevant to all students and adding in components of Marshallese culture and Marshallese student interest was the common answer by all four teachers who were interviewed. Teacher 1 provided a very specific means of making learning meaningful to U.S. Marshallese students by making student learning directly correlated to basketball when the curriculum allowed for it. Teacher 2 allowed for U.S. Marshallese students to work in groups because of what they viewed as "Marshallese students loving to talk, therefore making discussions and engaging part of student learning." Having students work in groups is what Teacher 4 did to help make learning meaningful to U.S. Marshallese students. Teacher 4 made groups of all students that were randomly selected through student names, this allowed U.S. Marshallese students to be grouped, while allowing them to converse and complete the learning object without limiting the learning needs of U.S. Marshallese students within the classroom.

How Do You Effectively Communicate with U.S. Marshallese Students' Parents?

Parent communication with U.S. Marshallese students was an issue for all four teachers interviewed. All four teachers responded that communicating with parents is difficult because of the language barrier; many parents do not speaking fluent English. Teachers 1, 2, and 4 all said they relied heavily on students to act as translators between them and parents. This was identified by the teachers as being both a positive and negative. Teachers identified the positive in that U.S.

Marshallese students were active participants in their learning, on the other hand being able to trust students to communicate with their parents correctly posed a problem. Teacher 3 utilized the Marshallese liaison at the school to make home visits and to communicate with parents, but also mentioned that using the Marshallese liaison was not always available because of conflicting schedules.

What Challenges Do You Face when Teaching U.S. Marshallese Students?

The interviewed teachers identified multiple challenges they faced as teachers regarding U.S. Marshallese students. Teacher 1 identified behavioral issues regarding U.S. Marshallese students in the classroom. Teacher 1 stated, “The biggest challenge I face is students staying quiet and still when necessary for learning, I believe this is brought on because their family life allows for a similar environment of chaos and noise.” Teacher 2 identified U.S. Marshallese students as being “full of energy,” this was identified as creating a concentration focus for students when working in groups or being asked to examine and learn new material. Teacher 2 also identified an above normal interest in using technology, such as Chrome books and personal devices in the classroom even when these devices were not necessary for learning. Teacher 3 viewed the language barrier with many U.S. Marshallese students as the biggest challenge faced teaching U.S. Marshallese students. Teacher 3 when teaching U.S. Marshallese students also identified the lack of student background knowledge as a challenge.

The need to work with U.S. Marshallese to teach fundamental, elementary level learning skills was identified as a significant challenge to teaching and learning for U.S. Marshallese students by Teacher 3. Teacher 4 discussed a uniquely different challenge from the other three teachers interviewed. Teacher 4 identified their challenge when teaching U.S. Marshallese

students was the perceived inability of most students to take care of and keep up with their school supplies and learning materials, including the school provided Chrome books. Teacher 4 did not perceive this challenge with other students. The constant need to remind U.S. Marshallese students to bring supplies and to take care of the supplies and materials given to them was discussed as a weekly challenge, and the issue was made more of a challenge through a limited ability to communicate clearly with parents regarding these issues.

Do Your Interactions with U.S. Marshallese Students Differ from Those of Other Students?

Teacher 1 interacted with U.S. Marshallese students differently based on their perceived notion as a teacher, of students taking more joy in the classroom. Teacher 1 stated, “This allows me to relate to them more easily through interactive lessons.” Teacher 2 indicated the only difference in interaction with U.S. Marshallese students was the facilitation of student groups instead of individualized learning. Teacher 3 discussed the need for more firmness and reminding of appropriate social interaction with U.S. Marshallese students. This was the only difference Teacher 3 identified in interactions with U.S. Marshallese students. Giving more guidance and clarification to U.S. Marshallese students was how Teacher 4 interacted differently with U.S. Marshallese students. Teacher 4 identified only U.S. Marshallese students as requiring more guidance and clarification in their classroom.

Teacher Interview Summary

The teacher interviews were very insightful to teacher perceptions. The varying degree, yet very similar responses provided some interesting findings. Helping teachers through their perceived challenges, while allowing curriculum standards to be equally implemented and taught

to all students created a challenge for teachers as identified through the research study teacher interviews. The sampling of teachers used in the teacher interviews represented the viewpoints and perspectives of those teachers, but because of the similarity of the individual responses, it appeared the teacher responses were an accurate reflective sampling of teacher perceptions towards student learning of U.S. Marshallese students. Teachers appeared to have varying degrees of understanding Marshallese culture and family structure. The perception of teachers regarding U.S. Marshallese students was uniquely different than the thoughts of the students from the student focus groups.

Ethnographic Positionality

As a research participant observer, my positionality as the campus principal within the research middle school allowed for an analysis of personal ethnographic observations of the larger student population and staff population. My positionality allowed for an examination of U.S. Marshallese students as an outside observer with direct access to monitor and examine U.S. Marshallese student actions actively both in and out of the classroom. Through my observations I was also able to observe the actions and conversations of teachers in the research middle school as the research participant observer.

Student Observations

U.S. Marshallese students appeared to have a joy for learning, based upon school attendance and class participation. Student attendance for U.S. Marshallese students at the research middle school was at or above the average of other students of 96% overall attendance for the observed semester. U.S. Marshallese student academic achievement was based upon the

student failing list, was less than that of other student demographic populations. Language did appear to be challenge with most U.S. Marshallese students, however when given time and explanation if needed, U.S. Marshallese students were willing to comply and do what is being asked of them.

U.S. Marshallese students were motivated by competition with basketball and volleyball being the greatest motivators. Just presenting U.S. Marshallese students with an opportunity to play these sports during recess or before or after school activities appeared to give them a sense of importance and willingness to do well in school both behaviorally and academically. The playful and joyful disposition of most U.S Marshallese students appeared to be more enhanced during the more unstructured times during the school day and when the U.S. Marshallese students grouped with other U.S. Marshallese students. While there were apparent differences between the Marshallese culture and the overall campus culture, observations of U.S. Marshallese students has not indicated that students were not engaged in school or lacking motivation to attend based on the observed behaviors of U.S. Marshallese students at the research middle school.

U.S. Marshallese students created a unique challenge when communicating with students new to the United States or with parents who were limited English speakers. The Marshallese language was not easily translated and does not always have specific words for school related terms and events therefore requiring English terms to be used in translation. The language barrier has only appeared to present a minor challenge to effective communication with U.S. Marshallese students and their families. Parents from my observations have been positive promoters of the school and encouraging of their students to perform well academically and in

extra curricular activities. The key point identified from my positionality has been for school staff to take a specific interest in U.S. Marshallese students and their outside school activities.

Educator participation and encouragement to not only support students, but also to better relate to U.S. Marshallese adults, has provided increased parental and student involvement in school events. This was gleaned through the observation of individual teachers who take genuine interest in U.S. Marshallese students as having better student performance and better student participation with success in learning. It was my perception as a research participant observer that growth in student participation and parental participation was made through staff acceptance of cultural differences through participation, attendance, or basic observance in Marshallese events and activities.

U.S. Marshallese students were observed being authentically engaged in the use of student issued Chrome books at the research middle school. Technology appeared to play an authentic role in empowerment and authentic engagement of U.S. Marshallese students. The students did not speak about the importance of technology and the teachers only discussed the use of technology amongst all students. My positionality within the school has allowed me to identify how U.S. Marshallese utilize technology not only in the school, but also in how they actively share the device with other students who need them for class learning activities.

Technology appeared to play a pivotal role in data review and also in empowering students to learn in a medium where they were most comfortable and adapted. When teachers utilized technology to deliver instruction through multimedia applications, they were able to meet the cultural learning needs of U.S. Marshallese students. The ability of technology to break language barriers and to promote student learning through engaging technology, students were engaged and empowered in school.

Teacher Observations

Teachers within the research middle school were observed through my positionality as the research participant observer as struggling to a minor level when working with U.S. Marshallese students. The common struggle was not necessarily associated with language, but culturally related to U.S. Marshallese student behaviors. U.S. Marshallese students did socialize more and their joyful disposition created an apparent challenge for teachers, as most students within the research middle school were able to limit their playfulness and boisterous student-to-student talking while in class and school functions. The observed cultural difference for U.S. Marshallese students created a situation where teachers were spending more perceived time addressing student misbehavior as opposed to embracing the behavior and utilizing the behavior as a positive student-learning tool.

Very little was given or taught to the teachers at the research middle school regarding Marshallese history, culture, and Marshallese experiences. Many of the conversations with teachers and observations of teachers identified different perceptions of Marshallese culture based on individual teacher experiences of stories they had been told by others or experiences with one family. A consistent recognized cultural phenomenon that was shared and understood by all teachers was the understanding of Marshallese family dynamics. Teachers did not have a clear understanding of why Marshallese family dynamics of communal living and Marshallese family adoption might have taken place. This created further misunderstanding of U.S. Marshallese students and how to work with students who are a part of a multi family structure. The family cultural differences between teachers and students create a struggle for understanding the traditional systems of school by U.S. Marshallese students. The differences were clearly

visible to adults who have been a part of the public education system, but not known to U.S. Marshallese students.

Teachers in the research middle school have been clearly observed working with U.S. Marshallese students in a manner that is both similar and unique to that of other students. Teachers, who took genuine interest in U.S. Marshallese students, were observed as having better student performance and better student participation with success in learning. Teachers were observed allowing students to work in groups with limited conversations. U.S. Marshallese students were allowed to speak in Marshallese and teachers were observed on multiple occasions allowing U.S. Marshallese students to work at a slower pace from others students at the campus. Giving U.S. Marshallese students more guidance and directions, while waiting on longer student responses from U.S. Marshallese students was observed on multiple occasions by teachers to help U.S. Marshallese to have a better understanding with an opportunity to learn what was being taught.

Ethnographic Positionality Summary

As a research participant observer, my positionality as the campus principal within the research middle school has allowed for an analysis of personal ethnographic observations of the larger student population and staff population. My positionality has allowed for affirmation and differentiation of topics and concepts discussed by students and teachers through the focus groups and individual teacher interviews. It was a unique experience to observe both students and teachers and their interactions with one another within the research middle school.

Summary

The students, teachers, and I as the research participant observer who shared their thoughts and perceptions of Marshallese culture, educational values, challenges, and ideas that motivate U.S. Marshallese students to do well in school, were all active participants in the interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnography qualitative research study. Student and teacher participation along with my observations in the research study revealed many similar dimensions related to the research questions that were collected as part of the triangulation of data to support various dimensions of engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their education. The revealed findings of the student focus groups, teacher interviews, and my ethnographic participation as the research participant observer, has established the foundation and basis of the discussion of the findings in Chapter 5, Discussions and Recommendations.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of Findings

In Chapter 5 of this interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnographic qualitative research study, I provide the presentation of the data as it relates to how educators can empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students to active learning and participation in the school and classroom. Also presented within Chapter 5 are the final thoughts for educators and recommendations for future research based on the findings of the research study.

The purpose of this study was to identify how U.S. Marshallese students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools. The indicators have been established on a historical, cultural, and linked perceptions of student learning as identified by U.S. Marshallese students and teachers. The empowerment of students leads them to be more actively engaged in school. This chapter is the discussion of findings of the interpretative descriptive naturalistic ethnographic qualitative research study by examining the data collected through my positionality within the U.S. Marshallese community, student focus groups, and individual teacher interviews. To provide clarity for this study, I used the research questions:

1. How can teachers engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students in active learning and participation?
2. How can teacher perceptions impact U.S. Marshallese student engagement and empowerment in a middle school?

When examining the research findings through a naturalistic interpretation it is clear that teacher perceptions and U.S. Marshallese viewpoints regarding learning and engagement in school are not aligned. The misinterpretations by teachers of what U.S. Marshallese students believe to be important regarding education, along with the expectations of parents in the

importance of education for their U.S. Marshallese students demonstrates the importance for educators to have a better understanding of how to empower U.S. Marshallese students to be engaged and active participants in their learning. Three findings demonstrate important themes for teachers and schools to utilize for the empowerment and engagement of U.S. Marshallese students. Schools need to recognize and embrace Marshallese culture, develop positive student relationships, and create activities that are engaging and of value to U.S. Marshallese students within the context of the school and classroom. Each finding agrees with previous research in Chapter 2, Literature Review, and the research study findings from the student focus groups, teacher interviews, and my positionality as the ethnographic researcher participant observer.

Recognizing and Embracing Marshallese Culture

Recognizing and embracing Marshallese culture is an important theme in both previous research and the research conducted as part of this study of student focus groups and teacher interviews. U.S. Marshallese students clearly indicate the importance of individual culture acknowledgement and the importance of family and culture in giving value to their education. Teachers on the other hand vary in their understanding and embracement of Marshallese culture. Through my lens as the ethnographic research participant observer, there is a clear disconnect between U.S. Marshallese students and teachers as education is related to Marshallese culture.

Teachers base their cultural knowledge of Marshallese culture and values on perceptions and third hand information as it is passed from teacher to teacher. Teachers do not perceive U.S. Marshallese students as valuing education, but the students want to do well in school and they identify their parents and families encouraging them to do well in school. The value of education

as it relates to teachers is similar and culturally connected as teachers identify their value in education as an overall improvement in their lives for a better future.

Teachers in the study recognize Marshallese culture, but vary in their understanding based on limited factual understanding with most of their knowledge being based on perceived student observations. Students identify that education is important to them and want their culture to be embraced and understood as important. Teachers within the school represent what O'Brien et al. (2014) identified as the dominant culture. As the dominant culture serving U.S. Marshallese students, it is important that teachers have a clear understanding of the *factual* culture of U.S. Marshallese students. With a clear understanding of Marshallese culture, schools and teachers can distinctly navigate through cultural behaviors and individual student behaviors that are not necessarily associated with Marshallese culture.

The disconnect is in the perceived value and importance U.S. Marshallese students place on education by their actions and behaviors in the school and classroom. U.S. Marshallese students believe the varied and limited understanding of Marshallese culture creates a distinct need for schools to embrace what O'Brien et al. (2014) identified as the nine guiding principles of cultural proficiency as shown in Table 11.

The nine guiding principles of cultural proficiency provides the foundational support necessary to empower students from a minority background, thereby providing a guide and an essential component to improving student learning for U.S. Marshallese students. When educators utilize the nine guiding principles identified by O'Brien et al. (2014), they create and foster a learning environment that empowers and engages U.S. Marshallese students through cultural awareness and embedded cultural activities that promote positive student learning through a distinct cultural embracement. The nine guiding principles provide educators with a

clear sense of purpose with a roadmap to empowering U.S. Marshallese students in their learning by replacing the various approaches in use by the interviewed teachers within the research study.

Table 11

Nine Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency

1.	Culture is always present.
2.	People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.
3.	It is necessary to recognize that people have group identities as well as personal identities.
4.	There is diversity within cultures.
5.	Each group has unique cultural needs that must be respected and met.
6.	The family is the primary system of support in the education of children.
7.	People who are not part of the dominant culture have to be at least bicultural.
8.	Educators should be aware that in cross-cultural interactions they must be on the outlook for different social and communication dynamics and respond to them appropriately.
9.	School systems also have to incorporate cultural knowledge of their students into policymaking and practices of the organization.

U.S. Marshallese students also identify the value they place on sports and teachers who establish positive relationships with them as students by encouraging them and valuing their ideas and culture. Educators can apply a conceptual framework of inclusion without limits. Utilizing a conceptual framework of inclusion without limits to empower U.S. Marshallese students in schools and classrooms creates an environment of improved student learning for students through creation of learning activities that encourage active student participation in learning at the same level as other students participating in the learning activities. By applying a framework of inclusion without limits, as opposed to a cultural proficiency framework, Marshallese minority students are not just culturally accepted, they are empowered to be a part of the overall learning process through engagement and active learning participation.

Student interactions are internalized and intrinsically processed by the student and then over time become the individual's own thoughts. "Since social interaction is principally constituted and mediated by speech, what gets internalized into the child's stream of thought are the meanings and forms generated in verbal exchange which themselves are products of the broader cultural-historical system" (Bruner, 1997, p. 68). Inclusion without limits requires teachers to include all students in all activities through ordinary classroom practices. Those practices need to have a balance of cultural connectedness that allow students to interact with peer students of the same culture moving to complete inclusion within the classroom to active participation with students of other cultural backgrounds.

Inclusion without limits does not require students to be "pulled out" or to have special modified lessons provided to them that are culturally separate from other students, but rather is a blended cultural learning approach in which all students are exposed to various cultural activities allowing the minority student population to become bicultural. Educators through the framework of inclusion without limits can empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students at higher levels of learning and establish positive relationships with students that encourage and promote an empowering student environment that promotes a positive school environment for U.S. Marshallese students.

The correlation of engaging activities made between U.S. Marshallese students and the interviewed teachers made a clear connection that when teachers bring an activity such as basketball to students through actual play, conversation, or related learning it creates a learning environment that is engaging and empowering to U.S. Marshallese students to take ownership in the student learning taking place. Both students and teachers identified the cultural importance and the importance to combining basketball with learning activities. Allen (1997) shows through

her research that the U.S. Marshallese people in Enid believe a college education is necessary to find quality employment if they are to return to the Marshall Islands. It is important for educators to understand Marshallese history and migration based on factual information and to have an understanding of Marshallese values as they positively correlate to placing a high value on education (Allen, 1997) and through the U.S. Marshallese student focus groups in the research study.

O'Brien et al.'s (2014) nine guiding principles provide a foundation for educators to follow when working with U.S. Marshallese students. The principles provide a simple and clearly articulated method that aligns with the framework of inclusion without limits. The framework of inclusion without limits allows U.S. Marshallese students to work in culturally connected groups within the classroom, while allowing other students from different cultural backgrounds to experience Marshallese culture in their own learning. U.S. Marshallese students are exposed to other cultures through shared classroom activities that allow them to be completely immersed and included in all school and classroom activities. Educators through the nine guiding principles, utilizing a framework of inclusion without limits, and valuing the Marshallese cultural through factual understanding can better develop and engage U.S. Marshallese students through school and classroom environments that empower them to higher levels of achievement.

Positive Student Relationships

It is important for educational leaders to create learning environments where other educators are trained to teach from a culturally competent perspective as related to their subject matter. More importantly teachers need to build positive relationships with minority students and

utilize these relationships to create teachable moments from inquiry, based on student cultural perspectives. An important piece of inclusionary practice is for the school to create a setting of empowering, inclusionary practices. “Student empowerment is a process by which students gain the power to meet their individual needs” (Kirk et al., 2015, p. 829). U.S. Marshallese students identified a need to feel valued by their teachers. All teachers interviewed within the research study indicated the importance of discussion and conversation with U.S. Marshallese students about things of interest to them such as basketball.

Having an understanding of Marshallese culture is important to building positive relationships with students. One perspective of cultural relatedness to relationship building comes from the Marshallese viewpoint of strangers and visitors. Throughout the history of the Marshallese people and even through today, the Marshallese are viewed as friendly and peaceful (World Fact Book, 2018a). Marshallese culture calls for strangers and visitors to be warmly received because it is important in Marshallese society to have consideration for others. The idea of Marshallese culture being embracing of strangers and visitors is supported through the U.S. Marshallese student focus groups identifying their desire to value teachers who establish positive relationships and those teachers who take a genuine interest in them as individuals and the Marshallese culture. Teachers also identify a positive correlation to engaging U.S. Marshallese students when they engage in conversation and participated in activities of interest to U.S. Marshallese students. Understanding culture and embracing activities of interest to U.S. Marshallese students appear to be an important factor identified by both students and teachers to establish positive relationships with students to empower and engage them within the school and classroom.

In order to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students, the critical step is student teacher relationships. Student motivation can be supported when classrooms promote student-teacher relationships (Nichols & Zhang, 2009). In order to practice inclusionary teaching practices and create an empowering school and classroom environment, it is essential that positive relationships be established between educators, students, and parents. The fostering of relationships is guided by inclusionary practices in the school setting including U.S. Marshallese students in the student-to-teacher and teacher-to-student conversation is an important component. To go to the next step of listening and creating learning applications around minority student learning needs, based on cultural awareness, educators can create an inclusive learning environment that values minority student social backgrounds through this awareness. It is through this appreciation that U.S. Marshallese students are truly empowered to be active participants who are engaged and motivated to achieve at higher levels of learning and retention.

The adult/student educational relationship and cultural awareness of U.S. Marshallese students is crucial to empowerment and engagement in learning. Both teachers and students within the context of the research study indicate a significant importance for teachers who take genuine interest in creating a more engaging classroom environment. From my positionality as research participant observer, I was able to clearly identify through observation the positive impact student/teacher relationships play in U.S. Marshallese student engagement and empowerment for motivating students to attend school while performing at higher levels for those teachers who establish those relationships. As students are empowered within the school, it is then the idea of the moral imparity and the continuation of American democracy can be secured. When U.S. Marshallese students are empowered as learners, it is only then public

education has taken a positive step towards higher levels of learning for all students' cultural awareness and positive student relationships.

School and Classroom Engagement

U.S. Marshallese students and teachers identify a clear need to engage students through activities for learning that is related to student interest. It is important for educators to practice instructional delivery practices that utilize inclusionary practices where educators value student differences and cultures. Teacher interviews reveal that when student interests are taken into account for instructional delivery that U.S. Marshallese students are more engaged and empowered in their learning.

U.S. Marshallese students indicate through the focus groups their desire to work in groups, especially with other U.S. Marshallese students. Teachers indicate in the interviews the positive outcomes of grouping U.S. Marshallese students within similar peer groups to improve academic performance. Through inclusionary practices educators empower students to communicate and participate by creating learning environments that not only meet the curriculum standards, but also provide a platform to listen to students and embrace learning activities of cultural and social importance to them as students.

My observation of Marshallese culture has identified an interest in music and art by U.S. Marshallese students. Through the literature review of Marshallese culture, art is also of importance to Marshallese people. Art is of significant importance to the Marshallese people (L. Tommy, personal communication, September 22, 2016). Marshallese men and women create beautiful tools and everyday items they artistically craft from centuries of practice and skilled craftsmanship. Items known and valued for their artistic beauty in the Marshall Islands are

weaved baskets and bags, wall hanging weaved decorations known as an *obong*, woven flowers, woven sleeping mats, and the design and creation of traditional dress correlated with modern fabrics and contemporary design (T. Mote, personal conversation, March 2, 2017). The Marshallese people are easily identified through the art they wear and create to share with others. The cultural attachment to art by U.S. Marshallese students is evident in the clothing, handmade leis, and weaved bags students can be seen with in the school and community. Educators need to apply this level of understanding to designing learning activities that will empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students to distinct cultural connections to learning.

Technology appears to play a pivotal role in empowering students to learn in a medium where they are most comfortable and adapted. When teachers utilize technology to deliver instruction through multimedia applications, they are able to meet the cultural learning needs of U.S. Marshallese students. The ability of technology to break language barriers and to promote student learning through engaging technology empower and engage students in school.

According to Thamarasseri (2014), students are motivated and engaged when multiple learning styles are addressed and learning is student centered. Both are important attributes geared toward student empowerment. When technology and data are aligned as part of student empowerment, Nichols (2004) describes the empowerment dimension as being characterized by two features: organization and stimulation. The organization of thought that technology promotes and empowers students to focus on what is important based on the ideas of inclusive practices associated with student learning activities. Technology can help educators bridge the gap with students between cultural blindness and cultural competence through applications geared toward student cultural backgrounds.

Collaboration in technology is empowering to students because it allows minority students to bridge learning gaps while creating equal access to education and ideas of student peer groups. The utilization of technology empowers students in a multitude of ways. Technology creates an empowering environment while at the same time allowing for inclusionary practice that is available to all students regardless of language or racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Teachers and students identified a need to understand Marshallese history better. This will help teachers understand their students and also for students to understand their ancestral history better. Heine (2002) concluded in order to meet the learning needs of students, schools need to be culturally responsive. Teachers and other students need to know the Micronesian students and appreciate the assets they bring to school, regardless of any language differences. Just as the research study results revealed, a need for greater cultural understanding for creating an engaging and empowering school and classroom environment, Heines (2002) research provided an important examination of the role apathy and cultural understanding can play in engaging and empowering students. If educators and communities understand Marshallese students and family culture and educational history, then true student empowerment can begin to take place within the school.

Educators need to seek ways through inclusionary practices that embrace and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. The research findings clearly point to U.S. Marshallese student desires to learn. It is up to educators to embrace Marshallese culture, establish and maintain positive student relationships with U.S. Marshallese students, and create empowering and engaging learning activities culturally connected to U.S. Marshallese students to encourage students to participate actively in learning activities.

Final Thoughts

Student empowerment is an essential component to student learning and student social growth. In order to create an environment of learning that meets the learning needs of minority student populations, specifically students of Marshallese descent, student empowerment becomes a part of the school and classroom culture. The purpose of this study was to identify how U.S. Marshallese students could be empowered and engaged in their learning through clearly identified indicators that educators could apply within their classrooms and schools. The indicators have been established on a historical, cultural, and linked perceptions of student learning as identified by U.S. Marshallese students and teachers.

In this study, I gathered qualitative data from U.S. Marshallese students which led to a contextual understanding of empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their learning thereby allowing them to grow academically and to a greater extent participate as active citizens of the Marshall Islands and or as U.S. citizens. The findings of this qualitative research study can be applied by educators to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning on a daily basis in schools and classrooms. The following research questions provided the basis of guidance to educators as defined by the findings of the research study.

How Can Teachers Engage and Empower U.S. Marshallese Students in Active Learning and Participation?

U.S. Marshallese students revealed they want to feel valued in school through teachers talking to them about things of interest to them such as basketball. Students also want to be able to work with their peers, specifically other Marshallese students. Being culturally connected in school is important for U.S. Marshallese students. Not only did U.S. Marshallese students want to learn about their own culture and other student group cultures, they also want other students to

learn about Marshallese culture. This embracement of multiple cultures identifies the joyful and accepting disposition of U.S. Marshallese students. Educators need to build and establish positive relationships through a clear understanding of the Marshallese culture with U.S. Marshallese students. When educators effectively communicate and utilize the cultural facts and the unique student population attributes of the U.S. Marshallese students, educators can then effectively create a school environment that is inclusive of U.S. Marshallese students through shared activities and values associated with school activities and classroom lessons.

When educators utilize the nine guiding principles identified by O'Brien et al. (2014), they create and foster a learning environment that empowers and engages U.S. Marshallese students through cultural awareness and embedded cultural activities which promote positive student learning through a distinct cultural embracement. If educators apply a framework of inclusion without limits, as opposed to a cultural proficiency framework, Marshallese minority students are not just culturally accepted, they are empowered to be a part of the overall learning process through engagement and active learning participation. Utilizing the cultural connectedness of U.S. Marshallese students to each other through student grouping and student activities can create an empowering environment for U.S. Marshallese students where they feel valued and important within the greater context of the school and classroom.

How Can Teacher Perceptions Impact U.S. Marshallese Student Engagement and Empowerment in a Middle School?

Teacher perceptions of U.S. Marshallese students have a direct impact on how teachers relate to U.S. Marshallese students as identified through the teacher interviews. Teacher attitudes towards U.S. Marshallese students differ based on their perceptions of students. When teachers indicate their perception of the Marshallese culture, it correlates directly to the classroom

activities they create for engaging U.S. Marshallese students. Teachers identified varying levels of understanding of the Marshallese culture and identified disparities in perception and truth regarding Marshallese culture. When teachers apply more factual cultural connections, they utilize classroom activities that are positively correlated to activities U.S. Marshallese students identify as being engaging.

It is important for educators to be exposed to factual Marshallese culture and to limit teacher perceptions and stories of U.S. Marshallese student behaviors and actions as being a connected identifier of the Marshallese culture. Educational leaders develop professional learning opportunities for other educators that allow for the discovery and analysis of historical and cultural understanding of the Marshall Islands in order to avoid the discrepancies unveiled in the cultural background of the research participant teachers. Educators need to embrace O'Brien et al. (2014), nine guiding principles of cultural proficiency, while being educated by educational leaders about Marshallese culture. Perceptions by teachers are key indicators to how they engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning.

Limiting false perceptions leads educators to creating empowering schools and classrooms that positively engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. Establishing positive relationships with U.S. Marshallese students in order to create the connections with students that are factually aligned to the larger U.S. Marshallese population and not based on the outlier student behaviors of individual U.S. Marshallese students. Educators through their personal connection can more readily identify student outlier behaviors and those that are culturally connected to Marshallese culture. U.S. Marshallese student indicate teachers who identify with them create a more empowering and engaging classroom environment.

“Empowering settings for adolescent youth are characterized by shared power and decision-making, positive sense of community, quality activities, and mutual goal achievement” (Kirk et al., 2015, p. 830). It is important for U.S. Marshallese students to feel appreciated and valued beyond just being an attending student in school or classroom. U.S. Marshallese students need to be valued and understood. Their cultural backgrounds need to be appreciated within context of their learning through culture connectedness and inclusive classroom practices. It is important for U.S. Marshallese students to have their values and ideas understood and applied when necessary into the daily learning of the classroom and larger school.

Recommendations for Future Research

Specific research directed at U.S. Marshallese education is very limited and this is the first identified research specifically directed at empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. The focus of the current study was middle school students and teachers. Potential future studies can focus on high school students and can involve parent interviews, as they have greater exposure to a longer duration of time in school. I concentrated on continued student engagement and a secondary focus on the specific role schools can play in engaging parents in active participation in their students learning and school activities. An important cultural phenomenon of interest to educators involves a more in-depth understanding of the Marshallese cultural perspective of biological parents and adopted parents. This unique role of adoption can lead to U.S. Marshallese students leaving with adopted families who have biological children also living in the home. The adopted students still have the opportunity to stay in contact with their biological parent. This creates a conflict in parent identification and can sometimes facilitate issues with the student when the adopted family begins to treat the student

differently from other children in the residence.

A research study directed at high school students and parents or families of these students may lead educators to understand the possible motivators and limitations better of U.S.

Marshallese students regarding education and career goal setting. Education is holistic system of student, teacher, parent, and community. Educators and educational leaders need to have an understanding of the connections of all four parts of the educational process to bring sustainable and continuing empowerment and engagement to the broader U.S. Marshallese community.

U.S. Marshallese student research participants identified relationships and cultural connections as being an important factor of being empowered and engaged in school. Teacher perceptions identified limited engagement and varying levels of cultural understanding by teachers. Future studies may reveal more in-depth identifiers of student engaging activities, through student focus groups with high school students and one-on-one interviews with parents.

Within the context of a secondary U.S. Marshallese student and parent family study, the future researcher can examine similarities and variances to this research study of middle school U.S. Marshallese students and teachers. Future research can utilize the framework of inclusion without limits to conduct a competitive analysis between students of other minority backgrounds in order to examine their levels of active student participation and engagement within the classroom. Identifying ways to engage students in school and classroom activities is an important factor in helping a unique and culturally diverse population of students to reach higher levels of student learning. Future research focused on U.S. Marshallese high school students and their parents adds a third dimension and allows for a second level of knowledge for engaging students and parents in further engaging and improving student learning with parent participation for U.S. Marshallese students.

Summary

Educators can empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. In this study, I gathered qualitative data from U.S. Marshallese students that led to a contextual understanding of empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in their learning thereby allowing them to grow academically and to a greater extent participate as active citizens of the Marshall Islands and or U.S. citizens. The findings of this qualitative research study can be applied by educators to empower and engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning on a daily basis in schools and classrooms.

U.S. Marshallese student empowerment and engagement as with other empowered minority populations has the power to motivate and create self-determined individuals who can succeed in a multitude of challenging academic situations. It is important for U.S. Marshallese students to retain their cultural heritage and cultural identity, while being engaged and empowered in their learning to becoming lifelong learners and productive citizens. Educators must develop a clear understanding of the culture and history of the Marshallese people and not rely on only perceptions of U.S. Marshallese students to guide their understanding of Marshallese culture.

Perceptions by teachers are key indicators to how they engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. Limiting false perceptions leads educators to creating empowering schools and classrooms that positively engage U.S. Marshallese students in their learning. Being culturally connected in school is described as an important component for U.S. Marshallese students. Not only did U.S. Marshallese students identify a willingness and importance to learn about their own culture and other student group cultures, they also want other students to learn about Marshallese culture. Utilizing the cultural connectedness of U.S. Marshallese students to each

other through student grouping and student activities can create an empowering environment for U.S. Marshallese students where they feel valued and important within the greater context of the school and classroom. Cultural understanding, positive relationship building, and the design of culturally connected intrinsically student motivated learning activities is the foundation and critical component of empowering and engaging U.S. Marshallese students in school and classrooms for improved student learning.

APPENDIX A
STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Interviewer:

Student Focus group #:

Focus Group Date and Time:

Location:

(Brief description of the research study, confidentiality, and informed consent.)

Greetings:

Prior to the focus group, greet the participants and extend appreciation for participation in the study.

Explanation of Study:

Explain the study is being conducted to identify how U.S. Marshallese students can be actively engaged and empowered in their learning. The focus groups intent is to identify student perceptions to answer the studies two-research questions.

1. How can teachers engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students in active learning and participation?
2. How can teacher perceptions impact U.S. Marshallese student engagement and empowerment in a middle school?

Focus Group Process, Consent, and Confidentiality:

Review the informed consent form providing more information regarding the study and confidentiality. Explain that during the course of the study and in the writing of the studies findings, the participant's identity will remain confidential and if at any time the participant would like to leave the study, they are free to do so.

Questions:

If the participants have any questions, offer the option for them to ask.

End of Interview:

At the end of the interview, thank the participants.

APPENDIX B
TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Interview Date and Time:

Location:

(Brief description of the research study, confidentiality, and informed consent.)

Greetings:

Prior to the interview, greet the participant and extend appreciation for participation in the study.

Explanation of Study:

Explain the study is being conducted to identify how U.S. Marshallese students can be actively engaged and empowered in their learning. The focus groups intent is to identify student perceptions to answer the studies two-research questions.

1. How can teachers engage and empower U.S. Marshallese students in active learning and participation?
2. How can teacher perceptions impact U.S. Marshallese student engagement and empowerment in a middle school?

Focus Group Process, Consent, and Confidentiality:

Review the informed consent form providing more information regarding the study and confidentiality. Explain that during the course of the study and in the writing of the studies findings, the participant identity will remain confidential and if at any time the participant would like to leave the study, they are free to do so.

Questions:

If the participant has any questions, offer the option for them to ask.

End of Interview:

At the end of the interview, thank the participant.

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