

Mozart to Mariachi:
A Self-Study Exploring a Music Educator's Journey of Acceptance into “The Space
Between”

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ABSTRACT

For many, the path to acceptance and finding a home in a culture that is not their own is marked by doubts, hesitations, and a lingering sense of uncertainty. Yet, it also brings moments of excitement, filled with new experiences, opportunities, and connections. In this self-study, I aim to share my story of navigating as a developing mariachi educator coming from outside Mexican culture. Through my personal narrative and reflections as a researcher co-participant, along with insights and recollections from interviews and conversations with those close to me—colleagues, former and current students, parents of my students, and community members—I sought to understand the continuous development and reshaping of my role and sense of acceptance from beginning as a cultural outsider to becoming a resident of “the space between” (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Trulsson & Burnard, 2016) and ultimately an accepted member of the mariachi music community.

Drawing upon outsider/insider research (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Merton, 1972; Trulsson & Burnard, 2016) as well as the principles of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000), this self-study allowed me to reflect on and refine my practice, while also providing a space to articulate my insights and analyze pivotal moments of discovery and growth in my journey as a mariachi educator navigating a cultural music tradition with which I was initially unfamiliar. By comparing the perspectives of the participants with my own, I gained a more comprehensive and informed understanding of my development as a mariachi educator and my journey toward acceptance within the mariachi music community. Through this research, I aim to inspire others to take similar actions in their communities by

connecting with and engaging in musical traditions and cultures that are meaningful to their students, families, and educational settings.

DEDICATION

To Dad,

*who taught me that education doesn't just make you smarter,
but opens doors to a world of opportunities.*

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To the participants who contributed to this self-study—Thank you for your honesty and candor as well as your perspectives and insights on my journey as a mariachi educator in “the space between.” Thank you for helping me to tell a fuller, well-rounded version of the story.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The journey to acceptance and finding a home within a culture that is not your own, for many, is filled with doubts, reservations, and a constant feeling of uncertainty. It also offers moments of excitement for new experiences, opportunities, and connections. How is one's role defined within the cultural setting? How do we differentiate between outsiders and insiders to that culture? Is there a space for individuals to find a place of acceptance within a culture that was previously unfamiliar?

When I began designing this self-study during the comprehensive examination process, I originally thought it would be linked directly to my teaching of mariachi music, a genre that was initially completely outside of my comfort zone and prior knowledge. My initial inquiries and research strategies were based more on the action of teaching and the principles of pedagogies. However, as I began to think more deeply about my journey as a mariachi educator who began from outside of Mexican American culture, a journey that is still continuing today, I discovered that this study was more about examining my pathway to understanding and acceptance within a long-standing cultural tradition of my students, their families, and our community.

During the first ten years of my teaching career, my identity was defined, almost strictly, as that of orchestra/strings teacher. However, it was an encounter in the hallway with my former principal in the middle of my tenth year that would change the course of my career as a music educator and reshape how I saw myself as a teacher. Per direction from our district superintendent, I was asked to begin a mariachi program at Marcos de

Niza High School; while our institution was very diverse with a large percentage identifying as Latinx or Hispanic, our music programs often did not reflect this.

While excited about the opportunity to build a program that would assist me in creating deeper connections with the community that I served, I recall the feelings of anxiety, apprehension, and self-doubt that festered in my mind. I felt confident in teaching music, but I had very limited knowledge about the background and performance of mariachi. *What did I know about mariachi music and culture? How would I teach students about a musical genre and tradition with which I was unfamiliar but was likely theirs? What would students, families, and community members think about a white music educator teaching a cultural music tradition deeply rooted in Mexican culture?* Similar questions and thoughts cycled through my mind as I stepped on a plane to attend my first mariachi pedagogy conference.

Fast forward more than six years later, in addition to three orchestras, I was directing a mariachi program of almost 60 students in beginning and advanced groups at the same high school. The students and I consistently learned alongside each other, and the community embraced me and my vision for the program. Over time, I felt my confidence grow, and I now feel empowered with a sense of acceptance in the mariachi classroom and community, despite not being a true insider. Today, I oversee the mariachi ensemble at Arizona State University, building relationships both on campus and within the community. The ensemble, composed of university students from a variety of programs and majors, community members, area music educators, and advanced high school students, has grown from about 30-40 members enrolled each semester to over 80 musicians. A timeline of my journey can be found in Appendix A.

How did I get to this point? What were my preconceived notions and views about mariachi music as an outsider to the genre and culture? How did my early experiences support the evolution of my journey into “the space between” and understanding of culture, both in our community and in the mariachi tradition? Furthermore, what are the viewpoints and feelings of those who have been close to me (i.e. students, parents, community members, colleagues) during this journey of acceptance and navigating from outside the culture to a space somewhere between outsider and insider? What are their feelings and opinions about a cultural outsider teaching and leading a mariachi program, and what are pertinent perspectives about their experiences?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this self-study is to examine the evolution of my journey in understanding student and community cultural backgrounds through experiences learning to teach and perform mariachi both within and outside of the classroom. Through my own personal narrative and reflections as researcher co-participant, along with insight and recollections from conversational interviews with those close to me (i.e., colleagues, students, parents, and community members), I aimed to gain insight into the continuous development and reshaping of my role as cultural outsider to resident of “the space between” (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Trulsson & Burnard, 2016) and ultimately toward becoming an accepted member within the mariachi music community.

Research Questions

As I navigated this study, the following questions provided direction and guidance as I reflected on my own experiences, interviewed participants, and analyzed the data and recurring themes:

1. What are my experiences of navigating a cultural music tradition as an initial outsider?
2. How did my experiences in teaching mariachi position me to become part of the “space between” with my students and within the community? Conversely, did any experiences hinder my becoming a part of the mariachi musical community?
3. When reflecting on my journey, what do I learn about my progression from outsider to resident of the “space between?” What are the perspectives of others who have been participants in my journey?
4. What are the similarities and differences between my reflections and participants’ reflections on my journey? How do these similarities and differences inform this journey and provide a more well-rounded telling of my development?
5. How can music educators effectively approach teaching cultural music traditions and building meaningful connections with cultural communities different from their own?

The succeeding sections of this chapter address the need for this study within the field of music education as well as definitions of terms that are central components of my inquiry. Additionally, I provide an overview of the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

Need for the Study

Researchers have found that population demographics in the United States are constantly evolving. Looking specifically at Hispanic and Latinx¹ population groups, from 2005 to 2050, these communities will account for 60% of the country's population growth (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, 2017). Furthermore, Neel (2017) points out that 69% of Latinx students identify as "being of Mexican origin" and that this subgroup population will increase by approximately 166% by 2050 (p. 3). How are leaders of educational institutions and curriculum developers recognizing and responding to this shift? How are facilitators of learning environments and educators addressing the needs of a changing landscape of learner demographics and populations?

Specific to music education, Soto (2018) shares, "Music educators and ethnomusicologists have recognized the importance of connecting home musical cultures to formal school learning, to allow students new musical horizons while also continuing to support musical sensibilities that are within their homes and families" (p. 33). In order to best address the evolving needs of the students present in the learning space, it is essential that music educators design programs that are relevant to their pupils and that might better connect to their home cultures (Lychner, 2008). However, music education curricula and teacher preparation programs have primarily revolved around western classical traditions, creating a further disconnect and barriers, as well as conflict, between

¹ The literature that I reviewed for this study uses a variety of terms, but Hispanic and Latinx/Latino/Latina have been prevalent in identifying this broad population group. While mariachi is a traditional Mexican musical genre, not all of the literature and ideas cited throughout the studied literature are specific to Mexican and Mexican American populations.

students' cultural knowledge and the curriculum taught in schools (Battiste, 2020; Bernard, 2012). Referencing Jorgensen (2003, 2008, 2010), Bernard (2012) recommends:

As the musical world of today becomes more and more wide ranging, and as music is being shared across national boundaries, music educators must understand and participate in a greater array of musical styles and traditions than ever before. Today's musical reality demands music educators who can support their students as they explore a varied repertoire—varied in terms of its historical context, musical style, and cultural origin. (p. 6)

Furthermore, by recognizing and incorporating varied musical traditions within the school music setting, educators may be able to foster mindful and meaningful connections with the practices and genres that students live outside of the classroom (Allsup, 2008; Clements, 2008; Green, 2001, 2008; Regus, 2022, 2025).

Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2000, 2002) offer pedagogical frameworks that provide educators guidance in facilitating these connections with students from various cultural backgrounds. These frameworks, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Teaching, will be discussed in the second chapter of this document; however, there is a need to see these approaches demonstrated in the practical classroom setting and how educators have navigated the journey to further understand the variety of cultural backgrounds and musical experiences within student and community populations. What are the triumphs and challenges in gaining acceptance within a musical and cultural practice that is not one's own? How does one navigate feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty? Where do the views of students, families, forebearers, and

community members fit into a music educator's journey of finding "the space between" cultural outsider and insider?

Definitions of Terms

Mariachi

Mariachi music, performance, history, and education play integral roles within this dissertation and self-study. For this study, mariachi is identified as the music and culture in which I am navigating my evolving journey from outsider to the "space between" as an accepted member of this musical community. The origins of mariachi music date back to the nineteenth century; the aurally-transmitted genre was first performed by peasant musicians on ranches and in small rural towns throughout western Mexico (Sheehy, 2008). While the mariachis that we hear today feature the resonant sounds of trumpets and sometimes flutes, early ensembles consisted of only stringed instruments, such as violins, guitars of various sizes, and an *arpa*, or harp, acting as the bass voice. The repertoire of these local performing groups consisted primarily of the *son*, a musical form that alternates between 3/4 and 6/8 time signatures, is characterized by rhythmic flow, and is often used to accompany dancers.

As urban centers such as Mexico City grew and developed in the first half of the twentieth century, musicians began to migrate to cities in the hope of financial gain through performances at social events (Clark, 2005). While the *arpa* still retains a role in the modern mariachi ensemble, the development of the *guitarrón*, a large turtle-back-shaped guitar, provided a more robust bass sound and allowed for easier travel from place to place between performances (Clark, 2005). Sheehy (2008) states:

From the 1930s to the 1950s, the mariachi experienced a profound transformation, changing from a loose-knit rural ensemble performing for local social occasions into a professionalized, codified, and romanticized ensemble that withstood the musical scrutiny of sophisticated urban audiences at the same time that it appealed to their idealized notions of their rural roots. (p. vi)

Mariachi music made its way to the United States through film, radio, recordings, and live performances. However, the Chicano movement for civil rights in the 1960s brought mariachi to the forefront as a symbol of Mexican American identity and a meaningful form of musical participation within the United States (Sheehy, 2008). Through the work of Chicano activists, mariachi festivals in the southwest United States were established during the 1970s and 1980s, providing educational workshops in addition to performances. It was during this time that seeds of mariachi education were planted within United States schools, blossoming and allowing for a re-envisioning of music programs that relied primarily on Western classical music and traditions.

Culture

As this dissertation unfolds, a variety of perspectives of the term *culture* will be presented in order for readers to fully understand the breadth and depth of its definitions and applications. In my research, I have found the writings of Elliott (1990) to resonate with my viewpoints:

Culture . . . is not something that people *have*, it is something that people *do*.

Culture is generated by *interplay* between a group's beliefs about their physical, social, and metaphysical circumstances and the linked bodies of skills and knowledge they develop, standardize, preserve, and modify to meet the intrinsic

and extrinsic needs of the group. . . . Properly understood, then, the culture of a social group is its shared program for adapting, living, and growing in a particular time and place. (p. 149)

In this sense, culture is a living, co-created experience that is constantly evolving and developing within different social groups and populations. Situated as a verb, culture can be defined as more than something that individuals possess, but something that they are actively a part of and continuously developing. While this study focuses greatly on an understanding of musical culture, I also experienced a transfer of knowledge in relation to students' home cultures and familial traditions during my journey that included language, food, and cultural events and observances such as quinceañeras and Día de los Muertos.

The Space Between

Throughout my journey into understanding my students' cultural backgrounds and becoming a part of the mariachi community, I experienced a progression from outsider to the space between outsider and insider. While a strict dichotomy of outsider or insider was generally accepted historically, a number of scholars in community-based research have come to the realization that these boundaries are "permeable" (Merton, 1972, p. 37) and that "as situations involving different values arise, different statuses are activated and the lines of separation shift" (Merton, 1972, p. 28). DeVault (1996) asserts that identities are "always relative, cross cut by other differences and often situational and contingent" (p. 35).

As will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this document, *the space between* will be used in this study to define an individual's positioning who was once an outsider and has worked to become a knowledgeable participant and contributor to the cultural

community. In defining this term from a research perspective, Kerstetter (2012) explains, “The ‘space between’ is usually characterized as a multidimensional space, where researchers’ identities, cultural backgrounds, and relationships to research participants influence how they are positioned within that space” (p. 101). Researchers suggest that, because individuals hold various identities, placement on the spectrum of insider, outsider, and *the space between* is situational and fluid; distinctions are made in relation to particular people or contexts (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012; Smith, 1999). While full insider status is not possible for initial outsiders, Banks (1998) alludes that the *external-insider*, which aligns with *the space between*, might become an adopted member of a community. These foundational ideas can extend to educators who are working to become accepted participants of cultures with which they are initially unfamiliar or inexperienced.

Delimitations

This study presents my journey as one individual music educator as well as the voices and perspectives of a small portion of individuals (colleagues, former and current students, parents, and community members) with whom I worked during my development as a mariachi educator. While the findings and themes derived from this study could apply to the stories of others, it cannot be assumed or implied that the data collected are applicable to the viewpoints of every individual involved in my journey or other studies of a similar nature or context.

Chapters of the Document

In this document, I present a literature review consisting of various perspectives and viewpoints on the definition of culture. In addition, I provide an historical overview

of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002). While exploring these two pedagogical frameworks, I discuss how they assist educators in bridging the gap between their understanding of the classroom setting and students' home cultures. Further, I provide an overview of how contemporaries of Ladson-Billings and Gay have expanded upon these frameworks in order to improve culturally relevant and responsive classroom practices in today's academic settings.

In the third chapter of this document, I showcase a methodology and framework for the study. Within the chapter, I provide context and research support for a self-study on my journey from an outsider of the mariachi community and culture to a member of "the space between." I share research on the outsider/insider research framework as well as my method of collecting and analyzing data throughout the process. Additionally, I describe the data collection and analysis process.

In Chapter Four of this document, I provide the backgrounds of the 19 participants who took part in conversational interviews. Because their voices are present throughout the findings of the self-study, I felt that it was pertinent to include information about each individual so that readers can understand who they are and how they fit into my journey as a developing mariachi educator. In Chapter Five, I present an analysis of the conversational interviews and reflective journal entries. Through analyzing these data, I identify overarching themes that are commonly discussed by the participants and discovered in my own reflections. Chapter Six contains insights and discussion on the findings of this research in relation to the scholarly literature presented in the second chapter. Additionally, I offer recommendations for music educators and researchers

related to future exploration and work within this framework and context. It is my hope that this study will be helpful to K-12 music educators, inspiring those who want to better understand and embrace the communities that are connected to and present within their educational environments.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this self-study is to examine my journey as a music educator in understanding student/community cultural backgrounds through experiences in and out of the classroom setting, navigating as an outsider of the mariachi community culture to “the space between,” and becoming an accepted member within the mariachi music community (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007). Within this chapter, I provide definitions of culture from multiple perspectives and viewpoints. Additionally, I present an historical overview of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000, 2002). I aim to explore how these pedagogical approaches can assist educators in bridging the gap between their understanding of school and students’ home cultures. I also examine ways that others’ research and scholarly work has expanded Ladson-Billings’ and Gay’s work. I explore these topics from a lens specific to this study and might not address all perspectives that are covered within this literature.

The Defining of Culture

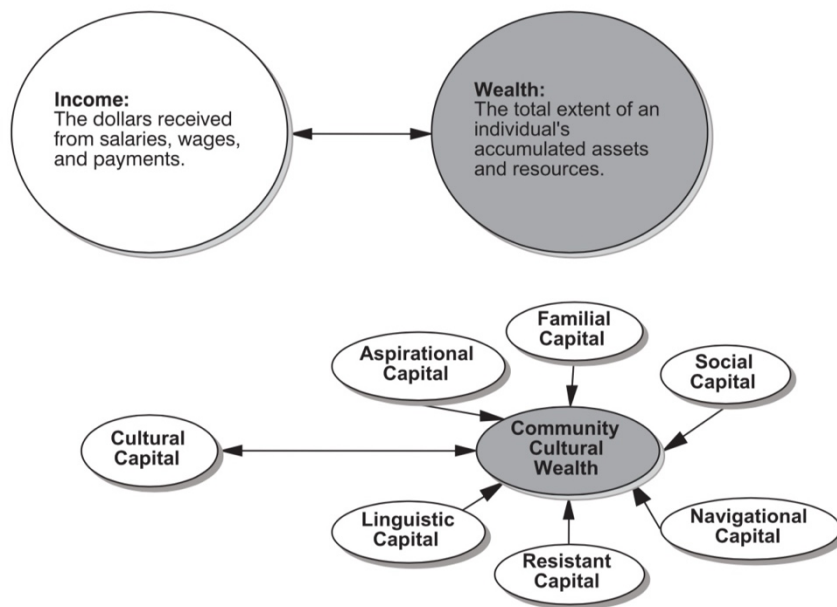
Culture has been explored and defined in a multitude of ways within scholarly research and education. While some might define culture as nationality, ethnicity, language, and/or race, others argue that such labels are too simplistic or superficial. Abril and Kelly-McHale (2016) cite Apple (1986) who notes that, while these components are valid and play a role in defining one’s cultural identity, the roots of culture run deeper, “[constituting] an entire way of life, as well as things people create, transmit, and

consume” (p. 243). Culture is also influenced by social, political, and historical ideas, creating multilayered understandings of its defining characteristics (Nieto, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Situating the term “culture” as an adverb rather than a noun, Moll (2000) provides the perspective that “people *live culturally* rather than . . . *live in culture* ” (p. 330, emphasis in original).

Yosso (2005) challenges and critiques the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) as well as Oliver and Shapiro (1995) to propose the Community Cultural Wealth model, using Critical Race Theory to address the racial and cultural pieces of the lived experiences of people of color. She asserts that both Bourdieu’s and Oliver and Shapiro’s perspectives ascribe a very narrow view of cultural capital that is centered around White, middle class values. She notes that communities of color “nurture cultural wealth through at least six forms of capital such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77), all of which build upon each other and are not exclusive. Yosso (2005) defines *aspirational capital* as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p. 77). *Linguistic capital* encompasses the skills, both intellectual and social, that are developed through communication in multiple languages or styles, emphasizing the idea that students of color enter school with skills developed by their home culture that may not match dominant communication styles in the academic setting. *Familial capital* depicts that cultural knowledge that is developed through family and community, placing emphasis on “history, memory, and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78, see also Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2002). *Social capital* includes the various networks of people and community resources that help individuals navigate through different institutions

within society, such as scholarship programs and higher education. *Navigational capital* is defined as “skills of maneuvering through social institutions,” which, historically, were not created with an equitable mindset in place (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). *Resistant capital* “refers [to the] knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80) Yosso also asserts that the basis of resistant capital is maintaining and passing on the other capital elements that are part of her model.

Figure 1



Note. From Yosso (2005, p. 78), A model of community cultural wealth. Adapted from Oliver & Shapiro, 1995

Hidalgo (1993) asserts that culture has three distinct levels: concrete, behavioral, and symbolic. The concrete level includes the most apparent elements of culture, such as food and dress, while the behavioral level provides insight into social roles, languages spoken, and approaches to non-verbal communication, reflecting the values of a cultural group or community. The symbolic level encompasses values and beliefs of a cultural

group or community. This level “can be abstract; however, it is the key to how we define ourselves. Components of the symbolic level include value systems, customs, spirituality, religion, and worldview” (McKoy & Lind, 2023, p. 10, referencing Hidalgo, 1993).

While the surface elements of culture, such as food and dress, are easily seen, researchers suggest that the more intricate components are, like an iceberg, hidden or invisible to the naked eye (Hall, 1977). Noel (2017) suggests a different metaphor, comparing elements and components of culture to a tree:

Some of these components [of culture] can be visualized as the branches of a tree, as the outward and observable customs of a culture. It is the roots, however, that provide the deeper, shared values and beliefs of which the branches grow. Current definitions of culture focus at the level of the roots of the tree, emphasizing the idea that a culture’s values and beliefs will shape the customs and traditions of that culture. (p. 11)

As mentioned, these invisible or hidden elements include values, attitudes, and beliefs of a cultural group or community. Goble (2010) defines invisible culture as “the unique constellation of habitual signs and meanings shared by the members of a cultural community that [distinguishes] their ultimate values and beliefs from those of other communities” (p. 28). However, culture is also fluid and multidimensional. Abril and Kelly-McHale (2016) assert that “[individuals] belong to multiple cultural groups from which they move in and out . . . [C]ulture is not something fixed but something that is constantly in flux, shaping and being shaped by people” (p. 244).

This sentiment is brought to the forefront through the concepts of enculturation and acculturation. Herskovits (1948) describes enculturation as a socialization process

where individuals learn about the norms and values of their indigenous culture.

Acculturation is defined as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1976, p. 258). Furthermore, individuals are active participants in culture development, shaping the values and norms of the groups with which they identify as well as expressing their own unique interpretations of cultural elements (Gutmann, 2009). In the following subsections, I discuss aspects and perspectives of culture that are relevant to this study: Family and Home as Culture, Gender as Culture, Music as Culture, Conflicts Between Home and School Musical Cultures, and Liminal Spaces and Cultural Straddling.

Family and Home as Culture

Baxter and Braithwaite (2006) define family as a group “of two or more persons, characterized by ongoing interdependence with long-term commitments that stem from blood, law, or affection” (p. 3). Georgas et al. (1997) share, “The family is a vital element in all societies. . . . [T]he family affects decisively how society functions and influences the social development and social behavior of the individual” (p. 303). Galvin (2006) echoes these ideas; “[f]amilies construct and manage their identity as a family through everyday communication with each other, but always with an awareness of the potential for public evaluation” (Huisman, 2014, p. 145, referencing Galvin, 2006).

According to Georgas’ (1988) ecosocial model, the family acts as “the primary source of influence” (Georgas et al., 1997, p. 304) in one’s development, but the family can also be affected by societal (e.g., political systems, education, religion, economic

systems, and mass communication) and ecological (e.g., physical and human-made environments) factors (Georgas et al., 1997). Examining family from a contextual perspective, Kagitcibasi identifies different patterns regarding family structures in varying cultures and societies. Collectivist patterns, common in rural and traditional societies, are characterized by interdependence both emotionally and materially while individualist patterns, exemplified in “the typical Western middle-class nuclear family” (Georgas et al., 1997, p. 304, referencing Kagitcibasi, 1990, 1994, 1996), depict independence in emotional and material contexts.

Historically, Mexican American and Chicano² culture has placed a large emphasis on family as a primary source of identity and support (Rothman et al., 1985). In their discussion of Mexican American family systems, Rothman et al. (1985) state:

Familism is perhaps the single most striking and consistent feature of Chicano culture noted in the literature. Studies have indicated that Mexican Americans are more firmly rooted in the family as a source of identification than either Blacks or Anglos, regardless of socioeconomic status or geographic locale. (p. 201)

While mainstream American culture frequently refers to the nuclear family unit, Mexican American familism, the conceptualization of familial identity, commonly identifies three systems when examining family structure: *la casa*, *la familia*, and *los compadres* (Rothman et al., 1985). *La casa* refers to the immediate or nuclear family, including parents and siblings. *La familia* is considered to include extended family members such

² As mentioned in Chapter 1, the literature that I reviewed for this study uses a variety of terms that have been prevalent in identifying a broad population group.

as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins while *los compadres* are often godparents and other influential individuals to the family unit.

Expanding upon the aforementioned systems, *la familia* has a variety of definitions within scholarly literature; “it connotes a social network resembling a modified nuclear structure. . . . [M]embers may or may not be related, but have some sort of significant interaction with the family” (Rothman et al., 1985, p. 201). Yosso (2005) explains that “familial capital is nurtured by our ‘extended family’. . . . From these kinship ties, we learn the importance of maintaining a healthy connection to our community and its resources” (p. 79). *Los compadres*, often directly related in some manner, are individuals whose “status is usually derived from their sponsorship of a family member in a church-related event such as baptism or marriage” (Rothman et al., 1985, p. 201). Although *la familia* and *los compadres* are important components within Mexican American familial structure, they are not equal to, nor can they substitute for, *la casa*, which is depicted as “the center of Chicano identity and commitment” (Rothman et al., 1985, p. 202; see also Sena-Rivera, 1979).

While familial systems create effective support systems, they have also been linked to generational friction and conflict within families (Buys et al., 1976; Melville, 1978; Rothman et al., 1985; TenHouten et al., 1971). As first- and second-generation Mexican Americans acclimate to Anglo American society, families may struggle with acculturation, “[exacerbating] stress when parental aspirations for children are unreasonable or inconsistent with the ability and desires of the child” (Rothman et al., 1985, p. 203; see also Buys et al., 1976; TenHouten et al., 1971). With more regular interaction with “Anglo society” [*sic*], traditional values of Mexican American families

may become questioned by younger generations and at odds with those of other perspectives.

The use of language plays a key role; Rothman et al. (1985) assert that “Mexican Americans raised in the United States have had less time to become proficient in Spanish because they must speak English out of necessity” (p. 204) in order to navigate and assimilate to the community in which they regularly interact. Furthermore, Rothman et al. acknowledge that first- and second-generation Mexican Americans feel “[pressured] to conform to the use of a language that may distance [them] from their most important source of support—the family” (p. 204).

As younger generations acclimate to the United States and its education system, they can often assist parents and older generations with navigating societal norms and expectations (Buriel & De Ment, 1997; Garcia Coll & Magnuson, 1997; Rodríguez, 2002). Rodríguez (2002) found:

As children progress through the schooling process, they acquire linguistic and socialization skills at a faster rate than their parents. An outcome of their accelerated acculturation is that children and adolescents from immigrant families may assume roles of responsibility within the family pertaining to interactions with schools and other institutions. . . . The notion of children and adolescents acting as cultural brokers for their parents and other adult family members exemplifies efforts to understand the relationship of the home environment to public institutions. (p. 88)

However, Rodríguez also acknowledges that Mexican American children and adolescents might experience difficulty adapting to a school environment that differs greatly from

their home culture. As a result, younger generations frequently “function between the two environments instead of within them” (Rodríguez, 2002, p. 89). It is imperative that educators comprehend and understand this navigation, recognizing that “differences in levels of [school] involvement are not necessarily due to devaluation of education among Mexican American families,” but alter due to a variety of cultural and experiential factors (Rodríguez, 2002, p. 93).

Gender as Culture

Dibben (2002) shares that “all human societies make social distinctions based on gender” (p. 117). Often, societies place a heavy emphasis on gender differences (Birke, 1992), although this differs when making cross-cultural comparisons (Dibben, 2002). Furthermore, socialization, “the acquisition of culturally appropriate values and beliefs” (Dibben, 2002, p. 118), may perpetuate gender-based views and perspectives more than biological evidence (Burr, 1998; Dibben, 2002). Historically, researchers have looked to Social Learning Theory in arguing that “children learn gendered behaviour from their environment by virtue of reinforcement, punishment and extinction of sex-inappropriate behaviour, and by exposure of boys and girls to different kinds of activities and role models” (Dibben, 2002, p. 118, referencing Mischel, 1970). Bandura (1977) asserts that this theory relies on identification, “the idea that children spontaneously imitate behaviour without direct training or reward based on an intimate relationship with the person being imitated” (Dibben, 2002, p. 118, referencing Bandura, 1977).

In Western culture, women have historically been depicted as passive, limited and more domestic in contrast to their male counterparts (Dibben, 2002). Evidence of female participation in Western European art music is often absent from its history due to the

denial of professional musical training for women as well as the perpetuation of the feminine role within musical arenas (Bayton, 1998; Citron, 1993; Dibben, 2002; Green, 1997; Sergeant & Himonides, 2014). In her research, Green (1997) discovered a wide array of gender beliefs held by teachers within the music education setting: girls are perceived to be more successful in singing, more active as instrumentalists, and are generally more expressive, but lack ability in the area of composition. Koskoff (1987) acknowledges that gender distinctions between the musical practices of men and women also exist in cultures outside of Western art music. Dibben (2002) believes that music in modern society can be a vehicle for changes in perspectives on gender identity:

[M]usic constitutes one of the most popular leisure pursuits of young people, it is integrated into people's lives in a way which is particularly unique . . . and it affords the repetition necessary to the constant achievement of identity highlighted by so many theorists. . . . Music, then, is particularly well situated to afford opportunities for the construction of (gender) identity. (p. 130)

Specific to mariachi music culture, the inclusion of women is a relatively recent addition. Citing the genre's rural beginnings in western Mexico, mariachi music was often performed in cantinas, "a kind of lower-class tavern" (Clark, 2005, p. 230), that women were not permitted to enter; female musicians working in these environments were frequently perceived as prostitutes and garnered poor reputations (Massie & Buzzell, 2008; Smith, 2018). Female participation in mariachi was not socially affirmed and the genre remained male-dominated for quite some time. The acceptance and status of female mariachi musicians has been met with resistance, both from cultural and familial standpoints as well as societal views. Pérez (2002) shares, "My parents were the

first to contest my participation in mariachi. . . . [M]y mother was concerned that my involvement with this group . . . would lead me to compromise my status as a ‘good Christian girl’” (pp. 151-152).

Examining mariachi traditions from an aesthetic lens, Smith (2018) notes that “within its musical stylings, lyrics, and visual imagery are coded meanings that reflect the ideal male persona and the Mexican heritage” (p. 16). Traditionally, mariachi music conveys the life and characteristics of the *mestizo* male, “a person of mixed race that was upheld by some 20th century nationalist projects as the truest form of Mexican” (Smith, 2018, p. 16, citing Alonso, 2004). The themes represented within mariachi include hardship, love, and loss as well as relationships with women (Alonso, 2004; Mulholland, 2007; Smith, 2018). Mulholland (2007) emphasizes the heritage of mariachi music and tradition:

The music runs through the blood of the mestizo passed down from father to son, the pain is in the sweat of the land-working man, and the tears of a man left broken hearted by a woman. Thus, the authenticity of the *mariachi* is literally rooted in the *tierra* (the dirt, land and homeland) of Mexico (preferably of Jalisco) and the blood of the *mestizo* passed down from father to son. (p. 257, emphases in original)

Within mariachi music and subject matter, women are often depicted as observers and seen as “objects of affection” (Smith, 2018, p. 15). Torres (2016), referencing Jáquez (2002), comments on the musical repertoire of mariachi: “[T]his notion of naturalized suppression originated with the song’s genesis by dominant male composers . . . and is

carried on through vocal styling that privilege[s] the male poetic persona who dominates the narrative” (Torres, 2016, p. 9).

Visually, a *traje de charro*, the outfit that is widely known for representing the mariachi genre and its performers, emulates the silhouette of the *charro* (Mexican rancher) and rural life in the Mexican countryside (Jáquez, 2002; Smith, 2018). Jáquez (2002) notes that the *charro* was “romanticized by the Mexican film industry during the 1940s and 1950s with such singing film stars as Miguel Aceves Mejía, Pedro Infante, and, more recently, Vicente Fernández” (p. 171). The *botonadura*, or the embellishments of buttons, embroidery, and adornments, were added in the eighteenth century by wealthy ranchers to emphasize prosperity and prestige (Pérez, 2002; Smith 2018). The suit represents the ideas of *mexicanidad*, the term representing what it means to be Mexican, and *machismo*, the pride of masculinity (Smith, 2018).

Contrasting with this vision of masculinity, feminine roles in Mexico and much of Latin America traditionally follow the concept of *marianismo*, the emulation of the Virgin Mary (Mulholland, 2013). Mulholland (2013) shares, “In this construct of ideal femininity, women are passive, stoic, spiritual, moral, loyal, and devoid of sexual desires” (p. 360). These characteristics are represented in the *china poblana*, a dress that incorporates a white blouse with a long skirt that features bright colors and embroidered symbols reflective of Mexican heritage (Lacy, n.d.; Smith, 2018). Referencing Pérez (2002), Smith (2018) states, “The coded meanings attached to these dresses indicate the woman’s roles as a child bearer and nurturer; the mother of her household who provides the moral ground for her husband and children, but also needs protecting” (p. 23).

Furthermore, the common Mexican *dicho*, or saying, “*te ves más bonita calladita*,” which

translates to “you look more beautiful when you are quiet,” provides insight into the prevalence of patriarchal values that are common in Mexican social life, placing masculinity above femininity. Torres (2016) explains:

So common is the phrase that even Mexican women use it among themselves in conversation, as a social commentary on the patriarchal values that pervade social life. The notion that to be beautiful is to be seen and not heard semantically encapsulates a sounded signifier of the social norms deeply embedded within Mexican society privileging maleness over femininity. (p. 7)

For women involved in mariachi music, these coded meanings and social values present conflict and challenges when establishing an identity on stage. Some female performers have worn traditional charro pants; this has gone against the gender norms of the culture and has caused performers and audiences to “reevaluate their notions of *mexicanidad*” (Smith, 2018, p. 23). Reflecting on her own experience, Pérez (2002) shares, “Simply by wearing the traditionally male charro [suit], . . . my gender identity was altered” (p. 148). Many female mariachi musicians and ensembles have adopted the charro skirt, “a full-length skirt that mimics the look of the charro pants with an A-line silhouette” (Smith, 2018, p. 24), often in brighter colors to symbolize femininity as well as to establish pride and a female presence in the mariachi community.

The participation of female performers within mariachi music has evolved over time both in Mexico and the United States. While women have been present in the mariachi performance arena throughout its history, their placement within the ensemble was relegated to that of singer and, occasionally, violinist. They were not typically welcomed as permanent members or as diverse instrumentalists. Jáquez (2002) asserts:

Even among male musicians who are willing to accept women as instrumentalists, the language portrays the nuances of these highly gendered spaces: “Well, of course a good violinist or singer is good—no matter woman or man”; “we have had some good women musicians on the violin”; “she sings mostly, though sometimes she’ll play guitar when we’re short a player.” While the statements are clearly meant to validate women’s presence in mariachi, they also illustrate the unequal acceptance of women in all spheres of musicianship. (p. 176)

Only recently have women been given the opportunity to define their role on their own terms (Smith, 2018). Smith (2018) states, “[Guest vocalist and violinist] were deemed the more respectable positions that a woman could have on the stage, and many popular female performers who successfully mastered the bolero and ranchera singing styles were accepted in the genre in this role” (p. 18). Jáquez points out that women still are not regularly afforded roles as *armonía* (guitar and *vihuela*), trumpet, or *guitarrón* players in traditional mariachi ensembles. Specific to the *guitarrón*, she speculates, “Not incidentally, the *guitarrón* provides the undergirding bass line over which the entire ensemble rests, so it is also as if such musical power should not be located in female hands” (Jáquez, 2002, p. 176). These attitudes are representative of musicians observed by Jáquez both in Mexico and within the southwest region of the United States.

The creation of all-female mariachi ensembles began as early as the 1940s with the establishment of Mariachi Las Coronelas in Mexico City (Smith, 2018). Subsequently, the development of female groups continued within Mexico throughout the following decades. In the United States, Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles was founded in

1994 as the first professional all-female mariachi ensemble, leading to the formation of numerous others throughout the country (Massie & Buzzell, 2008; Smith, 2018).

The development and inclusion of mariachi ensembles within public school music programs in the United States has played a key role in leveling the playing field in relation to gender roles within the performance genre. The growth of mariachi education during the 1970s and 1980s was a byproduct of the Chicano movement for civil rights that took place in the 1960s, celebrating the musical art form as a symbol of Mexican American identity (Sheehy, 2008). Smith (2018) states:

[Mariachi ensembles were] established alongside the traditional band and orchestra programs in the schools and thus [gave] the students another outlet to learn both the music and culture in an academic setting. . . . As increasingly more girls have gone through these programs, proving their enthusiasm, ability, and worth as equal performers, the oddity of seeing a woman on the stage has diminished and the social pressures have begun to ease [in the United States]. (pp. 20-21)

While mariachi was traditionally passed on through family and mentor-apprentice relationships in Mexico, the incorporation of mariachi curricula within public schools “resulted in generations of musicians who are more welcoming to women mariachis, more oriented toward technical proficiency, and more connected to the communities of practice” (Sinta, 2020, p. 10).

However, the literature indicates that men and women may continue to view their identities differently in relation to mariachi musical communities. Male performers have often grown up in the mariachi tradition, joining generations of mariachi musicians

within their families and seeing their musical work as one of the most prominent aspects of their lives (Smith, 2018). From the perspective of female mariachi musicians, Sylvia Hinojosa from Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles told Massie and Buzzell (2008), “This group is part time because women have a different agenda from men . . . they have to take care of a home, they have to take care of kids, and believe it or not mostly all the women in this group . . . go to school” (Massie & Buzzell, 2008). Similar to other career environments, female mariachis are not compensated at the same rate as their male counterparts, forcing them to find other outlets for financial stability alongside performing (Massie & Buzzell, 2008; Smith, 2018).

Female mariachi musicians often take pride in their pursuit of education in a variety of disciplines both within and outside the arts, and promote it to their audiences. Smith (2018) points out, “The contrast to their male counterparts is striking. . . . [T]he women are seeking [educational opportunities] out and proudly [encourage] others to follow suit. For them, being an educated woman in other fields is as important as their status as mariachi performers” (p. 27). Female performers continue to gain acceptance in the mariachi world through their persistence in the mariachi performance arena and the progressive, inclusive views of audiences. Commenting on the growing status of women in mariachi music, Smith (2018) shares, “Ultimately, female mariachis are not pushing against the symbols of *machismo* and *mexicanidad* but creating a space alongside the men that complements and adds to the genre” (p. 28).

Music as Culture

Hirsch et al. (1988) suggest that music and other art forms “are not just occasions for private appreciation and enrichment . . . but also indispensable symbols of our

national existence . . . not *just* [emphasis in original] objects for private pleasure and contemplation, but essential symbols that have helped define what we collectively are” (pp. 155-156). While Hirsch et al.’s viewpoints and perspectives historically did not include world music traditions such as mariachi, their words may provide support for inclusivity when applied to the present-day music classroom and curriculum.

Furthermore, music and the fine arts are frequently used to define and impart cultural beliefs (Elliott, 1990; Hirsch et al., 1988). The music classroom, while an environment that fosters learning and the development of cultural understanding, must also be a space that acts as a two-way street that includes “student-culture *transaction* and *transformation*” (Elliott, 1990, p. 151, emphasis in original). Working within this mindset, the goal is for students to be able to provide insight into their own cultural experiences while also relating them to the structures and teachings of the academic environment.

Specific to Mexican American culture as well as other cultural music practices outside of the Western classical tradition, students often navigate between two musical worlds, those of the home environment and the school domain (Soto, 2012). Previously defined, enculturation is “the learning [which] is occurring naturally through observation and imitation and through regular and consistent interaction within families and neighborhoods,” allowing learners to explore their ancestral roots in an authentic way (Soto, 2018, p. 33; referencing Campbell, 2018). Common in many musical genres, including fiddling and mariachi, performance traditions are primarily transferred via rote or aural teaching by family members or accomplished practitioners in the community

(Margolies, 2011; Shehan, 1987; Soto, 2015). This type of learning occurs regularly in Mexican American musical experiences at home and within communities.

Mariachi music, transitioning from humble beginnings on ranches and farms in western Mexico to extravagant and vibrant performances on stages around the world, is frequently seen as a symbol of Mexican culture and identity both in Mexico and the United States (Clark, 2005). By way of film and radio, mariachi music gained attention as performance art in the southwest United States during the twentieth century (Sheehy, 2008). The Chicano movement for Mexican American civil rights during the 1960s brought mariachi to the forefront as a cultural symbol. As performance and educational festivals were established throughout the southwest, mariachi ensemble programs developed and grew within public schools. Sheehy (2008) writes, “The [mariachi] programs attracted ‘parent power’ among Mexican American parents who had felt alienated by language, cultural, and musical barriers, strengthening the school-community bond” (p. vi). While there were struggles in developing and sustaining quality programs without formally published resources during the early years of mariachi education, the inclusion of the genre in school music programs throughout the southwest United States assisted in breaking down barriers and bridging the gap between cultures; school mariachi programs allowed all students to learn about Mexican culture, develop language skills outside of English, and experience a genre outside of Western classical music (Sheehy, 2008).

Music often acts as an integral component in the formation of identity, providing “a means of communication that can unite people and can represent a significant part of their cultural legacy” (Soto, 2015, p. 635). Addressing the needs of the present Mexican

American student population, Soto (2015) asserts, “Children who are of a different generation of Mexican Americans are trying to understand their own cultural identity and to assimilate within mainstream American culture” (p. 642). Creating connections that foster a relationship between communal music experiences and the institutionalized music education environment are imperative to successful identity formation. Campbell (2018) shares:

The world of children at home, in their local communities, and even as it is constructed at school, is a complex auditory ecosystem that deserves attention and continued study by those who concern themselves with children’s learning and development in music, including the web of social processes that are rich with musical content that helps to shape children’s expressive selves. (pp. 106-107)

Conflict Between Home and School Musical Cultures

In the United States, music education has traditionally been taught from a Western European perspective, and curriculum as well as pedagogical materials have been developed based on this, often blindly, accepted culture (Abril, 2006; Abril & Kelly-McHale, 2016; Robinson, 1996). While music educators commonly see elements of Western art music as the building blocks of music education and literacy, students from traditions not represented within this dominant cultural perspective are often not prioritized or even acknowledged, and thus are left out of pedagogical conversations (Abril & Kelly-McHale, 2016; Colley, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2002).

The ways in which curricula are shaped are influenced by the predominant, historical, and existing cultures within an institution and community. Gay (2010) asserts that these views are “so deeply engrained in the structures, ethos, programs, and etiquette

of schools that [they are] simply considered the ‘normal’ or ‘right’ thing to do” (p. 9). Culture frequently “serves as a framework through which teachers and students view themselves and others, acquire knowledge, and construct meaning” (Abril & Kelly-McHale, 2016, p. 245). Learning and teaching are consistently situated within a cultural context. However, educators often rely on the cultural resources that are readily available in order to incorporate cultural traditions into the curriculum (Bruner, 1996); this is concerning because resources can be somewhat limited and do not necessarily provide an accurate depiction of the cultural tradition or practice being represented. It is necessary for educators to be familiar with students’ home cultures, practices, and traditions; this understanding may allow them to better connect with and embrace the previously established knowledge that students bring to the classroom setting.

Hood (1960) developed the term *bimusicality* to refer to the ability to understand and perform in two contrasting musical systems. Bimusical individuals are able to “perceive, perform, and understand another musical system in relation to the context of the music and its place in culture and community” (Soto, 2018, pp. 34-35, referencing Palmer, 1994; Rice & Garfias, 2011; Titon, 1995). When negotiating the school musical environment, students do not always make connections between their familial musical identities and those presented or taught in school. Reflecting on her own experience, Soto (2015) shares, “After starting to listen and play Western concert band music . . . I could not quite make the connection between this new music that I was learning in school and the conjunto, *Tejano* [emphasis in original], and mariachi music I listened to at home and at community events” (p. 632).

Bimusical identity can also create an isolating experience for pupils within the music classroom. Curricular experiences in the school music setting do not often align with or connect to personal and familial musical ventures in which students take part outside of the classroom (Battiste, 2020; Boss-Barba & Soto, 2008; Carlow, 2004; Kelly-McHale, 2011; Lum, 2007; Lum & Campbell, 2009; Margolies, 2011; McKoy, 2018; Shaw, 2012; Soto, 2015; Thibeault, 2009). In his research investigating the musical experiences and lives of primary school children, Lum (2007) concluded that by putting students' prior knowledge and musical worlds at the forefront of curricular design and approach, music educators can have a more positive impact on the development of their pupils' musical identities. McKoy (2015) suggests that "teaching music without taking into account the cultural meaning the subject may hold for students is to overlook an important point of reference from which new knowledge may be constructed and program relevance can be maintained or re-established" (p. 24).

The findings of research also provide insight into how music is transmitted within cultural traditions. School music ensemble practices are often disconnected from the traditions of Latinx music culture, including structure, repertoire, and stylistic elements (Escalante, 2019; Gerrard, 2021; Kelly-McHale & Abril, 2015; Soto, 2015). Citing Kagan (1986), Kelly-McHale and Abril (2015) state that "[t]he competitive nature of ensembles . . . stands in stark contrast to the concept of allocentrism, which emphasizes collaboration and cohesiveness among groups—a common approach within the Latino family" (p. 158). McCall (2021) examines how collegiate music programs, while aiming to be inclusive of all students, continue to place emphasis on Western European traditions during the admission and audition process:

It should be noted that many music students of color . . . are often self taught and/or have gained extensive music skills (i.e., performing by ear, composition, transposition, and improvisation) in spaces such as the Black church where the oral tradition is central. However, because some of these students may not read Western music notation, possess the same musical tools as most of their White counterparts, or demonstrate their musical competencies similarly, [they] are often denied entry into music schools that largely focus on Western art music. (McCall, 2021, p. 209)

In a study that compared one undergraduate music education major's school-based orchestra experiences with her life-based bluegrass fiddling, Thibeault (2009) found that aurally-centered music traditions, such as fiddling, are process-based initiatives that develop around interaction and setting. In contrast, within school-based ensembles "the score (whether an explicit written musical score, or a memorized piece that had a fixed form) [is] at the heart of the experience regulating organization and behavior" (Thibeault, 2009, p. 258). Furthermore, Thibeault (2009) asserts that setting-based practices such as aurally-centered music "bring a different set of emphases, and can allow performers to engage in conversations that seem to have ended by the time a score usually reaches them" (p. 272).

How can today's music classrooms and curricula be shaped to better acknowledge and address the needs and backgrounds of *all* students? How can we create learning environments that are more inclusive and culturally responsive? While this reimagining of our teaching might seem daunting or cumbersome, Abril and Kelly-McHale (2016) state:

No student's culture is inaccessible to a teacher who makes the effort to understand or to learn to inhabit his or her world. But the complex nature of culture . . . requires that we come to know students not as members of this or that ethnic group, but as individuals with particularistic identities and learning needs. (p. 249)

Further, McKoy (2015) provides a relatable metaphor:

[I]n education, one size does not fit all and . . . we should strive to provide equitable educational opportunities that meet the individual needs of all students. To paraphrase an old saying: if we provide a shoe that fits, they will wear it. (p. 28)

These assertions support Powell's (1996) findings that teachers experience success in culturally diverse environments when they (1) take on the role of a facilitator/guide instead of a leader of learning, (2) revise and realize curriculum to better align with the experiences and knowledge of their students, and (3) seek to understand the cultures of the students with whom they work. Furthermore, McKoy and Lind (2023) share the viewpoint of numerous educational researchers that "today's teachers must be sensitive to and knowledgeable about the influence of race, ethnicity, and culture on learning. This is no less true for music education, particularly given the intimate connection between music and culture" (p. 1; see also Colley, 2009).

Liminal Spaces and Cultural Straddling

In the music education spaces, there are continuous interactions and intersections between cultural and musical identities; Brewer (2010) identifies these crossroads as areas of "liminal space" (p. 55). Historically, the term *liminality* was brought to the

forefront in anthropological research by Victor Turner, derived from *limen*, the Latin word for “threshold” (Brewer, 2010). In his study, Brewer (2010) comments that:

narratives reveal a series of liminal spaces in which the students experience formation of identity complicated by race, language, class, culture, and a myriad of other social ambiguities. These perceived boundaries, fluid and porous, provide entry points for exploration of experienced divisions and liminal spaces. (p. 56)

Liminal spaces can allow for the crossing of boundaries while also acknowledging and providing insight into individuals’ evolving and fluid identities. Escalante (2020) cites a reflective comment from one participant in his study:

What I found interesting was mapping my own identity and seeing on paper how I am a part of majority groups and minority groups. As a nonreligious Hispanic gay male, I don’t always think about my male privilege, or even my privilege as an able-bodied man. (p. 31)

For students and educators alike, these intersections can allow individuals to recognize and evaluate the areas of overlap and crossing of what Brewer (2010) refers to as “The Line” (p. 56), the borders that are frequently created between spaces of specified identity. Soto (2015) speaks to the internal friction between her home musical culture of mariachi, *conjunto*, and Tejano and participation in her public school band program, one that provided leadership experiences as well as a foundation in Western classical music.

Reflecting on her journey, she states:

I had initially left the Rio Grande Valley [located in south Texas], trying to escape my Mexican heritage on a quest to become assimilated and educated, and to feel superior to my community. I had always felt that the music of my culture was not

important—not good enough. It was I, however, who was misinformed. How ironic that the farther away I got from my culture, the more I longed for and appreciated it. (p. 633)

Brewer (2010) acknowledges this struggle that one participant voiced about finding belonging in the school band program while still remaining faithful to her home culture:

Sophia feels that Hispanics do not value activities like [school] band because she says they are not an inherent part of Hispanic culture. Hispanics perceive band as something for others who are “better than them,” while simultaneously recognizing that activities like band are positive outlets for students. This leads to a “struggle” that Sophia believes is at the core of the tension between American culture and Hispanic culture. (p. 48)

Carter (2006) also emphasizes the negotiations that students of color encounter as they straddle the boundaries of the home and academic environments. In her study of 68 African American and Latino youths, Carter (2006) identified three characteristic groups: cultural mainstreamers, noncompliant believers, and cultural straddlers. Cultural mainstreamers, while aware of different racial and ethnic cultures, “generally expected group members to act according to traditional assimilationist values, which call for minority groups to accommodate to and ultimately be absorbed into American schools, workplaces, and community” by the dominant culture (Carter, 2006, p. 308, referencing Gordon, 1964). On the opposite end of the spectrum, noncompliant believers “favor their own cultural presentations . . . and exert little effort to adapt to the cultural prescriptions of the school and white society” (Carter, 2006, p. 308). Noncompliant believers understand the value of education, but also recognize that there are inequalities that might

be upheld or perpetuated within the school environment and culture. Carter (2006) describes the ways in which cultural straddlers “bridge the gap between the cultural mainstreamers and the noncompliant believers. They are obviously strategic navigators . . . and embrace the cultural codes of both school and home community” (p. 308). In her findings, Carter (2006) reiterates that feelings or respect for education are not as much at the forefront as “students [using] the symbols and meanings they attach to different racial, ethnic, and cultural identities as measures of inclusion and exclusion” when navigating the school and home environments (Carter, 2006, p. 318).

Working with students who feel a tension or disconnect between home and school environments, as well as those cultural straddlers who more easily code switch between home and school, can be a challenge for music educators, particularly if the structure of the institutional environment places a heavy emphasis and value on Western European music traditions and practices. In reflecting on her work as a university professor, Schmidt pointed out shortcomings in her own teaching and guidance of music education majors:

[Our student] Carlos has reminded me that I could better support all students by learning more about the music that is important to them. Because Carlos was competent in the music valued by the School of Music, I did not consider that our music education course offerings failed to honor, or even acknowledge, the music that Carlos and probably many students care about in their lives beyond school.

(Castañeda Lechuga & Schmidt, 2017, p. 89)

She admitted that she did not fully acknowledge and appreciate the double life that Carlos and others students might be leading when navigating the institutional music setting, as

she unintentionally promoted what Carter (2006) refers to as “assimilationist ideology, which presupposes that the proper ends in education will have been achieved when minority groups can no longer be differentiated from the White majority in terms of education, economic status, or access to social institutions and their benefits” (p. 307).

In the educational setting, students are frequently negotiating their identities on multiple levels. Soto (2015) asks, “If children cannot take pride in the music that surrounds them in their everyday lives, can they take pride in being called ‘real’ musicians?” (p. 641). The intersections of the various identities that individuals hold challenge educators, students, and communities to explore and create liminal spaces for students, allowing them to navigate the contrasting viewpoints between home and school cultures. In order to better understand how educators can support this notion, it is pertinent to explore the historical development of two pedagogical frameworks: culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy.³

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In exploring frameworks that support the shift to more inclusive teaching and pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995) pioneered what she termed “culturally relevant pedagogy.” The foundation of culturally relevant pedagogy is based on three pillars: (1) the experience of student academic success, (2) the development or maintaining of cultural competence, and (3) the development of a critical consciousness to challenge the currently accepted social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995). While she might have established the term “culturally relevant pedagogy,” Ladson-Billings (1990) asserts,

³ Because terms and discussion centering around culture and diversity are still evolving, when discussing these two pedagogical approaches, I will defer to the authors’ language used in their seminal publications.

“[The] recognition of the importance of the teaching context is not a new one. There is substantial literature . . . on teaching urban students. This literature dates back almost 100 years to 1898” (p. 105, citing Cuban, 1989).

Academic Success and Excellence

In addressing the first pillar, academic success and excellence, Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that while academic skills will vary, “all students need literacy, numeracy, technological, social, and political skills in order to be active participants in a democracy” (p. 160). She asserts that educators need to be demanding and reinforce academic excellence, but also develop the idea that, with proper guidance, students will instinctively choose it. Ladson-Billings’ first pillar points out that it is important that teachers acknowledge and value the skills and abilities that students possess and “channel them in academically important ways” (p. 160).

Cultural Competence and Integrity

Cultural competence and integrity together form a second pillar at the heart of Ladson-Billings’ pedagogical framework. In navigating educational institutions, she shares that, for African American students and other students of color, the school environment can be perceived as one of hostility where home cultures are not accepted. However, culturally relevant educators understand that the inclusion of students’ cultural backgrounds can be an avenue and resource for learning, bridging the gap and disparity between home and school environments (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, partnering with cultural stakeholders can have a positive effect in the classroom. Ladson-Billings (1995) describes an educator who created an artist/craftperson-in-residence program so that “students could both learn from each other’s parents and affirm cultural

knowledge” (p. 161). Another educator that Ladson-Billings observed fostered the development of cultural language versatility. In order to strengthen their connection to standard English, the teacher encouraged students to use the language with which they were most comfortable, and then translate their spoken and written sentiments to the language being developed in the educational setting. Ladson-Billings (1995) shares, “By the end of the year, the students were not only facile at this ‘code-switching’ [attributed to Smitherman, 1981] but could better use both languages” (p. 161).

Critical Consciousness

The third pillar of Ladson-Billings’ (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy is critical consciousness. She asserts, “Beyond [the] individual characteristics of academic achievement and cultural competence, students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 162). It is through critical consciousness that students come to understand and challenge/critique power dynamics and relationships within education and society (Abril & Kelly-McHale, 2016) and, with the guidance of educators, are empowered to take appropriate action towards change (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Building upon the pedagogical ideas of Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay (2002) defines culturally responsive teaching as:

using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived

experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly. (p. 106, citing Gay, 2000)

In the framework of culturally responsive teaching, she identifies five essential elements or building blocks: (1) developing a cultural diversity knowledge base, (2) designing culturally relevant curricula, (3) demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community, (4) developing cross-cultural communications, and (5) demonstrating cultural congruity in classroom instruction (Gay, 2002).

Developing a Cultural Diversity Knowledge Base

Educators need to develop a base of knowledge concerning cultural diversity, including its relationship to curriculum content. Gay (2002) acknowledges that a number of teachers are not properly or adequately prepared to successfully work with ethnically diverse students, and asserts that it is crucial for educators to have explicit knowledge about students' home cultures in order to better adapt teaching content and styles and connect with the cultural familiarities of their pupils. In preparation, it is essential that teachers develop an understanding of the contributions and characteristics of the ethnic groups that are present within their communities (Hollins, King, & Hayman, 1994; King, Hollins, & Hayman, 1997; Pai, 1990; Smith, 1998). Furthermore, understanding the cultural characteristics of students and their families may provide in-depth knowledge that allows educators to make more informed decisions in the teaching and learning environment. Gay (2002) shares:

Culture encompasses many things, some of which are more important for teachers to know than others because they have direct implications for teaching and

learning. Among these are ethnic groups' cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns. (p. 107)

However, it is imperative that this acquired knowledge expands beyond just recognition and awareness; teachers need to make connections between students' cultural characteristics and the content they teach. Gay (2002) asserts, "There is a place for cultural diversity in every subject taught in schools . . . [C]ulturally responsive teaching deals as much with using multicultural instructional strategies as with adding multicultural content to the curriculum" (p. 107).

In supporting the integration of cultural diversity knowledge into classroom instruction and curriculum, it is pertinent that educators recognize the contributions, both prominent and less publicly visible, of the ethnic groups represented within a school and community as well as develop a more in-depth comprehension of theory and research related to including students' home cultures within educational contexts (Gay, 2002). Gay (2002) suggests that progress can be made if quality scholarship and research are integrated into teacher education preparation programs, affording pre-service teachers the opportunity to discover and learn about the contributions of diverse individuals within their specific content area.

Designing Culturally Relevant Curricula

A second aspect of Gay's culturally responsive pedagogy is that, as a knowledge base is developed, educators need to be able to transfer it to curriculum as well as instructional design and delivery. In discussion of curriculum, Gay (2002) identifies *formal instructional plans and curriculum* as those "approved by the policy and governing bodies of educational systems. They are usually anchored in and

complemented by adopted textbooks and other curriculum guidelines . . . issued by national commissions, state departments of education, professional associations, and local school districts” (p. 108). Because these plans and resources do not always adequately address ethnic cultural diversity (Wade, 1993), it is essential that culturally responsive educators are able to evaluate and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the materials and educational goals in relation to students’ home cultures. Furthermore, teachers need to feel empowered and confident to make changes to improve the curriculum for the students in their classrooms (Gay, 2002). While formal curricula within school institutions often avoid controversial issues and generalize knowledge with primarily quantitative, factual information rather than values, experiences, and ethics, “culturally responsive teaching reverses these trends by dealing directly with controversy; studying a wide range of ethnic individuals and groups; contextualizing issues within race, class, ethnicity, and gender; and including multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives” (Gay, 2002, p. 108). It is essential that educators address these topics without reinforcing stereotypes or generalization.

Symbolic curriculum refers to artifacts that assist educators in teaching knowledge, skills, morals, and values of the classroom (Gay, 1995; Gay, 2002). Examples of symbolic curriculum can include bulletin board decorations, posters, and displayed school and classroom expectations. Gay (2002) shares:

Culturally responsive teachers are critically conscious of the power of . . . symbolic curriculum as an instrument of teaching . . . [and] ensure that the images displayed in classrooms represent a wide variety of age, gender, time, place,

social class, and positional diversity . . . and that they are accurate extensions of what is taught through the formal curriculum. (p. 109)

Referencing the developmental groundwork of Cortés (1991, 1995, 2000), Gay (2002) defines *societal curriculum* as “the knowledge, ideas, and impressions about ethnic groups that are portrayed by the mass media” (p. 109). Through interaction with media such as television, newspapers, magazines, and movies, cultural knowledge is constructed (Cortés, 1995) and societal ideals are managed (Spring, 1992). Often, the ideas and facts presented through these outlets are not accurate and can be prejudicial (Campbell, 1995; Gay, 2002). Instead of ignoring these mainstream sources of societal knowledge and curriculum, it is essential that culturally responsive teachers acknowledge them and critically analyze how different ethnic groups are presented in these media. This critical analysis includes:

[understanding] how media images of African, Asian, Latino, Native, and European Americans are manipulated; the effects they have on different ethnic groups; what formal school curricula and instruction can do to counteract their influences; and how to teach students to be discerning consumers of . . . ethnic information disseminated through the societal curriculum. (Gay, 2002, p. 109)

Demonstrating Cultural Caring and Building a Learning Community

Creating a classroom environment that provides support and learning opportunities for a diverse population of students, a third characteristic of Gay’s approach, is also at the forefront of culturally responsive teaching. This component of Gay’s framework emphasizes pedagogical procedures rather than curriculum are emphasized. Of importance is the use of what Gay (2002) refers to as *cultural*

scaffolding, or “using [students’] own cultural experiences to expand their intellectual horizons and academic achievement” (p. 109). She emphasizes that, along with creating connections, culturally responsive educators must hold ethnically diverse students to the highest standard of success and consistently push their pupils to achieve this level of accomplishment. Gay (2002) asserts, “This is a very different conception of caring than . . . ‘gentle nurturing and altruistic concern,’ which lead to benign neglect under the guise of letting students of color make their own way and move at their own pace” (p. 109). In further understanding this idea, the relationships between teachers and students become partnerships within the culturally responsive classroom (Gay, 2002). The partnership, according to Gay (2002), is “action oriented” (p. 110) and requires that educators realize the intellectual abilities of ethnically diverse students, pushing them to a high standard of success while acknowledging and validating their cultural and ethnic identities.

A large percentage of students of color are raised in cultural traditions where emphasis is placed on the family or group rather than the individual (Gay, 2002). Gay (2002) states, “It is not that individuals and their needs are neglected; they are addressed within the context of group functioning. When the group succeeds or falters, so do its individual members” (p. 110). In this view, the culturally responsive classroom becomes a learning environment where all members are expected to help each other and contribute to success. Past studies have shown that this cooperative approach yields positive outcomes in student achievement (Escalanté & Dirmann, 1990; Fullilove & Treisman, 1990; Sheets, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

In developing and building this communal learning space, Gay (2002) emphasizes the importance of placing holistic or integrated at the forefront. She describes, “Personal,

moral, social, political, cultural, and academic knowledge and skills are taught simultaneously. . . . [Students] also are taught about the heritages, cultures, and contributions of other ethnic groups as they are learning their own” (Gay, 2002, p. 110). As part of this process, students come to understand the social implications of knowledge; “knowledge has moral and political elements and consequences, which [obligates individuals] to take social action to promote freedom, equality, and justice for everyone” (Gay, 2002, p. 110).

Cross-Cultural Communications

Cross-cultural communication is a fourth essential element within the culturally responsive classroom. Montagu and Watson (1979) describe communication as the “ground of meeting and the foundation of community” (p. vii). Gay (2002) emphasizes that learning can be difficult without genuine and informed communication between teachers and students, including those from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Communication and thoughts are often expressed in *culturally encoded* (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1985) ways, influenced by the students’ community and home cultures; teachers need to be able to decipher these codes in order to effectively communicate and teach the ethnically diverse students within their learning communities.

Gay (2002) explains that “[c]ulturally responsive teacher preparation programs teach how the communication styles of different ethnic groups reflect cultural values and shape learning behaviors and how to modify classroom interactions to better accommodate them” (p. 111). As part of preparation for classroom instruction, Gay recommends that pre-service teachers should be exposed to a variety of ethnic communication styles as well as other components, including the importance of

contextual factors, cultural nuances, delivery, vocabulary usage, role relationships of speakers and listeners, intonation, gestures, and body movements (Gay, 2002). While “traditional” classroom cultures place emphasis on passive-receptive communication, other populations and communities communicate in “more active, participatory, dialectic, and multi-modal” manners (Gay, 2002, p. 111). Within this exchange of communication, the speaker and listener share roles in a fluid, interactive way; culturally responsive teachers understand that these communal communication styles are not meant to be rude or disrespectful, but rather provide an active form of communicating for some students (Gay, 2002). The culturally responsive environment allows for pupils to use their natural modes of communication and thinking, as this will support engagement and academic success.

Along with validating different forms of communication, teachers/pre-service teachers should understand that students might organize and express their ideas in ways that contrast from the mainstream educational environment. While the “traditional classroom” style of communication is topic-centered (Au, 1993; Michaels, 1981, 1984), a number of cultural communities commonly use topic-chaining communication (Gay, 2002). In the latter form, the organization and expression of ideas is more contextual and socially-influenced. Gay (2002) states that “[t]he thinking of these speakers appears to be circular, and their communication sounds like storytelling” (p. 112). By understanding and embracing these styles, educators can actively acknowledge and validate the cultural values of their students, better assess their abilities and needs, and assist them with code-shifting when engaging within different environments (Gay, 2002).

Cultural Congruity in Classroom Instruction

When looking at the delivery of instruction, educators need to be cognizant of the connection between home and school cultures and consider that, as a fifth aspect of Gay's approach to culturally responsive pedagogy, instruction must address the learning styles of diverse learners (Gay, 2002). In turn, understanding students' individual learning styles and adjusting instruction appropriately allows for continuity between both home and school cultures when it comes to teaching and learning (Spindler, 1987). Effective examples of these concepts within the culturally responsive classroom include cooperative group learning, motion and movement, music, and variability of tasks and instructional formats (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Allen & Butler, 1996; Boykin, 1982; Gay, 2002; Guttentag & Ross, 1972; Hanley, 1998).

Gay (2002) believes that it is essential that pre-service teachers develop the skills necessary to discern misunderstandings and stereotypes that attach themselves to specific learning styles. Key components of different learning styles include (1) preferred content, (2) ways of working through learning tasks, (3) techniques for organizing ideas and thoughts, (4) physical and social settings, (5) arrangements of work, study, and performance space, (6) perceptual stimulation for receiving, processing, and demonstrating comprehension and competence, (7) motivations, incentives, and rewards for learning, and (7) interpersonal interactional styles (Gay, 2002). Educators need to know how these elements are organized and structured for various populations, as well as how they might vary when examining individual learners.

Cultural congruity can also be established by integrating cultural and ethnic diversity within the instructional process on a consistent basis. Gay (2002) asserts that

educators must learn how to “multiculturalize” skills within math, science, reading, and writing along with other aspects of the curriculum or educational setting. The incorporation of vignettes, examples, and scenarios can be an effective means of achieving this goal, allowing educators to build *pedagogical bridges* (Gay, 2002) to connect students’ prior knowledge with that which is newly acquired.

Moving Forward: Building Upon the Work of Ladson-Billings and Gay

The pedagogical frameworks that were developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay have been extremely influential and widely regarded in the field of teaching and learning. However, Ladson-Billings (2014) describes scholarship as “fluid” (p. 75), something that is constantly evolving to better reflect the needs of current society. She states:

The notion of a remix means that there was an original version and that there may be more versions to come, taking previously developed ideas and synthesizing them to create new and exciting forms. . . . Such revisions do not imply that the original was deficient; rather, they speak to the changing and evolving needs of dynamic systems. Remixing is vital to innovation in art, science, and pedagogy, and it is crucial that we are willing to remix what we created and/or inherited.

(2014, pp. 75-76)

Through this remix process, the work of scholars and researchers is reimagined, repositioned, and revised to incorporate fresh ideas and viewpoints in order for existing frameworks to continue their relevancy and influence in research and practice. In this section, I will discuss the work of Django Paris in collaboration with H. Samy Alim, who expanded upon culturally relevant pedagogy to establish culturally sustaining pedagogy,

as well as Constance McKoy working alongside Vicki Lind and other researchers to provide insights and specific pathways for culturally responsive pedagogy in music education.

Ladson-Billings (2014) acknowledges Paris (2012) and others who remix her original ideas in the creation of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which:

[uses] culturally relevant pedagogy as the place where the “beat drops” and then layer[s] the multiple ways that this notion of pedagogy shifts, changes, adapts, recycles, and recreates instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity—that is, that they become subjects in the instructional process, not mere objects. (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 76)

Paris (2012) pays homage to Ladson-Billings’ essential contributions to the field while also pushing the boundaries. He points out that, while educators and scholars might create and teach curriculum that is relevant or responsive to students’ culture, these actions do not ensure that the curriculum will support the continuation of relevance or responsiveness within students’ *repertoires of practice* (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003), the culturally-tied activities and traditions that they observe and experience at home and in their communities. Culturally sustaining pedagogy “requires that [educators] support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence,” with the goal to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Further, Paris emphasizes the importance of educators’ understanding of *cultural connectedness* (Irizarry, 2007, 2011),

and how our students comprehend and navigate culture in a fluid manner. He asserts that “we must be open to sustaining [cultures and languages] in both the traditional and evolving ways they are lived and used by contemporary young people” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Through culturally sustaining pedagogy and practices, educators are able to continue the extension of a more inclusive and pluralistic society that recognizes and encompasses the languages as well as cultural identities and contributions of all communities, particularly those that have been historically marginalized. In discussion of moving forward, Paris and Alim (2014) state:

The future of [culturally sustaining pedagogy] must extend the previous visions of asset pedagogies by demanding explicitly pluralist outcomes that are not centered on White, middle-class, monolingual, and monocultural norms of educational achievement. As we reposition our pedagogies to focus on the practices and knowledges of communities of color, we must do so with the understanding that fostering linguistic and cultural flexibility has become an educational imperative, as multilingualism and multiculturalism are increasingly linked to access and power. At the same time, CSP must resist static, unidirectional notions of culture and race that reinforce traditional versions of difference and (in)equality without attending to shifting and evolving ones. Finally, CSP must be willing to seriously contend head-on with the problematic as well as the many progressive aspects of our communities and the young people they foster. (p. 95)

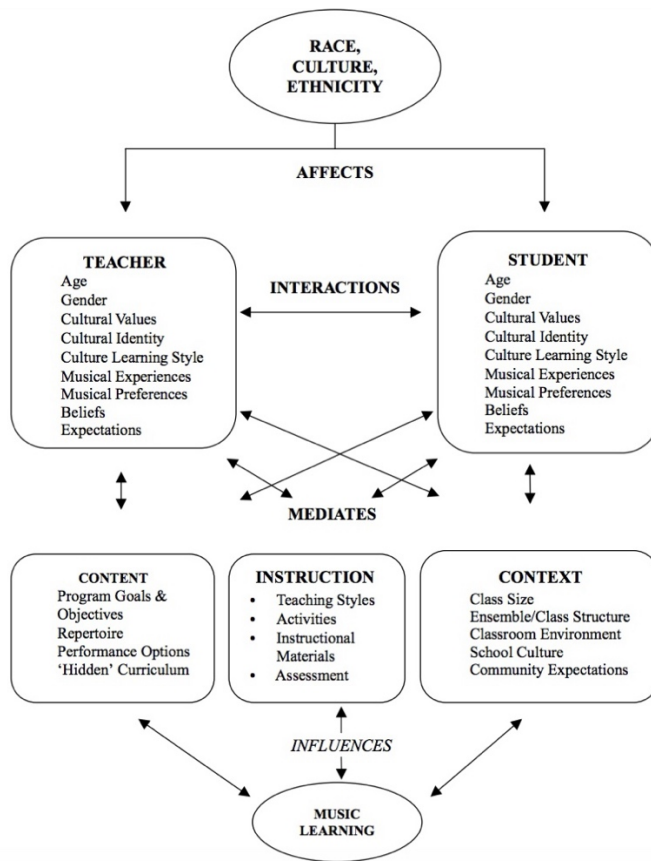
When examining culturally responsive pedagogy in music education, Constance McKoy and others have engaged discussion about how knowledge about and sensitivity

to race, ethnicity, and culture impact learning in the music classroom. McKoy et al. (2010) assert:

The path to greater understanding is challenging; remedies are not readily apparent and the topic is sensitive in nature. If . . . we truly believe in music for every child, we must find ways to support teaching and learning for culturally diverse learners. (p. 52)

Butler, Lind, and McKoy (2007) developed a conceptual model that demonstrates the impact of race, ethnicity, and culture on teaching and learning in music education.

Figure 2



Note. From Butler et al. (2007, p. 243), Equity and access in music education: conceptualizing culture as barriers to and supports for music learning, *Music Education Research*, 9(2)

Explaining the workings of the conceptual model, McKoy and Lind (2023) state:

The model consists of five categories: teacher, learner, content, instruction, and context. The categories represent dimensions or constructs . . . that may serve as barriers to or supports for music learning among diverse student populations, depending upon how they are influenced or affected by race, ethnicity, and culture. Though the model as illustrated may suggest that the boundaries between each dimension are discrete, they actually are often blurred: components from one dimension may influence or interact with those from one or more of the other dimensions. (p. 2)

McKoy and Lind (2023) explain that this conceptual model works in conjunction with the Gay's original framework to create links between music education and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Because music is deeply connected to culture and often plays a key role in shaping the identities of various cultural groups, culturally responsive teaching practices are essential in building strong connections with students in the music education spaces (McKoy, 2009). McKoy et al. (2017) reference numerous studies that demonstrate how culturally responsive instruction can positively impact a student's well-being, motivation, sense of belonging, and academic success (see Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Gay, 2010; Green, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Stalhammer, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). However, many music educators do not share the same cultural background as their students and may feel “discomfort or disorientation, particularly if their undergraduate preparation reflected a paradigm in which only traditional [Western European] ways of teaching and learning were valued” (McKoy et al., 2017, p. 52; see also Abril, 2009;

Benedict, 2006; Martinson, 2011). Developing a solid foundation of cultural knowledge and applying culturally responsive pedagogical strategies is crucial to implementing effective teaching practices that prioritize students' development and learning. While insistent and supportive of changes to better address students' cultural identities in music education, McKoy (2018) questions the slow nature of this process:

I [am] prompted to wonder how it is that change seems to be an essential facet of certain professions but so difficult to achieve in music education. And if those of us in music teacher education recognize a need for change, and are indeed incorporating change in the way we prepare music teachers, how is it that K-12 music education programs are, by and large, failing to reflect that change? (p. 4)

Chapter Summary

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the definitions, interpretations, and perspectives of culture are plentiful and diverse. Culture can be used as a noun, a verb, or an adverb. Culture is comprised of social, political, or historical ideas, and can be seen as multidimensional and complex with apparent and obvious characteristics alongside those that are more intricate and hidden. Further, culture can be explored through a variety of viewpoints, including family and home, gender, and music as well as conflict between home and school music, liminal spaces, and cultural straddling. Culture has also become a pertinent component of teaching practices through the development of pedagogical frameworks such as culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy and teaching, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. A commitment to understanding culture can be expansive and varied, allowing educators and researchers to gain insight and

understanding about students' backgrounds as well as how to help them best connect to and thrive in the academic environment

Barton (2018) explains, "People define themselves, and are identified, through their culture and consequently, their society's or group's shared values and characteristics" (p. 5). Through participation in musical experiences, individuals are able to connect both socially and culturally, shaping their identities within communities and society (Barton, 2018; Kelly, 2016; Turino, 2008). Musical knowledge is transmitted and acquired in multiple ways through active participation (Barton, 2018). In her recommendations to music educators, Barton (2018) asserts:

These [music knowledge] processes may include different ways of knowing unfamiliar to teachers of music, however, understanding how music is transmitted and acquired in a range of cultural and social contexts is important for music educators. This understanding would enable music teachers to better address diverse students' learning needs and not privilege one transactional mode over others. It would also mean that other culturally and socially diverse music practices are acknowledged rather than one dominating over others. (p. 7)

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the evolution of my understanding of student and community cultural backgrounds through my experiences as a music educator learning to teach and perform mariachi music, both inside and outside the classroom. By weaving together my personal narrative and reflections as a researcher and co-participant, along with insights and memories gathered through conversational interviews with colleagues, students, parents, and community members, I aimed to shed light on the ongoing development of my identity from cultural outsider to someone who inhabits "the space between" (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Trulsson & Burnard, 2016) and toward establishing a meaningful and accepted place within the mariachi music community. As mentioned in Chapter 1, my introduction to mariachi education was unexpected; my administration asked me to develop a mariachi program in order to better address and include the Hispanic and Latinx community within our school and community. My journey was accompanied by feelings of excitement, doubt, growing confidence, and awareness. I aim to examine my journey using the research methods discussed in this chapter.

Framework for the Study

The framework for this study is based on three related and overlapping areas of research: outsider/insider culture and research, the concept of "the space between," and principles of community-based research. While these research areas are not directly related to teaching, they can be applied to the educational context related to teachers' evolving positionality.

Outsider/Insider Culture and Research

The framework and elements of outsider and insider culture have been discussed extensively in the field of qualitative research (e.g., Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Merton, 1972; Trulsson & Burnard, 2016). While framed through the eyes of the researcher, the ideas and concepts of outsider/insider culture and research can be applied in the context of educators who desire to better understand the students with whom they work and the communities in which they teach. Citing Stringer (2007), Kerstetter (2012) explains that “a primary goal . . . is to democratize research—to dissolve the traditional boundaries between ‘researcher’ and ‘subject’ and to involve community members fully in the research process” (p. 99).

Merton (1972) describes outsider researchers as neutral, detached observers who are not from the community in which they are studying or working. Known for their supposed objectivity, these individuals traditionally “experience and treat even . . . close relationships as though from a bird’s-eye view” (Simmel & Wolff, 1950, p. 405). However, because of the distance and lack of connection between the outsider researcher and community members, outsiders sometimes have difficulty in gaining access to and trust with research participants (Chawla-Duggan, 2007; Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006; Kerstetter, 2012). Referencing Kerstetter (2012), Trulsson and Burnard (2016) state:

[R]esearchers often enter communities as “outsiders,” whether by virtue of their affiliation with a university, level of formal education, research expertise, race, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics. Many of these traits—such as level of formal education and access to resources—also connote a more privileged and powerful status in the larger society. (p. 4)

Because of these characteristics, outsider researchers might not be capable of fully understanding or taking part in a culture or community from which they are not native, making it difficult to analyze their observations in a culturally-relevant manner (Trulsson & Burnard, 2016).

In a description of insider researchers, Kerstetter (2012) shares that these individuals “are uniquely positioned to understand the experiences of groups of which they are members” (p. 100). Because of this familiarity, insiders are better able to connect with and gain the trust of research participants, honing in on similar shared experiences in order to generate data with richness and depth (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This knowledge and connection to the studied community or culture can also have negative implications, including difficulty in separating the researcher’s personal experiences from those of participants (Kanuha, 2000) and trouble with acknowledging their own potential bias within the research process (Serrant-Green, 2002). Additionally, Kaufman (1994) and Serrant-Green (2002) point out that insider researchers might also experience situations where confidentiality comes into question when interviewing community members about sensitive subjects.

Scholars have asserted that a strict dichotomy “is restrictive to lock into a notion that emphasizes either/or, one or the other, you are in or you are out” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). Rarely are individuals labeled exclusively as outsiders or insiders (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012; Merriam et al., 2001; Merton, 1972). Citing Mercer (2007), Kerstetter (2012) states, “In practice, researchers’ identities are often relative, and can sometimes even change, based on where and when the research is conducted, the personalities of the researcher and individual research participants, and the topic of the

research” (p. 101). It is because a strict dichotomy of outsider/insider does not exist that I choose to examine my journey as an educator into “the space between” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Mercer, 2007), a designation where individuals fall in between the roles of complete insider and complete outsider.

The Space Between

When navigating “the space between” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007), a researcher’s identity, personal culture, and relationship with the participants are influenced by their positionality (Kerstetter, 2012). Banks (1998) identified four categories in which individuals can be positioned in relation to a specific culture: *indigenous-insider*, *indigenous-outsider*, *external-insider*, and *external-outsider*.

The *indigenous-insider* is considered to be a true insider; the individual:

endorses the unique values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge of his or her indigenous community and culture and is perceived by . . . others . . . as a legitimate member . . . who has . . . the knowledge that will promote the well-being of the community, enhance its power, and enable it to maintain cultural integrity and survive. (Banks, 1998, p. 8)

Banks views the *indigenous-outsider* as a person who was a part of their indigenous community, but through cultural assimilation, has become a member of an outside culture, adopting the values, beliefs, and knowledge of the latter. Furthermore, the *indigenous-outsider* is frequently depicted as an outsider by the indigenous population (Banks, 1998). Tuhiwai Smith (1999) shares her personal experience as a researcher identifying and navigating “the space between” within the Maori community in New Zealand:

I was an insider as a Maori mother and an advocate of the language revitalization movement, and I shared in the activities of fund raising and organizing. . . . When I began the discussions and negotiations over my research, however, I became much more aware of the things which made me an outsider. I was attending university as a graduate student; I had worked for several years as a teacher and had a professional income; I had a husband; and we owned a car which was second-hand but actually registered. As I became more involved in the project . . . these differences became much more marked. (pp. 137-138)

Tuhiwai Smith's understanding of her changing position within her native community is an example of the awareness that researchers must display when working with participants; although one might initially be an insider, personal experiences and characteristics play a pivotal role in the positionality of the researcher in relationship to the culture and community (Kerstetter, 2012).

Examining the *external-insider*, Banks (1998) states that this individual was initially a member of another culture or community. However, taking part in distinctive and noteworthy experiences, they find a home and embrace the values of the newer, studied community, sometimes rejecting the beliefs of their own indigenous culture. Often, the *external-insider* is viewed by their new community as an "adopted insider" (Banks, 1998, p. 8). In contrast, the *external-outsider* is an individual who is seen as a complete outsider of the culture or community being studied. Banks (1998) states, "The external-outsider has a partial understanding of and little appreciation for the values, perspectives, and knowledge of the community he or she is studying and consequently often misunderstands and misinterprets the behaviors within the studied community" (p.

8). The designations highlighted by Banks (1998) “represent differences in researchers’ knowledge and values based on their socialization within different ethnic, racial, and cultural communities” (Kerstetter, 2012, p. 101). However, it is pertinent to note that the identity of a researcher in relation to the participants and community being studied is fluid and evolving (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Serrant-Green, 2002).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) share, “We know what we know because of how we are positioned. If we shift our position in the parade, our knowing shifts” (p. 17). The idea expressed by these two researchers can be applied to one’s position as an insider, outsider, or within “the space between.” Brewer (2010) identifies this space that exists amongst outsiders and insiders as liminal space, “a lens through which we may view the complexity of the social dynamics at work inside of, outside of, and between . . . experiences” (p. 56). As noted previously, Brewer (2010) describes these spaces and boundaries of identity as “fluid and porous . . . providing entry points for exploration of experienced divisions and liminal spaces” (p. 56). Freire’s (1998) philosophical statements support both of these viewpoints, asserting that an educator’s positionality is always developing and evolving based on his or her knowledge and experiences:

There is no *teaching* without *learning*, and by that I mean more than that the act of teaching demands the existence of those who teach and those who learn. What I mean is that teaching and learning take place in such a way that those who teach learn, on the one hand, because they recognize previously learned knowledge and, on the other, because by observing how the novice student’s curiosity works to apprehend what is taught (without which one cannot learn), they help themselves to uncover uncertainties, rights, and wrongs. (p. 17)

At the beginning of my journey as a mariachi educator, I was an outsider, or what Banks (1998) refers to as an *external-outsider*, in the mariachi community. My understanding of mariachi music was limited, and my connection with my students and their families, while genuine, was on a different level that did not fully acknowledge or embrace their home lives and cultural values. In this study, I explore the factors that allowed me to move into “the space between” and eventually assume the role of *external-insider*, as Banks describes.

Community-based Research and Research Identities

While not the aim of this study, it is often through community-based research that the impact of researchers’ identities are realized and explored, situated in the context of a particular population or culture (Israel et al., 1998). Citing the work of scholars (Israel et al., 1998; Viswanathan et al., 2004), Kerstetter (2012) shares that community-based research emphasizes the involvement of community members and participants throughout the research process; “[t]hese interactions provide a useful terrain for examining the positioning of researchers and community partners as insiders, outsiders, or occupants of the ‘space between’” (p. 103). Additionally, community-based research projects often empower partners and allow the perspectives of community members to be heard (Israel et al., 1998; Kerstetter, 2012; Stoecker, 2002).

Scholars have also addressed the power relationships that exist between researchers and the community members taking part in the research process. Specifically in situations where outsider and insider researchers are working together on a project, Wallerstein et al. (2008) acknowledge that diverse research teams are advantageous, but commonly present challenges and conflict: “[T]he more cultural diversity there is, the

more likely it is that high levels of tension, lack of respect for group members, and inequality in turn-taking will exist” (Wallerstein et al., 2008, p. 385). It is essential that points of conflict are addressed throughout the research process in order to build trust between the researcher and participants; when the “imbalances of power” (Kerstetter, 2012, p. 104) are left unacknowledged, the completion and effectiveness of the research are frequently hindered (Kerstetter, 2012; Wallerstein & Duran, 2008).

Summary of Study Framework

Outsider/insider cultural positioning and research, the concept of “the space between,” and community-based research combine to create the theoretical framework for this self-study. These areas of research can be useful in examining teachers’ evolving positionalities, relationships, and connections within the schools and communities in which they teach. The following sections discuss the methodology of the study as well as the processes of data generation and analysis.

Method

Researchers identify at least three methods for studying one’s own practice: narrative, autoethnography, and self-study. These approaches walk along similar pathways in qualitative research methodologies. I explored the grounding of each to determine the best approach for this study. Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington (2008) identify each avenue in a succinct way: *narrative* is “a look at a story of self” while *autoethnography* is “a look at self within a larger context” (p. 17). When describing *self-study*, the scholars define the approach as “a look at self in action, usually within educational contexts” (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 17).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry, attributed by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) to Dewey's work (1916, 1922, 1938) revolving around lived experiences, focuses on "how lived life bears on lived educational experiences" (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 19). Within this framework, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identify three commonplaces that play an essential role in narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place. Temporality references time within narrative research and acknowledges "that people and events always have a past, present, and future" (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 20). The meaning of experiences are often assumed to remain constant and objective; however, Cunliffe et al. (2004) suggest that "time is experienced subjectively and narratives are spontaneous acts of meaning-making that take place and interweave through many moments of discursive time and space" (p. 262). Sociality places emphasis on the relationships of the researcher and participants. Hamilton et al. (2008) assert that "[n]arrative inquirers are attuned to the feelings, desires, needs, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of both self and other" (p. 20). In addition to the inquirer's own narrative, the experiences and voices of participants should be considered in order to obtain a balanced or well-rounded perspective. Place also plays a vital role within narrative research. The acknowledgement and use of this commonplace in narrative inquiry can provide boundaries and can also be seen as a tool for reflection as well as for moving thinking forward (Hamilton et al., 2008).

Autoethnography

Autoethnography maintains a focus on self while also placing emphasis on experiences in relation to a larger social context (Coia & Taylor, 2005). More

specifically, “[a]uto-ethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture, an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 22, citing Ellis, 2004). Autoethnographic research aims to challenge accepted views and assumptions of the world in which we live (Jones, 2005) and sets positive social and cultural changes into motion (Renner, 2001). In this method, the researcher becomes a character within the story, allowing their identity to be explored through a cultural lens and context (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000, 2003; Hamilton et al., 2008). Furthermore, within autoethnography, culture can be defined to include “evidence of shared patterns of thought, symbol, and action typical of a particular group” as well as “language, action, and/or interaction” (Hamilton et al., 2008, pp. 22-23).

Self-study

Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) describe self-study as:

the study of one’s self, one’s actions, one’s ideas, as well as the “not self.” It is autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political . . . it draws on one’s life, but it is more than that. Self-study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known and ideas considered. (p. 236)

Similar to narrative and autoethnography, the researcher’s own story and viewpoint are vital components within self-study research (Goodson & Walker, 1991), which allow for deep inquiry and further understanding of one’s evolving professional identity and practice (Dinkelman, 2003). Further, self-study focuses on the pursuit of improved knowledge within the fields of teaching and learning (Loughran, 2004).

LaBoskey (2004) identifies five essential elements of self-study. Self-study is self-initiated and specifically focused; it aims to improve one's practice. Self-study research is also interactive, involving those who are a part of the researcher's practice, and uses multiple methods of, predominantly, qualitative inquiry. Also important within this research, validity is defined as "a process based on trustworthiness" (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 21).

A driving force behind self-study is critical reflection; for teachers and practitioners, expansive knowledge is gained through experiences and engaging in reflective practices (Russell & Munby, 1992). While practitioners are often separated from educational research, through self-study inquiry, educators are empowered to also act as primary investigators, allowing for their knowledge to be readily applied as valid information and scholarly work. Meek (1991) asserts that the "main thing wrong with the world of education is that there's this one group of people who do it—the teachers—and then there's another group who think they know about it—the researchers" (p. 34). By inquiring into their own understandings and experiences, teachers are able to focus on the construction of knowledge and increase the quality of their instructional practices (Elliot, 1989). For this particular study, which methodology will be most successful in embodying my proposed research?

Chosen Methodology for This Study

Because of its interactive and practical nature, a self-study approach was the best avenue for this research study. Self-study allowed me to reflect on and improve my own practice as well as articulate what I have learned in order to analyze moments of discovery and turning points in my journey from cultural outsider to "the space between."

Through sharing my reflections alongside the perspectives of the study participants, I hope to empower teachers and practitioners to critically reflect on their own teaching practices in order to better understand and apply knowledge and thereby improve their craft. Because of the interactive nature of self-study, the voices of those close to the researcher are heard and included in the inquiry; these connections allow the investigator “to generate an understanding of reality” (Hamilton, 1995, p. 35). Specifically, I aim to provide educators and practitioners with an example of how I navigated becoming part of mariachi practice as a cultural outsider, gradually gaining the trust and respect of students, parents, community members, and the greater Phoenix/Tempe/Guadalupe community. Through this research, I aim to inspire others to take similar actions by connecting with and engaging in musical traditions and cultures that are prominent in and important to the communities in which they teach.

Additionally, self-study methodology allowed for components of its sister methodologies, narrative and autoethnography, to be included within my research. In examining narrative methodology and how it weaves into this self-study, I aimed to incorporate the stories of participants in order to gain insight into their experiences within the research context. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state, “[P]eople by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience” (p. 2). In addition to sharing these stories, I looked to situate them within the mariachi environment and that of the Phoenix/Tempe/Guadalupe community in which I started my journey as a mariachi educator and as someone from outside of Mexican culture.

Citing Reed-Danahay (1997), Glesne (1999) shares that autoethnography is sometimes used “to describe ethnographies of the ‘other,’” and to allow “the writer [to] interject personal experience into the text as in a confessional tale . . . to investigate self within a social context, whether it be your own or that of another culture” (p. 181). While my perspective of my teacher identity development was important on its own, I also wanted to examine the viewpoints of students, colleagues, and other stakeholders within the Phoenix/Tempe/Guadalupe community in order to discover points of agreement and conflict. Hamilton (1995) shares, “When teachers teach, they do not merely present their subject matter acumen and their pedagogical abilities. They also communicate themselves. Indeed, they reveal their frames of self: their interpretations, their histories, their personal understandings of the world” (p. 35).

Data Sources

In describing qualitative research, Schwandt (2001) states, “Qualitative inquiry deals with human lived experience. It is the *life-world* as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings that is the object of study” (p. 84). It is a goal of qualitative researchers to gather experiential data and accounts that support the findings and conclusions of a study (Polkinghorne, 2005). However, Polkinghorne (2005) also points out that the words and descriptions of participants’ accounts are not intended as the data or evidence themselves; it is the meanings and thoughts represented by these descriptions that are the core evidential material of qualitative studies.

For this study, I initially intended to use two methods of data collection: (1) journaling in reflection on my own experiences and (2) conversational interviews with colleagues, community members, former and current students, and parents who have

been a part of my journey as a developing mariachi educator. While I thought these two methods would be sufficient, my dissertation committee recommended that I add an optional journaling component for the participants, allowing them to express themselves in a more private setting without me via video recording or a written response to a provided prompt. I agreed that this additional method of data collection might yield further perspectives that participants would not feel open to share with me in person or one-on-one. Through these three avenues, I was able to examine my evolution by both internal and external means. Analyzing a variety of accounts, I was able to paint a balanced picture of my development through the observations and reflections of both myself and those close to me within my professional life.

Journal of Researcher's Experiences

Within the realm of teacher education practices and self-studies, journaling is a common component in the generation of qualitative data (Ovens & Garbett, 2020). This method allows the researcher to gather and analyze data in an intentional way through various forms of text, or what Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) define as “writing with a purpose” (p. 124). Journaling affords the opportunity for deeper insight into happenings, allowing the researcher to examine their own thoughts and feelings in relation to these events. Furthermore, Ovens and Garbett (2020) share, “Journaling is both a process and an artifact that helps capture the immediacy of practitioners’ lives through a process of intermingling description, commentary, introspection, and analysis in ways that enable deeper reflection and transformation” (p. 2).

Reflective practices such as journaling allow the researcher to acknowledge biases, presumptions, and values while clarifying ideals and beliefs (Ortlipp, 2008;

Russell & Kelly, 2002). Ortlipp (2008) shares that journals are “used in engaging with the notion of creating transparency in the research process, and . . . keeping a reflective journal can have concrete effects on the research design” (p. 696). It is through journaling that I reflected on both previous and current experiences that I have had as an educator on my journey at Marcos de Niza High School and Arizona State University, allowing me to gain clarity and organization in regard to my thoughts and beliefs in navigating the evolution to mariachi educator. Additionally, I examined and explored my reservations, apprehensions, and insecurities with teaching mariachi as a person from outside of the culture, as well as preconceived notions and views that I held about mariachi music and culture. Journaling was also helpful in identifying potential participants who could best contribute to the study.

As Faculty Associate for Mariachi at Arizona State University (August 2022 to present during the time of this study), I used my experiences directing the Arizona State University Mariachi Ensemble to validate and verify my reflections on my previous role as a mariachi educator in the K-12 setting for six years (2017 to 2023) while also examining my experiences in the present. Furthermore, I attempted to unpack how these views and thoughts have changed and evolved over time. For this study, my journal served two purposes: to reflect on my previous experience and to look at my current engagement. I set aside time to reflect on my journey as a high school mariachi teacher, recalling past experiences. Additionally, I also composed reflections on my current experiences as the mariachi director for the program at Arizona State University by journaling after rehearsals and after conversational interviews with the participants. While the journal entries were not composed after every single rehearsal or

conversational interview, they were often connected to these moments and written over time. Further, they provided perspective both during and after the analysis of the data from the conversational interviews.

Conversational Interviews

A primary goal of qualitative researchers is to make sense of human experiences, beliefs, and behaviors within specific spaces, environments, and contexts through individual accounts (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). When performing qualitative research, the interview process allows for in-depth understanding of individuals' views and experiences (Kvale, 1996, 2003). Cohen, Manion, and Morison (2007) describe the interview as "a valuable method for exploring the construction and negotiation of meanings in a natural state" (p. 29).

Berg (2007) identifies four main types of interviews: structured, open-ended (unstructured), semi-structured, and focus group. The structured interview is designed with predetermined questions that often elicit a response of "yes" or "no," not often allowing for further exploration or unique, individualized viewpoints. The open-ended interview is on the opposite side of the spectrum, allowing flexibility for both the interviewer and interviewee in determining the content of the interview (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Semi-structured interviews offer a compromise between the two aforementioned classifications. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), the semi-structured interview, while providing a concrete, determined set of questions within the scope of the study, "allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand interviewee's responses" (p. 88). Lastly, the focus group interview allows the researcher to obtain opinions and beliefs on a certain topic,

using a sampling of a specific population with insights into that topic (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). Focus groups are especially useful in allowing participants to develop ideas together, coming to conclusions that are found through the collective experience (Berg, 2007).

Within the interview setting, participants are able to express their own voice and have their thoughts and beliefs heard in an authentic way (Berg, 2007). Interviews are usually interactive, allowing the researcher or interviewer to navigate for greater clarity and understanding while allowing participants to expand upon their views of topics (Alshenqeti, 2014). While interviews might seem straightforward in action, the interpretation of data and findings might be complex. Schostak (2006) asserts that the interview “is not a simple tool in which to mine information. It is . . . a place where views may clash, deceive, seduce, enchant” (p. 92). The interview process requires the researcher to listen to and attempt to gain understanding from the lives, experiences, and intimacies of each participant (Alshenqeti, 2014; Schostak, 2006).

Chase (2003) provides an additional perspective on interviews, suggesting that they can be seen as “occasions in which we ask for life stories . . . [or] narratives about some life experience that is of deep and abiding interest to the interviewee” (p. 274). Citing Mishler (1986), she points out that “conventional methods of sociological interviewing tend to suppress respondents’ stories” (Chase, 2003, p. 273) and can lead researchers to sometimes ignore what could be the most impactful stories while interpreting and attempting to transcribe them. Mishler (1986) asserts that narrating a story is at the heart of the human experience and that participants desire to share their thoughts and stories, even if the researcher does not explicitly ask. Further, Polanyi

(1985) states, “[S]tories are told to make a point, to transmit a message . . . about the world the teller shares with other people” (p. 12). Through this process, the participant, seen as a narrator or storyteller, makes the relevance and connections clear for the listener. By allowing participants to tell their own stories and make connections, a shift in responsibility in communication and meaning-making falls onto the storyteller rather than the listener (Chase, 2003). Further, Polanyi (1985) asserts that “stories can provide useful insight into what matters to those for whom the story is a ‘normal,’ ‘acceptable,’ ‘understandable,’ commonplace production” (p. 1).

By changing the approach of the traditional interview to that of a conversation or the sharing of life stories and experiences, researchers are better able to create a space in which participants can feel comfortable to speak candidly, sharing details that are important and vital to their own narratives. In turn, the translation and interpretation of meaning is a shared responsibility between the researcher and participant in relating these narratives to the research study at hand. Chase (2003) shares:

[L]ife stories themselves embody what we need to study: the relation between *this* instance of social action (*this* particular life story) and the social world the narrator shares with others; the ways in which culture marks, shapes, and/or constrains this narrative; and the ways in which *this* narrator makes use of cultural resources and struggles with cultural constraints. (p. 290, emphases in original)

Participants and Conversational Interviews

The participants for this study included former and current students, colleagues, parents, and community members who witnessed my development and journey as a mariachi educator. I identified participants and invited them to take part in the study

based on their role and tenure with me while also keeping role balance (i.e., students, colleagues, parents, community members) and time constraints in mind. It was important to me as the researcher that I include a variety of voices, encompassing viewpoints and perspectives that would further inform my inquiry. Using the strategy of purposeful selection, I “selected [participants] deliberately to provide information that [was] particularly relevant to [the] questions and goals” of the study (Maxwell, 2013). In addition, Patton (1990) states, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich* [emphasis in original] cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169). I purposely chose a number of participants who I knew to be consistently forthcoming in their perspectives and feedback during our time together throughout my tenure at Marcos de Niza High School and Arizona State University, as I felt that they would be transparent with their opinions and assessments of my journey; the incorporation of these voices would provide a balanced, realistic account. In addition to selecting participants myself, I also asked participants for suggestions of other individuals who might provide meaningful perspectives and viewpoints for the research study: who else might have an interesting story or experience to share?

Initially, I had planned to conduct one semi-structured interview with each participant and schedule a second, if further inquiry was necessary. In the selection of participants, I had aimed to include two to three former students, two colleagues, and two to three community members/parents. However, my dissertation committee recommended that the scope of participants and the number of proposed sessions be

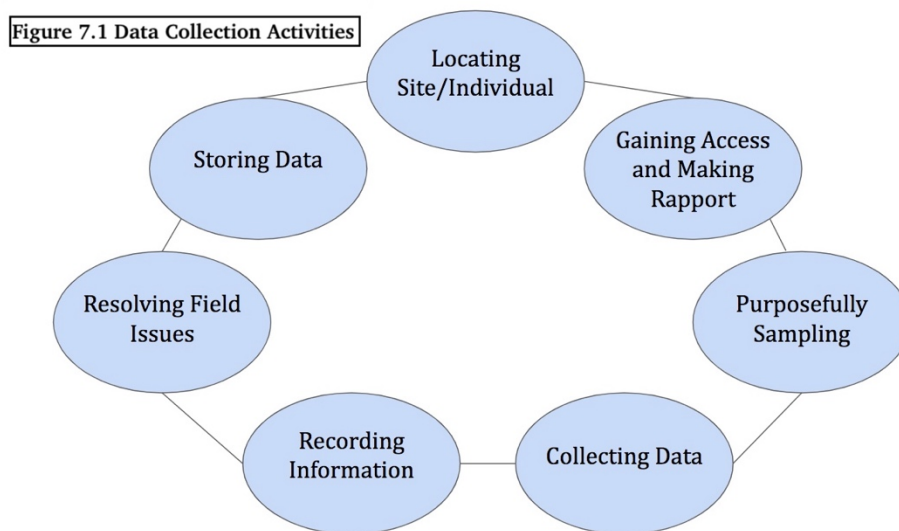
expanded, if needed, in order to receive more in-depth, complete stories to encompass the past, present, and future. Understanding that additional viewpoints would widen the scope of my inquiry and present a fuller perspective of my journey, I took the committee's advice and expanded the number of participants; I ended up with 19 participants (five colleagues, eight students, four parents, and two community members). Each participant took part in a one-on-one conversational interview that lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. While the interview environment was somewhat structured, the design encompassed more of an open-ended approach, using conversation starters and questions that encouraged participants to "fill in what [they] left out or to articulate more fully [their] contradictory feelings" (Chase, 2003, p. 284). Supporting this approach, Chase (2003) states, "The more fully particular are the stories we hear, the stronger our analyses will be of the relationship between the general and the particular" (p. 292).

Most of the conversational interviews took place in-person with an audio and/or visual recording device for transcription and analytical purposes. In-person interviews took place on the campus of Arizona State University or at a mutually agreeable location determined by the participant and me. Interviews via Zoom were also an option for participants to take part in the study. By including 19 different participant voices in this study, I was able to gain insight and paint a more comprehensive picture of my identity evolution and the journey from a cultural outsider into "the space between" (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007). A collection of sample interview questions for different participants (students, colleagues, parents, community members) can be found in Appendix B.

Data Generation and Analysis

According to Polkinghorne (2005), the goal of qualitative research is to provide insight into lived experiences. How does one best collect data in the qualitative approach? Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative data are “derived from an intensive exploration with a participant” and “[result] in languaged data . . . [making] it difficult to transform them into numbers for analysis” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). Creswell (2013) describes data collection as “a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p. 146). Figure 1 below depicts these tasks in a circular model, including locating individual participants, establishing a rapport, purposefully sampling, collecting and recording data, resolving anticipated issues with data generation, and storing data in a secure, protected environment to prevent loss (Creswell, 2013).

Figure 3



Note. From Creswell (2013, p. 146), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*

Maxwell (2013) asserts that the methods of collecting data do not always follow the direct scope or path of one's research questions. He states, "There is no way to mechanically convert research questions into methods; your methods are the *means* [emphasis in original] to answering your research questions, not a logical transformation of the latter" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 100). Furthermore, methods in which data are collected will be dependent on the research situation and the effectiveness of the approach in acquiring the information that is needed or desired. Polkinghorne (2005) states, "Data used in qualitative research are not simply lying about on the surface ready to be gathered up; rather, the researcher is required to dig below the surface to bring up experiential accounts" (p. 141).

For this study, I collected data through two primary avenues: reflective journaling from my own perspective and conversational interviews with study participants (colleagues, current and former students, parents, and community members). Additionally, participants had the option of completing a video/written journal entry with a provided prompt of questions; out of the 19 participants, three of them submitted a video or written journal entry.

My reflective journal entries were handwritten in a notebook or typed using word processing software. In order to have all entries in one place as well as to provide clarity and organization, all of these compositions were transcribed and/or pasted into a Google Doc file. This allowed me to code journal entries in a unified and succinct manner. I stored the reflective journal entries on a secure server via Google Drive, allowing for access only by myself and my dissertation chair or advisor.

Using the conversational interviews as a source of information and data, I analyzed and deciphered the experiences of participants in relation to my development as a mariachi educator. *How did their viewpoints and experiences align with my perceived development and evolution as a mariachi educator? Specifically, how did my identity as an outsider of mariachi and Mexican culture influence their opinions and thoughts? Where were there differences of perspectives when examining my reflections and memories in relation to theirs? How might have one informed the other? How might have they conflicted or questioned each other?*

I transcribed conversational interviews using the transcription platform Descript, and then made edits and clarifications through the platform or via Google Docs; at times, Descript transcribed words and phrases incorrectly. I made all edits to the transcripts while following along with the video interview recording, allowing for edits and accuracy. While ensuring that the transcriptions were accurate, this process also allowed me to listen again in order to discover viewpoints or ideas that I might not have perceived previously. Like the reflective journal entries, I stored interview transcriptions on a secure server via Google Drive.

For the optional video/written journals, I provided the participants with a written prompt that included questions similar to those asked in the conversational interviews (see Appendix C). Out of the 19 participants, only three completed this optional follow-up opportunity. While I thought that the responses might differ from those given face-to-face, the participants who submitted a video/written journal entry voiced viewpoints and sentiments that were similar to those from our one-on-one interactions. Based on the small number of optional submissions and reiterated opinions found in these

video/written journal entries, I assume that the participants in this self-study were being reasonably forthcoming and honest in the conversational interviews.

Data analysis consists of taking the steps to organize what the researcher has experienced in order to make sense of what they have learned from participants in the study (Glesne, 1999). Within this process, researchers can “describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, and link [their stories] to others’ stories” (Glesne, 1999, p. 130). Through data analysis, researchers are able to create categories, synthesize connections and patterns, and interpret the data that have been collected from participants.

In analyzing the reflective journal entries, the participant conversational interview transcripts, and participant journal prompt responses, I looked for commonalities and themes that emerged, and coded and categorized these accordingly. In explaining this process, Roulston (2014) states:

The basis of coding and categorization of data is that data in the form of interview transcripts, field notes of observations, or documents are reduced by labeling sections of data with “codes” that reflect some combination of topical content, structural features, and/or concepts derived from literature in the field. (p. 263)

Chapter Four presents each participant’s story about their own backgrounds, allowing readers to learn about them as individual storytellers. Incorporating the experiences and thoughts of others is essential to me, as I know that there is always more than one side to a story. Because the participants are individuals with whom I have close relationships and who played an integral role in my development, they were able to shed light on the process from angles that I could not as the subject and researcher. Stauffer

(2014) shares, “In narrative studies, the researcher is personally engaged in an ongoing relationship of trust with the participants that affords them a space in which stories—including disturbing ones—can be told” (p. 177).

Along with coding and categorizing the data, I shared the participants’ voices in order to effectively share the story of my development as a mariachi educator as an individual from outside Mexican and mariachi culture in Chapter Five. Through analyzing the thoughts, stories, and feelings of both myself and individuals close to me in the mariachi education environment, I gained insight into my evolution as a music educator teaching a genre outside of my own culture and experiences, as well as becoming part of a community of a long-standing cultural tradition. The inclusion of the participants’ viewpoints and perspectives allowed me to present a more developed, well-rounded depiction of my journey as a mariachi educator from outside the culture.

Trustworthiness

In order for research, findings, and interpretations to be seen as credible, it is imperative that the researcher establishes trustworthiness throughout a study (Glesne, 1999). Writing on the subjects of trustworthiness and research validity, Creswell (2013) and Glesne (1999) identify six validation strategies that are used in qualitative research: prolonged engagement, peer review or debriefing, acknowledging and clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rich, thick description, and realization of limitations within the study.

Creswell (2013) shares, “Prolonged engagement and persistent observation [emphasis removed] include building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by the researcher or

informants” (pp. 250-251). On this note, Glesne (1999) asserts, “When a large amount of time is spent with your research participants, they less readily feign behavior or feel the need to do so; moreover, they are more likely to be frank and comprehensive about what they tell you” (p. 151). The building of relationships and rapport in this study was essential to these individuals sharing their thoughts and experiences in an honest, uninhibited manner. Because I had previously established relationships with the participants, a foundation of trust already existed, allowing them to be more forthcoming and open about their experiences and opinions. The fact that the video journal entries provided by three participants aligned with the perspectives that they previously shared in the conversational interviews also supports the trustworthiness of the interview data from the participants.

Peer review or debriefing allows for outside or third-party individuals to provide the researcher with accountability and an external check of the process. The peer reviewer or debriefer “keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher’s feelings” (Creswell, 2013, citing Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This individual can also be seen as an auditor of the research study (Glesne, 1999). Throughout the research process, I have had colleagues in music education and other subject areas review my research processes, findings, and interpretations; the incorporation of peer reviewers, including my advisor and dissertation committee, has provided an extra line of accountability as I navigated the study.

A researcher needs to continually evaluate and be aware of personal bias and subjectivity when conducting research (Glesne, 1999). By communicating and clarifying

bias and subjectivity, the reader is able to understand the researcher's position and factors that could affect the process or inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1988), providing a sense of the researcher's trustworthiness. Glesne (1999) challenges the researcher to interrogate their own subjectivity by directly questioning their research and data collection processes: "Whom do I not see? Whom have I seen less often? Where do I not go? Where have I gone less often? With whom do I have special relationships, and in what light would they interpret the phenomena? What data collecting means have I not used that could provide additional insight?" (p. 152). Within this self-study, I attempted to challenge my own subjectivity as much as possible; the experiences and insights shared by the participants may not have always aligned with my own viewpoints of my journey, but they provided valuable perspectives that contributed to my development as a mariachi educator.

Along with peer review and clarifying the researcher's bias, member checking is another strategy to increase trustworthiness and validity in research. Considered to be "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314), the process of member checking allows the participants within the study to assess the accuracy of the data and analyses that are interpreted by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). This strategy can be helpful to the researcher in that it allows participants to verify that their perspectives are presented accurately, inform the researcher of any problematic areas or sections, and assist in the development of new ideas or revised interpretations (Glesne, 1999). As I navigated through this study, I gave each participant the opportunity to read through and verify interview transcripts. This was particularly important to me

because I wanted the voice of each research participant to be presented in an accurate and honest manner.

Creswell (2013) asserts, “Rich, thick description [emphasis removed] allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer describes in detail the participants or setting under study” (p. 252). A rich, thick description encompasses not only in-depth detail, but highlights elements that can be interconnected (Stake, 2010). A goal of this strategy is to allow the reader to decide whether the findings are applicable to other research areas or settings that might share similar foundations or attributes (Creswell, 2013; Erlandson et al., 1993). My intention was to provide insight in a meaningful and descriptive way through narrative and reflections from both myself and the research participants, allowing the reader to gain understanding of my evolution as a music educator.

While I intended to present findings and interpretations that were accurate and honest, I am aware that there are limitations within any study, particularly a study of one’s own practice. Glesne (1999) shares, “Limitations are consistent with the always partial state of knowing in social research, and elucidating your limitations helps readers know how they should read and interpret your work” (p. 152). While I identified research participants from a variety of areas in my development, each person’s experience was unique and could not completely represent every individual’s perspective in my evolution and development as a mariachi educator.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting a study, researchers need to be aware of their positionality, intentions, and motives as well as how these might be perceived by participants and

readers in relation to integrity, vulnerability, and power. Kang (2020) shares that a researcher with integrity “can be trusted as he or she strives to understand reality through actions, research methods, and his or her demeanor” (p. 66). Furthermore, the researcher also needs to establish trust with readers, indicating challenges or biases that might limit their own perspectives as well as how the research has affected their earlier views on the concepts and experiences being investigated (Yin, 2015).

Within self-study methodology, Hamilton and Pinnegar (2014) speak about the concept of “intimate scholarship” (p. 153, referencing Hamilton, 1995). They share:

Intimate scholarship . . . uncovers embodied knowing through autobiography and action, and explores the coming-to-know process based in dialogue that captures particularities to document the ways we navigate lives and experiences in the educational world. When engaged in intimate scholarship [researchers] reveal the vulnerabilities and passions that most often remain hidden in talk about experience. (p. 153)

In agreement with these sentiments, Kang (2020) elaborates that “[s]haring personal views on teaching and one’s personal journey towards improvement . . . publicly involves a level of vulnerability because we do not want to look inadequate as professionals” (p. 66, referencing Samaras & Freese, 2006). Examining my journey into the mariachi music community as an initial outsider of the culture allowed me to take a critical look at my experiences, embracing moments of success and triumph while also reflecting on moments of discomfort and defeat. Through a path of honest sharing and reflection, I was able to analyze my perspectives and experiences in relation to those of the study participants (colleagues, students, parents, and community members) in an open manner.

In this self-study, I understood the importance of acknowledging the possible power structures that might have presented themselves in my interactions with participants and to communicate why the work is pertinent and being conducted through this specific research lens. Schulte (2002) shares, “[Transformation] is marked by a disruption of values or cultural beliefs through critical reflection. . . . Transformation requires teachers to think critically and challenge ideas of how power and control are constructed in the world and mapped onto them” (p. 101). A number of the participants in this self-study were current and former students of mine as well as parents and community members; I acknowledge that our relationships as well as their respect for me as a teacher might have influenced what they would be willing to share with me in our conversational interviews. As stated previously, based on the analysis of the data from conversational interviews alongside the optional video/written journal entries, I assume that the participants were honest and forthcoming with their viewpoints and perspectives of my journey.

Furthermore, Schulte (2002) emphasizes that self-study assists educators in examining and understanding their cultural positions in relation to others. While I already had developed relationships with a majority of the participants, it was important that I placed emphasis on my growth, development, and reflection through this study, and reassured participants that their candor and openness would allow for analysis and findings that were comprehensive and fully realized. Throughout this study, I respected the confidentiality and trust of the participants, allowing them to share within the boundaries that were most comfortable to them as well as creating an environment that focused on respect and community. The design and methodology for this study were

approved by the university's Institutional Review Board and documentation can be found in Appendix D.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides insight into the details of the study as well as how it was conducted. I have related the framework of outsider/insider culture and research to my journey into mariachi education, completing a self-study that examines my learning and understanding as well as finding acceptance in the surrounding and mariachi music communities. Additionally, this chapter provides detailed information about the research process, including sources of data and data generation and analysis procedures that I used in attempting to depict the perspectives of the participants alongside my own as researcher and co-participant.

Based on the processes of data generation and analysis in this chapter, Chapter Four presents introductions to the 19 participants who took part in this study. Chapter Five focuses on the emerging themes and findings from the conversational interviews with the participants, integrating their viewpoints and perspectives with my own experiences and recollections in relation to my journey into “the space between,” as well as finding acceptance in the mariachi musical community. In Chapter Six, I discuss the emerging themes and findings in relation to literature, and provide recommendations for music educators and future research centered around this topic.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Participant Introductions

The purpose of this self-study is to examine my journey into the understanding of student and community cultural backgrounds through my experiences learning to teach and perform mariachi both within and outside of the classroom. Being someone from completely outside of mariachi, Mexican American, and Hispanic cultures, I aimed to gain understanding of my journey through my own reflections as researcher and co-participant, along with insight and recollections from interviews and conversations with others involved in that journey. I was interested to discover the perspectives of participants when it came to me teaching mariachi music and developing programs at both the high school and collegiate levels.

This study included 19 participants (five colleagues, eight students, four parents, and two community members) who have been integral to my journey as a mariachi educator. These individuals provided me with insight and unique perspectives, allowing me to better understand my progression from an outsider of mariachi culture to “the space between.” Because my conversational interviews with the participants led to the discovery of emergent themes and findings, I include some background and insight about their lives and experiences in order to place their viewpoints into perspective. The participants each chose their own pseudonym during their conversational interview.

Darbin

Born and raised in South Dakota, Darbin was my choral music education colleague at Marcos de Niza High School throughout most of my tenure at the school

(2012 to 2019), providing mentorship and guidance for me as a still-developing music teacher. Like me, Darbin is a White male and comes from a background of classical music, studying piano and clarinet as well as taking part in his public music program in band and choir. Darbin's involvement in music was primarily inspired by his older sister, whose involvement in piano lessons sparked his interest at a young age. While instrumental music was his primary focus throughout his K-12 journey, he found a home in choral and vocal ensembles as well as musical theatre during his undergraduate years, which ultimately led him to pursue a career as a choral music educator for 32 years. Alongside his work with choirs in the school setting, Darbin also had experiences teaching orchestra, guitar, and class piano.

Working as both colleagues and friends, we both agreed that a mariachi ensemble would expand the offerings and opportunities within our school's music program. Together, we traveled to Las Vegas for the National Mariachi Workshops for Educators during the summer in 2017. While he had taught outside of his comfort zone in the past, Darbin voiced his apprehensions about delving into mariachi: "[Mariachi] was so completely foreign to me with instruments I had never seen, except the guitar . . . I was very comfortable on guitar, but nothing else. I mean . . . even musically, rhythmically, the polyrhythms . . . [i]t was so outside of that Western European traditional training that I'd had my entire life that it was just, I don't know, it was a frightening experience to do something so new" (conversational interview, June 13, 2024). When mariachi was first introduced at Marcos de Niza High School as an extracurricular club that met after school, Darbin acted as a co-facilitator, often taking the lead on vocal instruction and working with the *armonía* (guitar and vihuela) section. As time went on and the program

grew to become part of the curricular school day, he took on a more supportive role, working with vocalists and the *armonía* section periodically since class scheduling conflicts did not allow for him to work with the mariachi program at our school full-time. At the time of this study, Darbin was on faculty at a local community college where he directed the musical theatre program and taught music courses.

Miguel

Miguel was the first student teacher that I hosted at Marcos de Niza High School, completing his placement during the Fall 2015 semester. During our time together, Miguel arranged a *popurri*, or medley, of mariachi songs for my orchestra students; the connection was magical, especially when performing for their families and our local community at the winter concert. Seeing the interest, Miguel voiced to me that he believed a mariachi program would be a game changer for our music program, embracing a culture and musical tradition that was prominent on campus but not greatly acknowledged in our existing ensembles. If it was not for Miguel completing his student teaching with me at Marcos de Niza High School, mariachi education might not have become a part of my journey as a music teacher. Our relationship has been one of mutual learning and respect, and I feel fortunate to have had his support and assistance as I have developed my knowledge and grown as a mariachi educator.

Miguel grew up in a small town in Southern California and was inspired to play violin after watching a local youth mariachi perform. Seeing his excitement for violin and mariachi, his parents enrolled him in private lessons with the director of the youth mariachi; it was through these lessons that he began playing in the ensemble shortly after. In the school setting, Miguel took part in orchestra from fifth grade through high school.

While he enjoyed orchestra, his true passion centered around mariachi music; he continued to gig with local mariachi groups, gaining valuable performance experience while also earning a paycheck. At a mariachi festival in California, he met the owner/director of a Grammy award-winning ensemble that is highly regarded throughout the mariachi world; the director encouraged Miguel to pursue a music degree in order to make a career in the professional mariachi scene. While pursuing his undergraduate degree in violin performance at a university in California, Miguel toured with the professional ensemble for two years. However, due to declining academic grades, he decided to step away from the ensemble in order to focus and dedicate more time to his studies at the university.

While he was disappointed to leave the renowned mariachi ensemble, Miguel was offered an opportunity to teach as part of a new string outreach program at the university. Through this experience as well as directing a local mariachi, he realized that he enjoyed teaching but needed to develop his skills as an educator in order to effectively guide students in gaining understanding and applying musical knowledge. Hoping to develop his pedagogical skills and resources, Miguel enrolled in the music education master's degree program at Arizona State University, where our paths eventually crossed as student teacher and mentor teacher then as colleagues. After graduating, Miguel began teaching elementary-level orchestra in a school district neighboring mine and co-directed the Arizona State University Mariachi Ensemble. A few years later, he applied and accepted the orchestra position at the main feeder middle school to Marcos de Niza High School, allowing us to work together once again. Miguel continues to teach at the middle school and has developed curricular mariachi classes alongside the orchestra program.

Veronica

I first met Veronica through an orchestra colleague of mine at the Arizona Music Educators Conference, and little did I know at the time that we would become colleagues and good friends. Our friendship blossomed when Veronica joined the Arizona State University Mariachi Ensemble in Spring 2022 as a community member while I was taking the course as a student. When Miguel decided to step back from directing the mariachi at ASU in 2022, he recommended me for the position; similar to when I started the mariachi program at Marcos de Niza High School, I was nervous about the perception of a cultural outsider directing a musical tradition tied so closely to a cultural heritage. Because we had established a genuine, strong connection as friends and I felt comfortable voicing my thoughts with her, I asked Veronica if she would be interested and willing to assist me in running the mariachi program at ASU, which she agreed to wholeheartedly. As the ensemble program has developed and grown, so has our relationship as friends and colleagues; we have performed concerts together, presented at professional development workshops both locally and nationally, and we continue to develop our pedagogical skills as mariachi educators.

Born in Sonora, Mexico, Veronica is a first-generation Mexican immigrant, moving to Arizona with her parents and sister at seven years old. She recalled that while they were neither particularly wealthy or poor when living in Mexico, her parents did not have many job opportunities when coming to the United States because they were undocumented. Her family lived in a small two-bedroom apartment for some time before moving to a suburb of Phoenix. Her father worked with his brother to open a business, which he continues to manage today. While life in the developing town afforded her great

academic and schooling opportunities, Veronica and her family were part of a very small Latinx population within the town. Deciding to attend college in a large metropolitan area of California was an eye-opening experience for her, as she was immersed in a community that identified primarily as Latinx or Hispanic. She shared, “It was amazing. I loved it, but I never even knew what I was missing to begin with when I didn’t see the diversity around me growing up” (conversational interview, July 9, 2024). While Veronica grew up listening to mariachi music at home, only in recent years has she begun performing it when moving back to Arizona and beginning her teaching career. At the time of this study, Veronica taught orchestra and mariachi at a middle school in the Phoenix metropolitan area and enjoyed teaching there because of the diverse community of students.

Lucia

When I began teaching at Marcos de Niza High School in 2012, faculty/staff happy hours were common occurrences and allowed me to connect with colleagues from around the large campus whom I did not see on a daily basis. Through these social interactions, I met Lucia, one of our Spanish teachers on campus. We shared a love of karaoke and music, which would bring us together a few years later when the mariachi program was established at our school. When I shared the details of my conversation with our principal with Lucia, she instantly expressed her interest and excitement to be a part of this new venture, wanting to help in any way that she could. Lucia had recently begun learning the guitar in an effort to get back into music, which she had pursued during her high school years as a member of the saxophone section in her school’s band program. We established an informal partnership; she would help me with the language and culture

aspects of mariachi and I would assist her in developing her technical skills on the guitar. Looking back, my partnership with Lucia was one of the primary reasons for the high school program's success, allowing for collaboration across educational disciplines as well as developing a program based on culturally responsive practices and teamwork.

Lucia is a native of Arizona and grew up in the city of Mesa, located in the Phoenix metropolitan area. While her mother spoke Spanish as her first language, Lucia did not grow up speaking the language nor was it pushed upon her. She recalled stories that her mother used to share: “[W]hen [my mom] was in school, they’d get punished for using Spanish in the classroom. They’d get hit on the wrist with rulers. And so it was just the idea that we weren’t going to [and] she wasn’t going to teach us Spanish” (conversational interview, July 21, 2024). However, because Lucia’s grandmother spoke only Spanish, Lucia became interested in enrolling in Spanish classes in junior high school. This exposure and love of world languages eventually led her to a successful teaching career as a Spanish language educator at both the junior high and senior high levels for 30 years in Arizona until retiring in 2023.

Adonis

I met Adonis early on in my mariachi teaching career through his nephew, Samuel, who was one of my students at Marcos de Niza High School. At that time, Adonis was directing a community mariachi group and was going back to school to pursue a degree in music education at the local community college. Over time, he transferred to Arizona State University, where our paths crossed through the professors in the Music Learning and Teaching program. While Adonis’ course of study would

ultimately lead him to become a high school band director, he remained interested and connected to mariachi music and culture.

Adonis grew up in Guadalupe, Arizona, a small town located within the city of Tempe. He describes Guadalupe as a “Mexico-influenced town” (conversational interview, August 24, 2024), as the population is a mixture of descendants of Mexican immigrants, generational families, and members of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, a Native American community that originated in Mexico. Adonis began musical studies on trumpet at age 10, taking part in the band and mariachi programs at Frank Elementary School in Guadalupe. He continued to play throughout high school, performing mariachi alongside his classical training. While his adult life initially took him on a path outside of music, he decided to pursue a degree in music education at the age of 35, hoping to establish a career in the public school system. At the time of this study, Adonis was a high school band director in Casa Grande, Arizona, where he also taught guitar and mariachi. He has been a member of the Arizona State University Mariachi program on and off for a few years, frequently encouraging his high school students to join as community members in order to further their skills and understanding.

Nancy

During the 2021-2022 academic year, I was completing my residency and finishing coursework for my doctorate at Arizona State University. At this time, I was a student in the ASU Mariachi, which was under the direction of Miguel. It was here that I met Nancy, who played trumpet in the ensemble and was pursuing an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts. Nancy was a freshman at the time, and based on her knowledge of the genre and willingness to sing vocal solos in the ensemble, it was clear that she had

prior experience playing mariachi music. When I took over direction of the ensemble the following year, Nancy was supportive of my leadership and also took it upon herself to make new members feel welcome within the trumpet section, creating a sense of community within the large ensemble environment.

Nancy grew up in a border town between Arizona and Mexico, and is a first generation Mexican American. She remembers growing up with all of the Mexican traditions, including quinceañeras, holidays, and piñatas as well as listening to traditional Mexican music such as cumbias, banda, and mariachi. Despite having some higher education in Mexico, Nancy's father worked in the fields as a migrant worker; unfortunately, his academic degree from his home country did not afford him comparable opportunities in the United States. Nancy's immediate family consisted of her parents and her older brother; she described the dynamic as close-knit. She recalled how supportive her parents and her brother were of her education, schooling, and extracurricular activities. For Nancy, the possibility of graduating with a college degree felt like a privilege and something that was possible because of the support of her family. Speaking about her parents, she shared, "[I]t's really interesting to all their stories of their childhood and how different they are to mine and the way I was, you know, growing up with a lot more things and resources than they had growing up" (conversational interview, June 25, 2024). Moving from her hometown to Tempe for college was a tremendous shift for Nancy; she recalled feelings of uncertainty within the new academic environment, especially being part of a community that was much more diverse than where she had grown up. She stated, "[T]he demographics [in my hometown are] mainly Hispanic . . . you're right at the border. So, going to a bigger city . . . in the middle of a

state, you know, it was kind of like a shift. [T]here's a lot of other people [from] around the world too . . . so that took a bit of adjusting, but it was really, really cool to see that shift happen" (conversational interview, July 25, 2024). Participating in the ASU Mariachi throughout her four years at the university, At the time of this study, Nancy planned to graduate with a bachelor's degree in fine arts in May 2025 and planned to pursue a career in the technical side of the arts.

Elle

Elle was one of the first students to be involved in the mariachi program at Marcos de Niza High School. She took part in our initial club of 10 students and witnessed the establishment of the curricular ensemble. Alongside mariachi, she was also a dedicated member of our orchestra program and served on the leadership team. After graduating from high school, Elle attended Arizona State University and continued to play violin through the ASU Mariachi as a student and later as a community member.

A first-generation Mexican American, Elle's parents hail from two different regions of Mexico. Her mother grew up in Puebla while her father's family hails from Veracruz. While her parents emigrated to the United States and raised their children in American society, Mexican culture and traditions remained at the forefront of her family life, celebrating and learning the significance of numerous holidays including *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), *Día de la Independencia* (Mexican Independence Day), and *Cinco de Mayo* (which Elle acknowledged is celebrated quite differently in the United States and Mexico). Elle has visited her extended family in Mexico many times, which has allowed her to stay very connected to her Mexican roots. She attributes her

introduction to mariachi music to her mother, who would often play familiar tunes while cleaning or cooking. Elle recalled:

I would hear her music, and a lot of it would be mariachi. And also when we would go to parties with the family that we have here in Arizona, mainly on my mom's side . . . And so whenever we went to their houses to celebrate any birthdays, Cinco de Mayo, Día de Independencia, Christmas, New Year's, anything, they always hired a mariachi. So I would always see my family, like, asking them, "Oh, play this song, play that song!" And . . . usually it was a small group, but they played really loud and everyone was just so lively. (conversational interview, September 20, 2024)

Because she already played violin in orchestra, Elle felt that mariachi was the next step for her, allowing her to better connect with her culture and heritage. Additionally, she felt that participation in mariachi would allow her to develop a deeper relationship with her mom, honoring a musical tradition that was important to their family.

Sammy

I have known Sammy since she was 10 years old and began playing the violin in her elementary school orchestra program in Tempe, Arizona. Very shy and reserved in her younger years, Sammy attended an elementary/middle school orchestra camp that I hosted at Marcos de Niza High School during the summers. While extremely quiet, it was clear to me that she was observant, detail-oriented, and hardworking; she kept up with the older students in the ensemble and demonstrated a maturity that I had not frequently seen from students just beginning their musical journeys. Sammy eventually attended the feeder middle school where Miguel taught, so I saw her more frequently at side-by-side

concerts as well as during our Saturday Strings Program, a quarterly workshop that provided free private lessons to elementary and middle school students as well as allowed high school students in the Marcos de Niza Orchestra to gain teaching experience.

Sammy entered high school just as our mariachi program became a curricular course that met during the school day; she enrolled in both orchestra and mariachi. I did not know that Sammy identifies as half Hispanic until getting to know her and her family during her high school years; as she mentioned to me, she presents as White but has found a home in mariachi. Her participation in mariachi has allowed her to feel confident in embracing her Mexican American heritage in a more visible and open manner. As she became more connected to mariachi, Sammy became a leader in our mariachi program, and many of the students looked to her as the nurturer or mother figure of our ensemble. As I reflect on that time, I am proud to have seen Sammy develop and progress as a musician and human being, evolving from the reserved girl to a confident, determined young woman who feels connected to her culture and heritage.

Sammy grew up in a household of mixed cultures and traditions; her mom is white and her dad is Mexican American. She recalled that her paternal grandmother lived with her family during her early childhood years, but passed away just as she began her musical journey at age 10. Her grandmother exposed her to numerous elements associated with Mexican American culture, including making tamales at Christmas and attending big family gatherings and parties. She shared, “We still do those things, but after . . . my grandma passed away, it kind of went away for a little bit . . . In traditional Hispanic families, it tends to be the women who carry out the kind of traditions and my dad just didn’t really know how to do any of it” (conversational interview, June 19,

2024). Sammy attributes her participation in mariachi as a renewal of her Mexican cultural connection. When she was younger, she remembers listening to mariachi music with her father, but never thought that she would perform in the genre herself. However, when Miguel established a mariachi club at her middle school, it piqued Sammy's interest and provided an avenue for her to connect with the Mexican culture that she felt had been packed away when she lost her grandmother. As mentioned, Sammy subsequently became an invested member and leader in the Marcos de Niza High School Mariachi, and also took part in the ASU Mariachi as a high school student. She stated, "I find the most musical passion [in mariachi]. And it's just something I've found that I enjoy and like consistently enjoy every time that I do it" (Sammy, conversational interview, June 19, 2024). At the time of this study, Sammy was a student at Arizona State University, where she was double majoring in music and culture alongside anthropology. Additionally, she remained an active member in the ASU Mariachi Program and had also established her own professional ensemble that performs throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area.

Argos

I met Argos during a visit to Kyrene Middle School (KMS), one of the middle schools that feeds into Marcos de Niza High School; I was providing a clinic for her eighth grade mariachi class. KMS had established a mariachi program a few years prior to Marcos de Niza, and I anticipated that those students would begin enrolling at the high school and would be interested in continuing their participation in mariachi. It was clear to me almost immediately during that clinic that Argos was a leader within the ensemble, performing on the percussive *vihuela* and singing solos with a confident, belting tone. As

she progressed throughout high school, I witnessed her grow as a vocalist and leader; she enrolled in private voice lessons in order to better shape her technique and develop her pedagogical understanding. As we prepared for performances, Argos used her fine-tuned ear to provide honest and constructive feedback to better our ensemble. While the advice was sometimes critical, the members of our ensemble respected her viewpoints and believed that it was for the continued improvement and success of the group as a whole. As Argos grew as a community-minded musician, she gained awareness of working with different personalities, adjusting her tone and approach based on the individual with whom she was interacting.

Argos grew up navigating two different, separated cultural worlds, as her parents divorced early on. She identifies as tri-racial; her mother is Black and her father is both Latino and Native American. Music plays a key role in her childhood memories with her parents; when with her dad, they would listen to a number of Latino artists such as Selena and Vicente Fernandez, while her mom's playlists often included pop artists like Mariah Carey and Christina Aguilera. Even though her parents were separated and led different lives, both sides of Argos' family encouraged each other's cultural traditions and beliefs. When Argos was in elementary school, her mom enrolled her in a dual language program, allowing Argos to learn Spanish and become more connected with her dad's culture. She recalled, "It was mainly my mom trying to make sure that I kept up with that side. She had gotten me enrolled in the dual language program initially . . . [S]he knew

that opportunity would have been invaluable, and now I have my Seal of Biliteracy⁴” (conversational interview, June 21, 2024).

However, it was not until later in elementary school and early middle school that Argos’ mom knew about her interest in music; “[I]t was kind of a shock, but she kind of just let me go on with it. And as I kind of got more involved, she ended up getting more involved, but still kind of let it be my own thing. I think she kind of acknowledged, like, ‘I can’t fully relate to this, this isn’t fully my thing, and this is something that you uniquely have to do’” (conversational interview, June 21, 2024). Her participation and experiences in mariachi at both KMS and Marcos de Niza High School provided acknowledgement, validation, and reassurance that she was successful in her own performance, especially as a vocalist, and encouraged Argos to continue her journey as a mariachi musician and artist. She became a leader in the mariachi program during her junior and senior years. She shares, “[T]his is something I really do care about. I care about the reputation that we have and I care about . . . the quality of the work, . . . I care about this for me, I care about this for my brother because he was also super in the mariachi [at KMS] at the time” (conversational interview, June 21, 2024). Argos also took part in the ASU Mariachi during her senior year of high school, allowing her to see the possibilities of pursuing music in a post-secondary setting. At the time of this study, she was enrolled in the Popular Music program at Arizona State University and regularly

⁴ In 2016, the Arizona Legislature passed Arizona Senate Bill 1239, which recognizes students who demonstrate proficiency in English and at least one additional language through the completion of coursework and proficiency exams completed during grades 9-12. A special seal is placed on a student’s diploma and an official notation is made on the student’s official transcript.

performed with the ASU Mariachi and the professional mariachi ensemble that Sammy established in the community.

Sierra

I was introduced to Sierra during the same visit to Kyrene Middle School where I met Argos. Sierra played the guitar in the ensemble and also had a bright voice reminiscent of Selena Quintanilla. She frequently performed vocal solos or duets alongside Argos; I remember thinking that their voices were very complimentary of one another. While I could tell that Sierra was nervous to interact with a high school director, she displayed positivity and readily applied the feedback that I provided to her and her peers. I was excited to work with Sierra in high school; she seemed motivated and passionate about developing her skills in mariachi music and playing music alongside other student musicians.

Growing up in Guadalupe, Arizona, Sierra described her family as close-knit, consisting of her mom, dad, and older brother. Her mother is Mexican American while her father is Native American. Reflecting on her childhood, Sierra recalled her dad as a musician who had been playing in a Tejano band for many years; she voiced that she detested the Spanish music that she would constantly hear in her household. She shared, “I did not like listening to it, especially because sometimes [they] play the song over and over again to get the lyrics together. My mom listened to Spanish music too [while I was] growing up” (conversational interview, June 22, 2024). Sierra preferred the music of mainstream popular artists such as Alicia Keys, identifying with lyrics in English. However, when she participated in a dual language program in her elementary and middle school, her curiosity about Spanish music began to grow:

I did [dual language] for five years, so from kindergarten all the way to fifth grade. So then, at our middle school, they started a mariachi program just because we were going there. So like, the bilingual program was [also] moving to the middle school I was going to . . . [A]n instrument was never the idea for me to want to do. . . . The first year was really iffy . . . [E]ventually it started growing on me. I started singing more at home and it wouldn't be English anymore. It started to be Spanish music and I was like, "Wait, I kind of like this!" I think because I started to understand what was being said in the music. (conversational interview, June 22, 2024)

As Sierra entered high school, mariachi remained a constant passion of hers and she participated in the Marcos de Niza High School Mariachi program for all four years of high school. She recalled, "I think I started taking mariachi more seriously junior, senior year. And growing with the mariachi itself, we all grew together to make the friendships and stuff . . . 'Cause I feel like things only work when you really connect with the people around it" (conversational interview, June 22, 2024). Since graduation from high school, Sierra has continued to pursue mariachi music in a community-based mariachi ensemble that performs throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area.

Toby

Like Argos and Sierra, I met Toby during recruitment and coaching visits at Kyrene Middle School, working with the orchestra students. Unfortunately, due to scheduling conflicts, Toby was unable to fit both orchestra and mariachi into his schedule, but learned the mariachi repertoire on his own and joined the ensemble for performances. His first couple of years at Marcos de Niza were similar, enrolling in our

curricular orchestra program and taking part in our mariachi club after school. However, during his senior year, Toby was able to fit both orchestra and mariachi into his schedule, allowing him to become fully immersed in the mariachi classroom culture and community. While he loved orchestra, I noticed a deeper connection to mariachi music and performance that developed during Toby's final year of high school, growing as both a performer and contributing member within the ensemble. It seemed that Toby had found a space where he felt very much at home. Additionally, like Sammy, Argos, and Sierra, while in high school, Toby took part in the ASU Mariachi as a community member, allowing him to connect with other mariachi musicians throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area.

Toby's parents both grew up in New Mexico, but he was born and raised in Arizona. He pointed out that many of their family traditions come from the New Mexican background. Growing up, he nostalgically remembers cleaning days at home and his dad playing Spanish music on the radio. He shared, "[Dad] would turn on the radio and that day you knew it was cleaning day. You would get everything done. PineSol was a famous smell in the house" (conversational interview, September 27, 2024). While he remembers growing up with traditional holidays and celebrations, Toby recalled that his family "lost" a number of their Mexican cultural observances sometime during his childhood; instead of celebrating *Día de los Muertos* and *Día de Los Reyes* (Three Kings' Day), it became more just the typical Halloween or Christmas. He states:

I'm not really sure where to blame the loss of life and fade out of our cultural connection, but the recognition of it really happened at like the age of 12 as I was growing up. As I made friends [who were of Hispanic/Latinx background] in the

middle school there, they talked about their lives a lot more and I got to see that a lot of what I'm doing is like a more typical of a White American household more than it is of the Hispanic heritage household. (conversational interview, September 27, 2024).

An accomplished artist alongside his skills as a musician, Toby was majoring in Art Education at Arizona State University at the time of this study and remained active as a member of the ASU Mariachi program, also performing alongside Argos in Sammy's professional mariachi.

Skye

My relationship with Skye evolved over the eight years that we have known one another. I began as her viola instructor through private lessons; then I became her mariachi director as she began her journey with switching to violin and mariachi in college. As I reflect on our experiences together, Skye presents the common qualities associated with a number of violists that I have worked with throughout my career: intelligent, modest, hardworking, and sometimes reserved. Her rich tone and musicality are where her personality and passion shine through her shy demeanor. During her time at Arizona State University and through her participation in mariachi, I have witnessed Skye grow as an individual, coming out of her shell and finding a community of musical family.

Skye grew up alongside her twin sister in a household that celebrated Mexican culture and heritage. Her mom is Mexican American and Puerto Rican while her dad is of Canadian and Portuguese descent. Many of her memories revolve around traditional Mexican holidays and food including *Día de los Muertos* and *Christmas/Navidad*. She

recalls setting up an altar each year to remember family members who had passed on and making tamales at Christmastime. Skye's maternal grandparents have also been a prominent part of her life; she shared, "[W]e spent a lot of nights at their house growing up and [my grandma] would always make Mexican food when we went over. And even now, she's so worried about us being like hungry college students, so she, like, brings food over a lot . . . [M]e and my sister are the only grandchildren, so we've always been like the focus of their attention" (conversational interview, September 24, 2024). Even though it is small, Skye considers her family to be a prominent part of her life and a close circle.

Skye's introduction to mariachi performance came later in life when entering college. She remembers being exposed to the genre a few times growing up through her family, but in the area of Phoenix where she lived, there was not an established program within the middle school or high school that she attended. Instead, Skye played the viola in her school orchestra program, honing her skills in classical music and earning spots in multiple honor orchestras throughout middle school and high school. Entering her undergraduate career at Arizona State University, Skye wanted to continue performing, but decided to join the mariachi program and switch to violin. Pursuing mariachi, Skye has become a valued member of the ASU Mariachi ensembles and has also begun to gig professionally, joining an outside mariachi made up of students from the ASU Mariachi program. Through this venture, she has grown her confidence on violin as well as vocals; she shared, "They made me sing, and I had never really heard my [singing] voice before, especially singing in Spanish. It was scary" (conversational interview, September 24, 2024). While she continues to pursue music, Skye was majoring in Architecture at

Arizona State University at the time of this study and has taken part in a number of programs and internships that promote roles for women and Hispanic individuals within architectural and aerospace industries.

Vincent

Vincent enrolled in the Arizona State University Mariachi program at the start of his freshman year. As a Music Learning and Teaching major, he wanted to explore a musical tradition that was outside of the Western classical tradition, one that he grew up listening to. Vincent and I instantly connected on a pedagogical level; he expressed to me that one of his goals as a music educator is to bring mariachi education back to his local community. We had numerous conversations about curriculum planning, pedagogical approaches, and how to develop a program that embraces musicians of various backgrounds and ability levels. While serving as the choir director at his church, Vincent approached the pastor about beginning a community mariachi; this endeavor was welcomed with open arms and membership in the parish mariachi club grew considerably over the first two years. As I will discuss in further detail later on, Vincent embraced me as a mariachi educator as well as a music teacher educator and has voiced strong opinions about labeling outsiders in mariachi culture and the mariachi music community.

Vincent is the child of two Mexican immigrants; his father grew up in Zacatecas, Mexico and came to the United States in his late teenage years. His mother was born in Durango, Mexico and moved to Harbor City, California during her early childhood. Vincent grew up very involved in the Roman Catholic Church, singing in the choirs and learning a great deal about theology. He recalled a number of familial traditions throughout his childhood, including sharing *tamales* and praying the rosary at Christmas

as well as eating *buñuelos* during Lent. While he was not involved in mariachi as a child, music was an integral part of Vincent's household. He shared, "Growing up, my dad would always play his guitar and he would teach me . . . I have memories of him waking me up with a serenata. [H]e would play his guitar softly and I'd wake up and he would sing a song to me" (conversational interview, September 4, 2024).

Vincent attributes his early experiences with mariachi music to his father; he remembers listening to his dad sing mariachi songs with karaoke tracks, often featuring the music of Vicente Fernandez, one of the most famous, well-known mariachi vocalists. He stated, "I grew an appreciation for mariachi, but I never had the opportunity to [do it] until I was deciding where to go [for college]. ASU having a mariachi was like a big decision for me, and it ended up being, I'd say, the most important part of music school for me" (conversational interview, September 4, 2024). Further, Vincent voiced that his participation in mariachi has allowed him to grow closer to his father, developing a deeper, stronger connection to their culture and family.

Rosa

I have known Rosa since I first arrived at Marcos de Niza High School in 2012, when her oldest daughter participated in my colleague Darbin's choir program. A few years later, Rosa's daughter Sonia enrolled in the orchestra program I directed and participated for all four years of her high school career. While Sonia didn't express interest in the mariachi program when it began, Rosa was determined to support and help launch this new initiative. She became an active member of our parent booster club, always willing to assist with anything from chaperoning and organizing to event setup and fundraising. Though Sonia's younger sister, Reina, attended a different high school

in town, she was eager to join our after-school mariachi club. Seeing this as an opportunity to help Reina connect with music rooted in their family's culture, Rosa and I worked together to ensure she could attend our afternoon rehearsals at Marcos de Niza each week. Rosa and her family have deep ties to the Town of Guadalupe, a community within Tempe that is home to many of the Mexican American and Pascua Yaqui families whose children attend Marcos de Niza High School. Through Rosa's efforts, I was able to build stronger relationships within the Guadalupe community, creating trust and support for the mariachi program. Her friendship, support, and confidence in my abilities allowed me to feel a sense of acceptance within both Guadalupe and the mariachi music community.

Rosa grew up in Guadalupe, Arizona, which she describes as a very small community of about 5,000 to 6,000 people. She and her siblings were raised by her grandmother in a strict, conservative household. Rosa recalled:

Nana [my grandmother] kept a really short leash on us. . . . I did high school then band and then a little part-time job, and that's all you did. . . . If by chance they let you go anywhere, Nana called and got the scoop on everything. (conversational interview, October 6, 2024)

Rosa remembers Guadalupe being a very tight-knit, almost cliquish, community, and her household was even more exclusive: "We really weren't allowed to do much with people that weren't part of the church or part of our [family] circle" (conversational interview, October 6, 2024). Mariachi played a significant role in Rosa's family life, particularly at quinceañeras and other special occasions. It was secular music that felt "more tame" and closely tied to their familial culture. Rosa recalled a mariachi coming to their house every

Mother's Day to serenade her grandmother with *Las Mañanitas*, a traditional song in Mexican families honoring the contributions of their matriarchs. Reflecting on these serenatas, she was always impressed by the musicianship of the performers and never understood why outsiders would mock mariachi musicians, given their talent and dedication to the craft.

Although mariachi was not something Rosa had the opportunity to participate in as a child, she was proudly involved playing tuba in the marching and concert band programs at Marcos de Niza High School during her teenage years prior to my tenure as the orchestra and mariachi director. However, as one of the few students from Guadalupe in the band, she felt a sense of disdain and ridicule from the surrounding community. She shared, "What wasn't known to the community was looked down on or mocked" (conversational interview, October 6, 2024). Noting that mariachi is often a male-dominated musical genre, even into the late 20th century, Rosa expressed that the same sentiment might have been directed at her had there been opportunities for her to participate. She stated, "Especially being a woman, I think if you were wanting to be a girl in mariachi back then, it'd be like, 'Look at her. She thinks she's all that'" (conversational interview, October 6, 2024).

Reflecting on her strict upbringing, Rosa explained that she chose not to raise her children in the same manner. She wanted them to have the opportunity to experience more than she had and to make their own life choices. While her children were raised in Tempe, Rosa and her family maintain a close connection to Guadalupe, participating in familial gatherings, celebrations, summer camps, and youth activities. Although her children don't share the same deep connection to the community, Rosa said, "[It is] still

part of who I am, part of my culture . . . Guadalupe is my home” (conversational interview, October 6, 2024).

Ann

Ann, Sammy’s mom, served on the executive board of our orchestra/mariachi parent booster organization for three years at Marcos de Niza High School. While reserved in personality and demeanor on first meeting, Ann was dedicated to the success of both programs, wanting students to be able to pursue their passions with the support of the greater community. As I got to know her over the years, Ann proved that she was trustworthy and supportive, often providing feedback in an honest, constructive way. As Sammy has continued her participation in mariachi through Arizona State University and her personal ventures, Ann remained a constant supporter of my journey, attending concerts and events as well as taking part in projects like this study.

Ann grew up in Lake Havasu, Arizona in what she describes as a “very white” family. She shares, “I didn’t really have any experience with Hispanic culture. I grew up in Arizona . . . and had some experiences like with kids that I went to school with or things like that, but not really anything in depth” (conversational interview, June 20, 2024). Ann’s father ran a resort and hotel in Lake Havasu while her mother raised their family. Ann was an invested athlete in high school and also played in the marching band. It was not until age 21 that she had her first significant interaction with Hispanic culture: “I went on a mission for my church and spent a year and a half in Panama. So, still not Mexican, a different kind of culture, but Hispanic and I loved it so much” (conversational interview, June 20, 2024). Upon returning from her mission, Ann enrolled at ASU as a history major but then quit to take a job with a medical research company where she

eventually met her husband, who is half Mexican; she has since worked her way up within the company. Through her marriage, she became connected to Mexican tradition; Ann's mother-in-law lived with Ann's family for a period of time towards the end of her life. While this will be discussed further later in this chapter, cooking alongside her mother-in-law helped Ann gain insight and appreciation for Mexican food and community, finding a sense of belonging in the culture.

Jackie

Toby's mother, Jackie, has always been very involved in his education and supportive of the music programs that he takes part in, whether it was through school or in community-based settings. I first met Jackie when Toby enrolled at Marcos de Niza High School as a freshman; Toby was an advanced violinist and successfully auditioned for our Symphonic Strings Orchestra, the intermediate level ensemble within the program. While Toby was interested in mariachi, his schedule could not accommodate both programs, so he took part in the after-school club that the Spanish teacher Lucia and I continued to offer even after a curricular class was established. Jackie was extremely helpful throughout the years, from chaperoning events and field trips to providing supplies that were needed. Being in the education field herself, I got the sense that Jackie understood what I was trying to accomplish. I always felt that I had her support when working to continuously develop and grow the programs at both Marcos de Niza and Arizona State University.

Jackie grew up in Silver City, New Mexico, a small mining town on the border of New Mexico and Texas, in a Mexican American family. Very family-oriented, she recalls attending church every Sunday and then gathering at her grandmother's house. She

shared, “Of course, she’d be sitting there making fresh tamales, tortillas, eggs, and sausage . . . [A]ll our cousins and aunts and all of us would meet there. And of course, she’d make food in five minutes, but it wasn’t fresh enough. So, as soon as we walked in the door, she’d make new. That was every Sunday” (conversational interview, September 19, 2024). Many of the memories from Jackie’s childhood revolve around holidays, get-togethers, and the food that would accompany family time. Mariachi was a genre that was often heard in her household along with other Spanish styles. She remembers gatherings and parties where everyone would sing and dance together.

While music was an important component of Jackie’s family life and culture, her school music experience was a short-lived, negative experience. She shared, “I got in band, but I got myself kicked out because, of course, back then . . . girls didn’t play drums or anything. So I got kicked out because I didn’t like clarinet” (conversational interview, September 19, 2024). However, watching her own children grow up, she believes that involvement in programs outside of core academic courses are essential in a well-rounded education. She stated, “I’ve always been a strong believer [that my sons] didn’t have a choice. Either they played music or they played a sport . . . [T]wo of mine chose music, which I’ve always thought is a good background to make your education” (conversational interview, September 19, 2024).

Manuel

I have known Manuel, Toby’s father, as a kind and generous individual—someone who truly embodies the spirit of paying it forward. Much like Jackie, Manuel has always been committed to Toby’s education, supporting not only him but also his peers in following their passions. Manuel was a strong advocate for the mariachi program

at Marcos de Niza High School, always eager to help in any way that he could. One of the most significant contributions he made came during Toby's senior year. Manuel and Jackie approached me with the idea of purchasing *trajes*, the traditional mariachi performance uniforms, so that the students could look like a professional mariachi ensemble and elevate their performances. This project was especially close to Manuel's heart, a true passion project and an extraordinary act of kindness. He worked closely with a company in Las Vegas, Nevada, to ensure the students looked their best. Manuel later shared with me that he wanted to make this happen in honor of his parents, who had never had the chance to see Toby perform mariachi music. This gesture not only elevated the program but also served as a beautiful tribute to his family.

Family has always been central to Manuel's values. His mother was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, while his father was born in New Mexico, United States. Manuel grew up poor, but remembers the strong work ethic that his parents modeled and the emphasis that they placed on keeping the family together. After moving to Arizona and starting his own family, he continued the tradition of returning to New Mexico each year during the holiday season with Jackie, Toby, and his other sons to spend time with his parents and extended family. Eventually, he took on the tradition himself and trips to New Mexico ceased, having his children and some extended family come to his house for Christmas. He shared that this was hard on his parents, as they often had to decide on which of their children to visit during each holiday season.

Reflecting back on his childhood, Manuel remembers how much his mother loved mariachi music and Mexican musical genres in general. While one of his brothers played guitar and sang growing up, Manuel himself was not involved in mariachi or music

ensembles. However, his appreciation for the genre was reignited when Toby began participating in school mariachi programs. He saw it as a way to reconnect with his family memories and was always immensely proud of Toby's progress and performances.

Natalie

Natalie's daughter, Marissa, primarily took part in the orchestra program at Marcos de Niza High School and enrolled in our advanced mariachi ensemble during her senior year. As a parent, Natalie was a tremendous support, always lending a helping hand and encouraging my ideas for student opportunities. During her daughter's senior year at Marcos de Niza High School, Natalie played an important role within the orchestra/mariachi parent booster club, assisting the advanced mariachi ensemble in raising funds for our trip to Orlando, Florida. During this trip, we presented a session for teachers and performed at the American String Teachers Association National Conference. We also participated in a masterclass with members of Mariachi Cobre, the professional mariachi ensemble in residence at Disney World.

Natalie grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico as part of a large Hispanic family. She remembers mariachi being a prominent component in her cultural upbringing: "We'd have mariachis for weddings, funerals . . . Always for, like, birthdays and everything, they would always sing 'Las Mañanitas.' . . . And so in culture in Albuquerque . . . that's a big thing. Mariachi is a big thing there . . . [It] just always was a part of the culture" (conversational interview, September 18, 2024). In the present day, Natalie still listens to mariachi and it was a big deal for her family when her daughter decided to take part in the mariachi program at Marcos de Niza. For Natalie, traditions are paramount

components in a family or a community, and even though “it’s not everyday we see [mariachi] . . . it’s in our culture” (conversational interview, September 18, 2024).

Lupe

I met Lupe, Skye’s mother, in May 2017; she was seeking private viola lessons in order to push Skye to the next level of playing and get her ready for the transition to high school orchestra. Lupe’s personality was very different from those of her twin daughters; she exuded an outgoing, social demeanor that was caring, genuine, and friendly. As we began Skye’s lessons, I told Lupe about my vision to establish a mariachi program at Marcos de Niza High School and to develop my skills as a novice mariachi educator. I remember her excitement and support of this endeavor, expressing how positively she felt about her familial culture being included in a school music program; this support continued throughout my time building and developing the mariachi program at Marcos de Niza. While Lupe’s daughters attended a different high school without a mariachi program, she encouraged them to participate in the mariachi program when beginning their collegiate journey at Arizona State University; this experience would allow them to learn about mariachi music and performance, working with me as their instructor.

An Arizona native, Lupe’s upbringing in a mixed cultural family gave her a unique perspective on both Mexican and Puerto Rican traditions, though the dynamics of her family shaped her experiences in distinct ways. Her father's Americanization and preference for speaking English likely created a gap between his cultural roots and the way he communicated with Lupe. Despite his bilingualism, his choice to speak only English might have been an attempt to fit in with his surrounding environment, perhaps prioritizing assimilation or convenience in a predominantly English-speaking society. On

the other hand, her mother, being from Sinaloa, Mexico, and more immersed in the traditions of her heritage, ensured that Spanish was the language spoken in their home.

A number of Mexican cultural and holiday traditions were central to her upbringing; Lupe remembers food being a cornerstone of family gatherings and celebrations: “We always got together and we made just a spread of food. Of course, tamales are essential in any Mexican household . . . So that was not only a cultural time, but it was also a time of reflection and a tie of connecting with family. Of course, when you make tamales, everybody’s involved, from your grandmother to your cousins” (conversational interview, September 28, 2024). While the actual process was time-consuming and frequently viewed as a chore by the younger generations, Lupe reflects on these gatherings as a time where she got to connect with others, closely listening to and absorbing all of the family “chisme,” or juicy gossip. The tradition of food preparation continues with her family in the present, and her daughters now take part. Lupe expresses, “[F]ood is love, food is our culture. Food just has so many stories within itself during the preparation or the breaking of the bread portion. There’s just a lot there” (conversational interview, September 28, 2024).

Because of her father’s military career and her mother being her primary caretaker, Lupe communicated exclusively in Spanish as a child, even though she could understand her father when he spoke to her in English. A child of the 1980s, she was classified as an English Language Learner (ELL) when enrolled in elementary school. At the time, ELL programs were commonly structured as intense pull-out programs that removed students from direct classroom instruction for a significant amount of time each day. Lupe recalls:

I'd come back being a Spanish speaking kid, missing two hours of class and being thrown back in. It was tricky because you don't speak the language, you don't know what was going on, and you missed two hours of your day. And everybody's built friendships and has an idea of what's happening in the space. And I'm just trying to survive, trying to pick words to piece together what was taking place, right? (conversational interview, September 28, 2024)

While educational spaces today may recognize and celebrate the different cultures present within student learning communities, Lupe felt pressure to assimilate to the American, Anglo-dominated society, both at school and at home. She shares:

[My mom] didn't want me to be the odd kid out. In the beginning, I used to bring burros in my lunchbox and then kids [would make] fun of me. She's like, "No, we're not going to do that" . . . [I]nstead of her telling me [that] it's okay to have our culture represented, she didn't want me to feel isolated. So, she gave me more American lunches. Sandwiches versus burros, . . . I think my mom and I were both going through the same journey. She was new to the country [and I was] new to school life as an ELL kid. (conversational interview, September 28, 2024)

Lupe's childhood educational experiences would lead her to pursue a career as a dual language educator at the elementary level. Thinking back, she reveals that she never had a Hispanic teacher and went into education in order to help students who had a challenging start to school like she did. She states:

I never thought about colorism and how impactful it [could have been] to have somebody that looked like me in the 80s, be guided by a teacher that looks like me. I never thought about . . . how interesting and impactful [it is] to see a person

of color in the classroom, a leader in the classroom, to give those kids the idea that, “Hey, I could be a leader someday. I could be an educator. I can be an engineer.” (conversational interview, September 28, 2024)

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided introductions and background information about the 19 participants that took part in this study, which included five colleagues, eight students, four parents, and two community members. Because their voices will be prominent in the following chapter, I felt that it was important for readers to understand who these individuals are and how they fit into my journey as a developing mariachi educator.

In the next chapter, I attempt to address these questions by presenting the overarching themes and ideas that I identified through data collection and analysis. By sharing the participants’ voices as well as my own reflections and perspectives, I provide insight about my journey into mariachi as well as navigating acceptance with the community. Through this process, I gained a deeper understanding of the participants’ viewpoints as well as learned about some of their own outsider/insider experiences.

CHAPTER 5

EXPLORATION OF EMERGING THEMES AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this self-study is to examine my evolving understanding of student and community cultural backgrounds through my experiences learning to teach and perform mariachi music, both within and beyond the classroom. Through personal narrative and reflective inquiry as a researcher co-participant, alongside insights and recollections drawn from interviews and informal conversations with colleagues, students, parents, and community members, I sought to illuminate the ongoing evolution of my role in the learning space and mariachi music community. Specifically, this study explores the shift from cultural outsider to inhabiting “the space between” (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Trulsson & Burnard, 2016), and toward becoming an accepted member within the mariachi music community.

It is important to note that my journey into mariachi was not something that I decided to explore on my own. As mentioned in Chapter Four, hosting Miguel as a student teacher allowed me to witness the students’ and community’s response to the inclusion of mariachi within the orchestral setting. There was a spark of excitement that resonated within our program and Miguel encouraged me to develop a program in the future, offering his assistance as an experienced mariachi musician. While the idea of mariachi was temporarily placed on the back burner, my principal approached me about establishing a mariachi curriculum and program. While I was initially anxious about this venture, with the support of Miguel, my administration, and colleagues, I accepted and adapted to the opportunity presented to me. By no means was the journey one without

challenges and obstacles; my thoughts, ideas, and commitment evolved and deepened over time alongside my developing relationships within the surrounding and mariachi music communities. Often feeling an overwhelming sense of imposter syndrome throughout the journey, my conversational interviews with the participants allowed me to feel more at ease, hearing that my efforts and actions were seen as well-intentioned and inclusive.

As I spoke with participants and reflected on my journey, five recurring themes emerged, allowing me to organize and structure the findings of this study: Views of a Cultural Outsider Teaching Mariachi, My Teaching Approach, Connection with the Surrounding Community and Mariachi Music Community, Acceptance, Growth, and Next Steps, and Participants' Own Outsider/Insider Stories and Experiences. Throughout the following subsections, I will share the memories, viewpoints, and opinions of the participants. In addition, you will encounter sections of narrative writing from my perspective as I journaled throughout the process of the study and reflected upon the analysis of the data; these perspectives are signaled by italicized text.

Views of a Cultural Outsider Teaching Mariachi

During my undergraduate and master's degree studies, I had some exposure to the elements of culturally relevant and responsive teaching pedagogies, but I do not remember being immersed in discussion or attending specific lectures that dealt with them in an intensive way. I remember thinking, "Good teaching recognizes all of the students in front of me and I need to find ways to build connections so that my students feel actively engaged and a part of the greater community." But how do educators do this effectively and responsibly? What do we do instinctually and how can we build upon this

to truly address the diverse learners that enter our classrooms? Obviously, it is more than just programming music from different cultures or planning a lesson to acknowledge a certain history. It takes a deeper initiative to truly teach in a culturally relevant and responsive way that validates and celebrates the cultural backgrounds represented in our music classrooms.

I remember how nervous I was and the thoughts that went through my mind . . . Me, a mariachi teacher? How is this White, Jewish orchestra teacher from Upstate New York going to convince a predominantly Hispanic/Latinx/Mexican American community in Arizona that I am capable of creating a successful mariachi program? Yes, I know there are professional development workshops and opportunities, and that I have time to learn the instruments, but what are people going to think? Are they going to judge me? What if I say or do the wrong thing? I want to acknowledge and honor the home music cultures and experiences of the students in front of me, but how do I go about this in a way that is respectful and culturally responsive? How do I ensure that my students, their families, and the community understand that my intentions are authentic and come from a place of wanting to learn and grow, to better understand and connect with those around me?

Throughout my time as a mariachi educator, I have always tried to be honest and transparent with myself, my students, their families, and our community. While I am a certified music teacher with years of training, I am still developing my skills in mariachi pedagogy and aim to design a classroom that encourages a two-way street of learning. My teaching colleague Darbin recalls:

I remember you saying, “I am outside looking in. So, you are welcome in this space to educate me as we go.” You developed some really strong relationships with parents that way. I think that realization and then the openness to acknowledge it publicly, . . . I think it takes strength to be able to do that and it takes understanding of yourself. I think that’s what made that process easier or more manageable. (conversational interview, June 13, 2024)

As an educator and the child of two public school teachers, I have discovered that education is a lifelong pursuit and if I exude a passion for continued learning, it will hopefully inspire my students to do the same. Jackie shares, “I think, cultural-wise, anybody can teach [mariachi] . . . It’s how much you feel it and receive it, and are willing to throw yourself into it” (conversational interview, September 19, 2024).

It was clear that my prior teaching experiences and successes as an orchestra teacher played a role in others’ views and perceptions of me venturing into mariachi education. Elle, one of my earliest mariachi students, reflects:

I didn't really see much of race being a thing. I was just, I knew how well you conducted an orchestra and I knew you would bring those key skills into mariachi. And I know you were also taking a workshop for mariachi and bringing what you learned from there over to our school. And so I wasn't really concerned in any way. I knew that you as a teacher were really great and you would really help the group . . . [M]y initial thoughts were that Glasser’s got this. I know he’s gonna do great! (conversational interview, September 20, 2024)

Others concur with Elle’s sentiments, citing that my professional development and preparation to teach mariachi provided them with some reassurance that I was developing

my skills as someone from the outside looking in: “[T]he first couple of days you had talked about how you went on the trip, summer trip to the workshop [in Las Vegas]. And I was like, ‘Okay, you know, he did research. He knows what he's doing.’ I relatively had faith. I don't think I was ever kind of like, ‘Whoa, what's this guy doing here?’” (Argos, conversational interview, June 21, 2024).

While he appreciated my dedication and hard work throughout my journey, Manuel, a parent, mentioned his initial apprehension about a cultural outsider teaching mariachi:

At first, I thought, “Is he really going to teach the kids right? He is White and this is Mexican music.” But, going from school year to school year, the more you did, the more I saw you were doing things right. . . . You learned and definitely did your research. (conversational interview, October 5, 2024)

For those who might have felt distanced from their Hispanic or Mexican American culture, enrolling in mariachi allowed them the opportunity to learn alongside me:

I think the reason I felt like there were no apprehensions . . . was because, in my family, I felt really distanced from my culture. So enrolling in your class, it really felt like I was learning with you about what was actually happening in the mariachi genre. . . . And so it felt as though we were learning together. And so everything you taught me was something I was learning for the first time, or it just helped bring back this knowledge that I had. (Toby, conversational interview, September 27, 2024)

Further, others voiced that it was inspiring and enriching to see an individual from outside the culture taking the time to learn about a musical tradition that was new and intriguing to them:

[Y]ou definitely had the musical background to be able to communicate what was needed to convey the right things about the music. And so I think . . . the passion was like the biggest thing. I think being exposed to teachers like you who aren't part of the culture, but are passionate about it and just curious enough to dive into it. I think that's a very enriching way to learn it. (Skye, conversational interview, September 24, 2024)

Rosa, a Marcos de Niza parent and community member, also expressed how excited and impressed she was when finding out that I was beginning a mariachi program:

It was like, “Oh my God, he’s taking this on? He is so freaking brave!” The first thing I thought of [was], “He must really love the culture. He must really appreciate it.” And it was more of a sense of overwhelming appreciation than anything. . . . The first thing that just came over me was pride and knowing that my kids were going to be a part of this [and that you were] willing to step outside of [your] comfort zone to learn it and teach it. (conversational interview, October 6, 2024)

It has been rewarding to learn about a genre of music that holds an important place in the lives of many students as well as the community in which I live and work. Exploring mariachi pedagogy and performance with awareness and care has allowed me to learn while gaining the respect of those around me.

I believe that fostering and nurturing relationships within my educational community and surrounding environment has been essential to my growth as a developing mariachi educator. Making a point of regularly acknowledging my identity as a cultural outsider navigating my path into mariachi culture and education, those involved saw that my intentions were authentic and genuine. Lupe, a community member and Skye's mom, shares:

I knew your heart. You came to me and you were vulnerable, and that right there spoke volumes to me. I knew your heart. I knew your heart was in the right place. I knew you were open to learning, to educating, to hearing our stories and hearing what we have to say. The moment I met you, I knew you were perfect for my daughter . . . because I just knew your heart was bigger than this world. You were the right person for that job. You just helped our community be seen and celebrated. (conversational interview, September 28, 2024)

The acknowledgement of cultural traditions and intricacies in the musical practice were also noted in my approach as an initial outsider:

[Y]ou . . . understood a lot more than I guess I was anticipating and had put in the work to understand the culture . . . which I really appreciated. [I]t's frustrating when you go to things like [a mariachi class] and the person's really removed from the culture and kind of are just viewing it, like, on paper versus being, like, connected to it, which I felt like you [did] so well. (Sammy, conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

Sammy's observations as one of my students reassured me that my work to prepare myself as a teacher and practitioner was seen and appreciated. As a community member

and culture bearer, Rosa voiced how she felt about mariachi being included in the school music program that her children were a part of:

It felt like we were finally accepted. It felt like my culture [and] my background [were] finally accepted into a school institution. It's like, oh my gosh, you know, representation . . . and that's not something that we always had. Yeah, you grow up in the Southwest [United States] surrounded by Native Americans and Mexicans, but you don't really see that representation anywhere [in public schools]. . . . When I saw mariachi open up and I saw that there were kids from Guadalupe joining, I was like, "This is amazing! This is opening up the floodgates to let these kids in that don't have those resources and affluent background to come in and become a part of something spectacular." (conversational interview, October 6, 2024)

Despite the positive feedback and proceeding in a way that I felt was respectful and culturally responsive, self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy have always been present in my mind, even with the positive and successful experiences that I have had during my journey as a mariachi educator and practitioner. Reflecting on his participation in mariachi rehearsals at ASU, Adonis, an area music teacher and a community member in the ASU Mariachi, asserted that I did not need to be so self-critical:

I know you want to depend a lot on people who have done mariachi in the past. I would recommend trying to not depend so much on others. Not that you can't use them, but if it's your band, your structure, keep it that way. . . . Because you do know what you're doing. It's hard to feel that way when you feel like an outsider. (conversational interview, August 24, 2024)

Labelling myself as a cultural outsider was seen as a sentiment of unworthiness and inferiority from Vincent, an ASU Mariachi student, who believes that it was demeaning to my hard work and dedication. He shares, “I think it's an insult to yourself to call yourself an outsider. . . . [T]hose who are putting in the work and helping us advance should be the ones we honor. . . . [E]verybody has a lot of respect for you. And, I think people would be foolish to not respect what you've done, especially since you weren't born in it and you dedicate so much time to it” (conversational interview, September 4, 2024). While he understands that I am not native to Mexican American culture and the practice of mariachi music, Vincent feels that I have done the work to demonstrate a respectful and well-informed commitment to my students, our community, and the art form itself; he believes that this deserves acknowledgement and acceptance from the mariachi music community.

While the views of the participants were positive overall, Argos, a student, recalled an experience that she felt might have been misunderstood by those outside of the mariachi program at Marcos de Niza High School. She remembered that during and after some of the first off-campus performances for the Marcos de Niza Mariachi Ensemble, event organizers and audience members would speak with me, almost exclusively, rather than the students. While Argos did not feel offended by these interactions, she believes that others may have seen this as problematic. She states:

What's the one movie where it's like the white English teacher comes into like the poor, broken down school and it's like, “I'll fix these youth through music?” You know, initially I just hope people wouldn't take that or get that first impression because it really wasn't that. It was very much a mutual, mutual discussion of

where we wanted to go and, like, there was input allowed. So it's like, that was mainly the concern, like the impression that others would get from the group.

(conversational interview, June 21, 2024)

Reflecting back on these interactions, I agree with her assessment that this might have generated a false or misconstrued impression of the dynamic within the mariachi program at Marcos de Niza High School. As she mentioned, the students were always involved in the acceptance, planning, and execution of performances, both on campus and within the greater community.

While my conversations with the participants were generally positive, I still think about the moments of imposter syndrome that I have experienced and continue to encounter as I teach this cultural art form. Am I doing things correctly? Am I approaching things in a culturally relevant and responsive way? How can I be better, and will these feelings of inadequacy and second guessing ever subside?

I think back to one of the student evaluations that I received after, what I thought was, a successful semester of community building and collaborative music-making. One of the survey questions asked, "What suggestions do you have to improve this course?" A student response stated, "A more cultural instructor—we sound white because we play white." My stomach sank and tears filled my eyes—what did I do wrong? I chose a wide variety of music, brought in sectional coaches with a wealth of mariachi experience, and listened to recordings to get a better idea of style. You name it, I did it! When I opened the line of communication the next semester and asked for assistance from the ensemble to continue the development of an authentic sound, no one came forward with constructive criticism.

While I do believe that I have approached my role in the mariachi classroom with great care and planning, I realize that I will not be able to please or gain the respect of every individual. There will be moments of tension or conflict that, hopefully, lead to instances of learning and continued individual development. I realize that I can only be myself and proceed in a way that, I believe, embraces the students in front of me as well as respects and honors the cultural music tradition that we are learning and celebrating as a community . . . together.

My Teaching Approach

I remember coming back from the National Mariachi Workshops for Educators in Las Vegas feeling so empowered to start our mariachi club at Marcos de Niza High School. In just one week, I had learned a great deal about instrumental techniques, pedagogy, repertoire, and how to go about establishing a program. However, how would I approach teaching this ensemble?

I definitely was not the expert in the room when it came to Mexican culture and the Spanish language, but I knew that I could offer musical foundations and guidance. I was very fortunate to have a number of orchestra students in our weekly club who were knowledgeable about cultural traditions. I also was grateful for the assistance of Lucia, one of our Spanish teachers, in learning correct pronunciation and translations of the song lyrics. From the beginning, I realized that the mariachi ensemble environment would only be successful if designed as a two-way street of learning for both myself and our students.

As the program grew to become a curricular class offering in subsequent years, it was clear that this model allowed for further success; by incorporating student voices

and acknowledging the cultural knowledge that they brought to the classroom, we were able to make progress in a collaborative, student-centered way. There were definitely growing pains and bumps in the road along the way, but what journey doesn't have some? Even from the beginning, I always tried to model a style of teaching that was inclusive of the learners in front of me, open to feedback, allowed for continued understanding, and demonstrated respect for the culture and the music.

The previous discussion of the participants' perspectives on a cultural outsider teaching mariachi highlighted my approach as a music teacher facilitating a cultural tradition with which I had little to no experience before starting the program at Marcos de Niza High School and later directing the mariachi ensembles at Arizona State University. In this section, I discuss the participants' comments about a supportive classroom environment, the structure of rehearsals and instructional techniques, the inclusion of students' voices and perspectives, my patience with both others and myself as well as my willingness to admit mistakes and shortcomings, and the respect that I demonstrated for the culture and art form. They also highlighted my passion for deepening my knowledge of mariachi music and history.

I have consistently worked to create an instructional space where students feel safe and supported as well as valued for what they bring as an individual. As a music educator, I believe that it is essential to meet students where they are musically and technically, guiding them to the next level of their musical development. Darbin, my choral colleague at Marcos de Niza, shared his thoughts on the environment that he observed in my classroom throughout our time as colleagues:

The first two words that [come] to me are language that I steal from a church that I worked for: welcoming and affirming. . . . [W]hatever their training or background or experience . . . you just make it safe and then you have a plan. [I]n any educational situation, I think that's where the best learning happens, when a kid feels safe and they feel like whoever's in charge can take them from where they are to wherever the next thing is. (conversational interview, June 13, 2024)

Reflecting on Darbin's words, I am reminded of the mariachi workshop in Las Vegas where I received my training in mariachi music and pedagogy. Although I was initially anxious and nervous upon arrival, the instructors met each of us where we were as musicians and teachers, empowering us to feel confident as facilitators and educators in the mariachi classroom.

Adonis recalls how intentional I was in approaching mariachi, especially in my first years developing the program at Marcos de Niza High School. He shared:

You wanted to embrace a culture instead of, like me, taking it for granted. That's how I felt about that. So that's a really cool thing, and I think that attracts a lot of people to open their minds. Especially not just in the background, but people outside the heritage or mariachi world. (conversational interview, August 24, 2024)

Expanding upon this, during his time as a community member participant in the ASU Mariachi Program, Adonis pointed out that my more "classical" approach allowed me to reach and connect with a wide range of musicians:

A lot of mariachi is done with ear training and just mimicking what you hear, that's good for some people. Other people who are more classically-trained tend to

struggle with that. So, bringing it to a more structured environment, scaffolding methods, and using that classical training to deliver a new type of style reaches far better. And the explanations of how it's done, the modeling, because you need someone who can do classical and show them how to do it mariachi. And that style difference is something most people don't pick up on. So it's cool to be able to do both. And the structured learning, that's also something new. Most mariachi groups just get together, let's just play it. Try and just trial by error. Whereas in the mariachi world at ASU, what you've done is create structure. They actually can hear and see the music written in front of them. Accents, what we're looking for, the style we're trying to create, what emphasis, how to use the phrasing, all that structure is now something incorporated to teach a little better for a larger audience. (conversational interview, August 24, 2024)

Miguel, my colleague and former student teacher, shared observations about how I designed and structured rehearsals during his student teaching semester at Marcos de Niza; he voiced that this translated well to the mariachi rehearsal environment that I later cultivated and developed:

What I appreciated and learned a lot about was how to structure rehearsals in an effective way because I lacked that heavily and I'm still working on it. . . .

Finding ways to be effective with what it is you're teaching and the amount of time that you have. And then being able to . . . take the techniques that you were trying to teach your kids and walk them through the processes of playing it and doing it, and doing it in a way so that everyone was successful as long as [they] tried. (conversational interview, July 16, 2024)

Multiple participants spoke about the consideration and inclusion of students' voices and perspectives in my teaching as well as my focus on building relationships within the classroom. As someone with a plethora of experiences with mariachi music, ASU student Nancy appreciated that her thoughts and those of others were considered when making musical decisions:

I always love that you include the students. You know, you're always like taking feedback from us. And you know, at the beginning of every class, you were always telling us like, "If you want to say something or like something doesn't sound or whatever it is, say it." And doing that really opens a big [door] of, like, having confidence as a student to be able to be like, raise my hand and [contribute]. (conversational interview, June 25, 2024)

Argos' comments were in alignment with Nancy:

You made a very consistent thing to always ask like, "Hey, what are you guys thinking? What are you guys doing? Who wants to run rehearsal, you know? Who wants to do this?" So you definitely like [were encouraging] when people would be like, "Oh yeah, I'll take a community role in this." (conversational interview, June 24, 2024)

I have always tried to create a learning environment that is a two-way street; students have a great deal of knowledge to contribute to music. Elle had high hopes for me as a mariachi educator, having seen my leadership in the orchestra program at Marcos de Niza High School prior to the formation of the mariachi ensemble. Speaking about her frame of mind at the time, she states:

With already being your [orchestra] student, I [knew] what to look forward to, I [knew] what to expect, and I [knew] you were also really good in taking feedback from the group. So, anything that we also wanted to add, you would take into consideration and just make it as part of the group. (conversational interview, September 20, 2024)

If she were to describe me and my teaching style to an incoming student, Lucia, my Spanish language colleague at Marcos de Niza, shares:

[T]his is a very creative and passionate individual. He's very well knowledgeable in his field regarding music, with singing as well as instruments. But he's also got a passion for just working with people. He's really good about building relationships. (conversational interview, July 21, 2024)

Such comments from participants signal to me that my previous experiences in the orchestral setting informed and influenced how I would approach the mariachi classroom and rehearsal environment.

Despite this, there were instances where my classical music background might not have aligned with the expectations of some, leading to moments of tension. While much of the music performed in mariachi classrooms today is learned through written sheet music, the genre was traditionally passed along to new generations of musicians through rote teaching, allowing for nuances and specialized details that might not be easily notated. My student Sammy and her mother Ann identified shortcomings in my initial understanding of mariachi performance and practice, things that I have learned to embrace and consistently aim to improve upon as both an educator and musician:

[S]omething that always, like, came back over and over again was not necessarily having to play what's on the paper, which is very different from orchestra, so I understand the background. But sometimes it was frustrating because I could tell, like, through listening and what I had heard in the pieces, like on recordings and things like that, or hearing other people play it, I was like, “Well, I think this part needs to change or we need to tweak this part, and it needs to sound more like this because it'll flow better and it'll sound how it's supposed to.” Versus, like, just playing it on the paper and how it was written. . . . I think you realized more and more that that's kind of how mariachi works in a way. (Sammy, conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

Watching Sammy on stage with the mariachi ensembles, Ann observed:

[I]n the beginning, your approach was very orchestra teacher, so stand in the front and conduct, right? I understand at ASU, there's like a ton of people. . . . You have to conduct there. But with the smaller group [at Marcos de Niza] at first, even at gigs and stuff, it was very music stands, stand in front and conduct. Kind of, like, very orchestra structured, right? And towards the end, you would start them or you'd have one of the kids start. And sometimes they'd have music stands, sometimes they'd have the songs memorized or whatever. And then you would stand at the side and play with them instead, which I thought was really cool. So, it was more like a mariachi band instead of a class. I think there's a lot of good [development] in that area, and that was really hard for you. (conversational interview, June 20, 2024)

Patience was mentioned in several contexts during the conversational interviews, highlighting both my growth and my dedication to ongoing learning and understanding of the genre's technical and musical aspects. For some, like former Marcos de Niza student Sierra, it was pointing out my patience with students and different personalities within the classroom environment:

Honestly, I really love the way you teach. And I'm not just saying that just to say it, but you really have patience with us and I don't know how you do it. And I just feel like the way you taught really helped all of us [see our full potential].

(conversational interview, June 22, 2024)

Miguel expanded upon Sierra's viewpoint about my teaching style and my approach to working with students:

I really like that you [are] a “come as you are” type of teacher. You [aren't] aggressive, you [are] very loving and very caring in your teaching. If a kid just tried, you always found a way to build them up and to support them. . . . [It was like] you said, “Hey, you're invited to the party, all you have to do is decide to come.” It was cool during my time at Marcos to see how you treated students and connected them with [others]. (conversational interview, July 16, 2024)

For others, my patience in allowing myself to grow and develop in mariachi was both evident and visible. Having grown up as a musician primarily in the orchestral setting, Toby, a student with experiences in the Marcos de Niza and ASU Mariachi programs, provided observations between both my orchestra and mariachi classes:

I just think you made it clear to the class that they're gonna be some, not incorrect, but just misalignments in your teaching style versus what is traditional of

mariachi culture. You made that very apparent in each class, so the students know, and that they could help you learn from each error. . . . [Y]ou can give your teaching and then the students can also provide their insight for you and, like, just guiding both each way in the process. (personal communication, September 27, 2024)

He went on to explain that I demonstrated a strong intention to learn and grasp the unique nuances of mariachi:

[I]t really came down to just the style in which you played something like, “Oh, this is what my brain recognized mostly, and I think this would sound good.” But others recognized it as a break from the mariachi pattern, or just style in general. . . . Like, you've really tried to . . . put it out there that, “Oh, I'm coming from an outsider point of view, though I'm trying my best and learning the genre style and everything that I can to make this authentic for you guys.” And I definitely think you make the classroom environment more welcoming to opinions from the students in the class. (personal communication, September 27, 2024)

Lupe, a community member and dual language educator, emphasized that my efforts to build relationships and rapport with students, families, and the community gave me the space to show myself grace and continue learning in real time from those around me:

[Y]ou come with all this knowledge, right? But your patience and hearing everybody, making sure voices are heard, people tell their stories, their perspectives. You can know everything, you can read all the books. But if you don't sit down and break bread and talk to people from the community, all you are is just a book, right? But you have taken the time to break bread with all of us, to

talk with us, to talk about our culture. That's just an added layer. But I think just your patience and learning, your patience in yourself. You gave yourself a lot of graces, which is what you need throughout your journey, right? Take your patience with yourself. (conversational interview, September 28, 2024)

Respect was another key principle tied to my teaching approach, particularly in honoring the cultural tradition, offering an authentic and intentional learning experience, and continuously expanding my own knowledge and understanding. Veronica, colleague and Assistant Director of the ASU Mariachi, expressed similar sentiments to other participants:

I feel like you have navigated [this journey] very well in your respect for the culture and your knowledge of the genre, the music genre, and in your pedagogy. All of it has always felt like you've approached it from that viewpoint of wanting to be as authentic in the representation of the music and how you can make that happen, right? (conversational interview, July 9, 2024)

Part of that respect involves recognizing when to seek assistance and expertise from others. Throughout my journey, I have sought out clinicians and experts to share their expertise with my students, providing perspectives and insights beyond what my musical experiences alone could offer. Skye, my former private viola student and a member of the ASU Mariachi, describes this approach:

I enjoy how [your approach is], like, interdisciplinary. You bring in other people like [Veronica], people that are focused in different areas. And then you yourself also focus on the violin sometimes. And so it's nice to have you play things out that aren't clear to the whole section. I think that helps a lot, because in other big

groups like that, I haven't really had directors that outright play what they want to hear. They just speak it. [I]t's nice to have those examples and then also have other people that are specialized in other things and give their perspectives. It's like you run the group in an interdisciplinary way, and I think that helps the sections and also the group as a whole. (conversational interview, September 24, 2024)

Skye's use of the term *interdisciplinary* has prompted me to reflect on the unique experiences and strengths each person has contributed to my mariachi ensembles, whether as an instrumental specialist or as someone with extensive experience in the genre or culture.

Working alongside Veronica, my colleague and Assistant Director, to further develop the mariachi program at Arizona State University, she has been a valuable sounding board, offering great insight, perspective, and advice as I continue my journey as a developing mariachi educator and navigate acceptance within the mariachi music community. She reflects:

I think a big part of [your approach] is that you really have a desire continuously, through the whole time I've known you, to learn and to be better. And I think a huge, huge part of that is your ability to ask for help. (conversational interview, July 9, 2024)

Through my journey, I have learned that patience is a necessary virtue to grant yourself when navigating a musical practice with which you are unfamiliar; if you don't do this, you will never develop the strength to continually persevere and learn. Being willing to listen, admit your shortcomings and mistakes, and take feedback is essential,

even if it is difficult to digest and handle at times. Building relationships based on trust and honesty are also essential in developing an instructional space where students can feel comfortable expressing their perspectives and opinions for the benefit of all, including music educators. The idea of a two-way street of learning empowers students to contribute to their own learning as well as the understanding of those around them. With this in mind, I firmly believe that I have learned—and will continue to learn—just as much, if not more, from my students’ experiences and heritage as they learn from my background in music education pedagogy.

Connection with the Surrounding Community and Mariachi Music Community

The Panera Bread on McClintock Drive and Guadalupe Road will always be a place that holds special significance to me, not because of the delicious salads or mouthwatering sandwiches, but rather what transpired in the beginning years of my journey into mariachi education. Meeting there for our first booster club board meeting of the 2019-2020 school year, I explained to the parent volunteers my vision of what I hoped to accomplish with the mariachi program that year, which was in its second year as a curricular class. They were on board and excited to expand the booster club to include both orchestra and mariachi.

*Despite their enthusiasm, in the back of my mind, I still had feelings of doubt and anxiety. What were people thinking about me, this white guy teaching mariachi? I wasn’t authentic to the culture or genre, and I most certainly didn’t want families or community members to think that I was trying to “save” anyone; it made me think of movies like *Dangerous Minds* or *Freedom Writers*, which had great intentions and messages, but might also come across in a manner that viewed marginalized communities in a deficit*

and in need of “saving.” How would I know if I was doing a good job as well as approaching things in a respectful and responsive way? How could I be accepted if I wasn’t an authentic member of mariachi culture and community? What were community members saying about me and this venture?

At the conclusion of the booster meeting, Rosa and I stuck around for a bit longer. Rosa grew up in Guadalupe and still had strong ties to the community. I felt that our relationship was close enough that I could be open with her about my feelings and the apprehensions that I had because of my outsider status in mariachi and Mexican American culture. I remember the smile that appeared on her face after I voiced my concerns; she looked at me and shared, “You know, Scott, you ARE authentic. You are authentic because your intentions are authentic. You want to create a space where our culture and our music are recognized and celebrated, and that’s what matters. And trust me, you will know if the Guadalupe community is unhappy or not satisfied—we aren’t quiet when it comes to things like that!” She went on to say that the buzz around the Town of Guadalupe was extremely positive and that my admission of my status as a cultural outsider provided the community with honesty and candor, allowing them to see that I was willing to challenge myself and learn alongside the students while fostering the growth of trusting relationships.

Developing relationships with the surrounding communities and the mariachi music community is a third theme contributing to my journey as a mariachi educator. The participants shared a variety of perspectives and thoughts on how I developed honest, meaningful relationships to gain trust and respect within these communities.

As a cultural outsider, I believe it is essential for others to understand that I am not attempting to portray myself as a mariachi expert or as an authentic representative of the culture. Elle recalls memories from some of our earliest performances with the Marcos de Niza Mariachi Ensemble:

I remember in the community events, you would start out with a speech [to let] everyone know, “I understand I am a white guy and I'm teaching mariachi, but once you hear the group you'll hear how amazing they are, and how their practices have really helped them become what they are today.” I think that was one of the things that . . . helped the community, like, understand probably a bit better.

(conversational interview, September 20, 2024)

Involvement in community events, especially those in Guadalupe during my time at Marcos de Niza High School, allowed for families and community members to better understand what the students and I were trying to accomplish. Argos shares:

It's like opening [the community] up to be like, “Oh, there's, like, this place academically where [students] can express themselves” and be, like, “Oh yeah, this is music that I grew up with.” But it also . . . kind of revitalized the community in a way. (personal communication, June 21, 2024)

Sierra, a former Marcos de Niza student, recalls that the mariachi's connection with the community was genuine and appreciated, but also noticed that as I gained the trust of the residents in Guadalupe and the mariachi music community, my confidence and love for the music grew:

I'm from Guadalupe so, like, I know a lot of people out there. They love us. They loved us when we were playing. I feel like after a while, I noticed that you started

to love it more. So, we would start gigging more, more time was put into it. And I feel like sometimes, like, you played with us too. So it wasn't just fun for us, it was also fun for you. (personal communication, June 22, 2024)

Expanding on the perspectives of others, Jackie, Toby's mom, pointed out that I was honest and forthcoming about my background and experiences when attempting to connect with students, their families, and community members:

[Y]ou didn't make yourself act like, "This is my culture. This is where I've grown up. This is how I was raised." You made it, "I'm coming into your community. Let me know how you want me to be perceived or what you want me to do." . . . You let yourself know, let everybody know that, "Hey, look, I'm just falling into this. And, just thank you for helping me and I'm trying my best, but I'm not trying to be something I'm not. I'm just trying to do what I can, with what I know, and who I am." (personal communication, September 19, 2024)

Community input and feedback were crucial in guiding decisions and shaping the development of the mariachi programs at both Marcos de Niza High School and Arizona State University; as Miguel would consistently remind me, I was a guest in someone else's culture, no matter how knowledgeable I might become. Lucia, my Spanish language colleague, felt that I embraced this advice wholeheartedly:

The attempt to make the connection was always in a non-threatening way. You know, you weren't just trying to push yourself out there like you knew everything. You explored, you asked, you listened. That was a big piece, it is that you listened to what the community members said or . . . told you about different experiences with the music and how certain songs that they loved, what they meant to them.

And you embraced that and you brought that in. And you included it in your programs and I think that's what made it even more popular and it grew. And you had the community's backing on that. And I think just the main piece is that you listened. You listened to what they had to say and the experiences they had, and you brought that to the forefront. I think that was what made it so successful.

(conversational interview, July 21, 2024)

Rosa, who has close ties to the town of Guadalupe, eluded that this approach drew in parents and community members who were not usually involved:

When programs like [your mariachi] open up and these kids are taking the initiative themselves to want to [participate], it means a lot. But when programs like yours open up, it also opens up the eyes of these parents who maybe weren't going to be supportive, but then saw something like this and decided to be like, "Yeah, we are going to do this [and be involved]". (conversational interview, October 6, 2024)

The recurring theme of consistent willingness to listen and remaining open to learning was discussed by several participants throughout the study. Sammy, who aspires to become a mariachi music educator herself, appreciated these qualities:

I think the biggest thing that I've noticed, that I've always, like, admired I guess, is that you're willing to learn and listen to the people that are in the culture. I think that's an important part that some people tend to not do. . . . [T]hey don't necessarily want to listen and they kind of just want to do what they think is the best or what they've learned in, like, a class or something like that. Where I think you've been willing to listen and be open to the people that are in the culture

because you know that it's something that connects to them in a different way.

(conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

Lupe shared a similar viewpoint to Sammy's, highlighting that I grasped the importance of an individual's desire to feel recognized and valued:

[Y]ou are just always open and ready to receive whatever people give you. You never shut anybody down. And just as you are right now, you're always open to hear different perspectives. And that's so impactful. So impactful to our community [because] we want to be seen and heard, right? Everybody wants to be seen and heard. When you have somebody that is listening and watching and taking notes and absorbing, that's powerful. (personal communication, September 28, 2024)

Others saw my efforts to connect as a cultural outsider to be an asset in gaining the support of community members. Coming from a background in mariachi and growing up in Guadalupe, Adonis asserts:

There's always the cliché. You have a Hispanic director and there's also a limitation to that because they're expected to only do certain things, only expected to venture into the community so far. So, by having someone with a larger background [that is] different from theirs, it tells them that we have a claim in the society around us, not just our own background, but everywhere. And that's really, I guess that exposure is a lot different from what we're so used to [in a] way. (conversational interview, August 24, 2024)

Darbin and I reflected on why the mariachi program was both desired and necessary at our school. Although our student population was predominantly Hispanic/Latinx, with

significant representation from Mexican American and Pascua Yaqui communities, our music ensembles did not always reflect these demographics. How could the introduction of a mariachi ensemble make our music program more inclusive? How could it foster better communication with the students, families, and communities which we served?

Darbin recalled how persistent I was in connecting with those around me:

You were constantly reaching out to connect with [whoever] was in your world. . . . And I think you still do that today, . . . reaching out into the universe and making as many contacts as humanly possible, I think. And so if there was someone that felt disconnected, you [had] a knack for finding them and not just telling them, “I want you to feel connected.” You know, it was, [in] my memory of it anyway, “What can I do for you and your kids to bring you [in]?” And I think that's why that program took off. I think why it resonated with that community so strongly. It wasn't you going in and telling somebody what they needed to do. It was you going in and saying, “What can we do to open up this program and welcome you into this space?” I think you did it brilliantly and I think the results show that. (conversational interview, June 13, 2024)

This is not to imply that there were no significant challenges or obstacles along my journey in connecting with the community and advocating for the mariachi programs that I led. Natalie, a Marcos de Niza parent, recalled feedback from a local news story about the advanced mariachi ensemble at Marcos de Niza, which was featured in preparation for our tour to Orlando, Florida. While most comments on social media were supportive, a few accused me of cultural appropriation and labeled me a “culture vulture.” Natalie shares her recollections of this experience:

“Oh, he's a white guy teaching Hispanic [cultural music] and it's all Mexican or whatever.” And I think you really didn't let it affect you. Because mean things, mean comments, social media says mean things. And I think what other people didn't realize [was] that it had nothing to do with the color or the culture. It was that you embraced it. And I think at that point when someone said something really mean, I felt like you just were very positive about it, even though I know it probably hurt. Because you were like, “Wait, I'm trying to really do a good job here. And I see my kids smiling and I see them connecting.” (conversational interview, September 18, 2024)

Reflecting on the feedback from online commenters who did not know me, my students, or the development of our program, I realized, both at the time and again while working on this self-study, that my efforts could have been perceived negatively, despite my authentic and honest intentions. However, Veronica emphasizes that my actions have consistently shown a strong sense of care and accountability in response to conflict or criticism:

I feel like every time you've faced . . . challenges, whether it was a faculty member not being able to get behind what you were trying to express or maybe a student not quite seeing the picture of what you're trying to achieve with the mariachi group, I think . . . you have responded with a lot of consciousness. [Y]ou really thought about how you responded, how you were going to respond, right? And you consulted, right? I feel like you take a lot of time to reflect on what the right decision should be. And I think that that's really the best that someone could ask for, you know? Because in those challenges, you've been able to have

conversations with people and approach it with respect for the other person. And a lot of the times it comes down to just difference of opinion is what I've found.

And you walk away from those conversations knowing that too, you know? Not everybody is going to agree with what you're trying to do, but with the hope that there are people that see the work that you're doing and that can also get behind that too. And so I feel like you understand that balance really well.

(conversational interview, July 9, 2024)

As I reflect on the connections that I've made and the relationships that have developed from mariachi over the years, I am both astonished and grateful. Here I was, an outsider with very limited experience in mariachi music and Mexican culture, but felt embraced for who I was and what I was trying to accomplish. From the musicians and educators at the workshop in Las Vegas to the families and community members in Guadalupe, Tempe, and Phoenix, the vibes that I received from others were positive. Perhaps this was because of how I approached things, providing an open door for feedback and a two-way street in the classroom. Maybe it was my curiosity and willingness to learn about cultural traditions that were not my own.

I can pinpoint moments where I felt genuine connections of community and family. I remember when I started receiving invitations to my students' quinceañeras, a rite of passage and celebration for young women in Mexican culture when they turn 15. Sierra's quinceañera was the first that I attended; I recall sitting in the church in Guadalupe surrounded by family members and the church's religious artifacts. While I felt "outside" and didn't understand all of the components of the ceremony that was conducted in Spanish, I also realized that I wouldn't have been invited if Sierra and her

family did not feel a strong connection with me as her mariachi teacher and a mentor in her life. I remember walking up to congratulate her after the ceremony; she was smiling from ear to ear beside her parents: “You came! I am so excited that you’re here! Thank you for taking the time.” It was moments like this that made me realize that I was becoming a part of the community, a part of “the space between.”

As I heard in some of the conversational interviews with my students and their parents, food often plays a central role in families and communities. It’s almost like a love language of sorts, preparing and offering food as a symbol of care and connection. It always made my day when students or parents would show up to my classroom with plates of holiday cookies just out of the oven, jars of homemade salsa, or dozens of freshly prepared tamales, allowing me to experience their family recipes and the intricate variations that represented each of their renditions of Mexican cuisine. As Lupe, Skye’s mom, told me, “Food is love and food is our culture.” It made me ponder if, perhaps, I wasn’t on the outside as much as I thought . . .

Acceptance, Growth, and Next Steps

Here I am, directing a collegiate mariachi program alongside Veronica, someone I deeply admire as an emerging music educator in Arizona and an invaluable source of insight into both Mexican culture and mariachi music. Many people have told me that “You’ve made it!” and have referred to me as “The Mariachi Education Guy” in the Phoenix metro area. However, I don’t quite see it that way. There’s always this lingering sense of doubt and imposter syndrome, a reminder of my beginnings as an outsider.

When I first started my journey into mariachi, Miguel gave me important advice: “No matter how much you learn or how much success you achieve, you should always

remember that you are a guest in someone else's culture." This wisdom has stayed with me, guiding my decisions and reminding me to always act in ways that honor my students and the culture, while also continuing to expand my knowledge and practice in mariachi. While I have certainly become more familiar with mariachi practice over the years, along with the cultural traditions associated with it, I do not consider myself an expert. Yes, I have valuable experience when it comes to building a program, navigating the journey of an initial cultural outsider, and building relationships with families and communities. However, much like when this journey commenced, I still do not want to present myself as something I am not.

Through recognizing and building connections within the communities surrounding Marcos de Niza High School and Arizona State University as well as the mariachi music community, I realized I had found a place of acceptance—a home in “the space between,” a concept I referenced in earlier chapters. This acceptance, a fourth theme in my self-study's findings, fostered further growth in my teaching, performing, and understanding of mariachi music and culture.

Several participants mentioned my apprehensive and nervous demeanor when I first started teaching mariachi, noting that it seemed natural and reflected my desire to succeed in becoming a capable mariachi educator and a part of the music community. Elle recalled how I have evolved from the beginnings of teaching mariachi at Marcos de Niza into my current position at Arizona State University:

I feel like maybe you were a bit nervous about teaching mariachi. But, I mean, it was completely normal because it's a whole different type of music that you're learning and about a whole different culture as well. But, I would notice that you

would be a little bit nervous about maybe making some changes here, or how something would sound different if we added this or took away that. But, over time, you did become more confident in your teaching and up to now with this huge group of people [at ASU], you're not afraid to say, "Oh, let's do this instead. Oh, let's do that." (conversational interview, September 20, 2024)

Miguel described the apprehensive beginnings of my mariachi journey in a metaphorical way:

I remember that I [kept] nudging you [to incorporate mariachi] and then you started moving forward I don't think you were pulling or pushing back, but I remember you were just kind of standing there and then you started to slowly lean forward. And then, finally, you took the first step and continued to walk.

(conversational interview, July 16, 2024)

Lucia and I reminisced about how our mariachi-Spanish language partnership at Marcos de Niza began. She agreed to work on language and culture with me if I taught her basic guitar chord progressions so that she could perform alongside students in the ensemble. As I mentioned in Chapter Four, I believe that this partnership played a vital role in the success of our mariachi program at Marcos de Niza, allowing for collaboration across academic areas as well as developing a program based on culturally responsive practices and teamwork. Reflecting on the many hours we spent together after school, working on pronunciation and interpretation, she shared:

I think maybe the only challenge would have been at the beginning, just trying to [speak and] understand the lyrics. [Y]ou can translate it, but then to be able to understand, like when you're singing it, you know? What does it mean? Why do

you add so much emphasis on this piece and not [during] that piece? But that was something, I wouldn't even say it was a negative. It was like something that you embraced and that you learned, and then you just went with it. (conversational interview, July 21, 2024)

Pedagogical support from cultural insiders like Lucia, Miguel, Adonis, and Veronica helped me develop both my confidence and knowledge as a mariachi educator while simultaneously teaching and learning from the students in front of me. While I am not fluent in Spanish, I am now able to better comprehend the message that is being conveyed in a song. When researching and learning about new repertoire, I regularly create a literal translation of the lyrics and then attempt to gain a full understanding of the ideas and meanings being communicated. Lyrics and text play such a vital role within mariachi music, allowing the singer to be a storyteller in expressing sentiments of love, family, heartbreak, joy, anger, and cultural pride amongst other themes and emotions. With this knowledge and understanding in collaboration with other mariachi educators and culture bearers, I have become more confident in selecting repertoire that is both approachable and appropriate for students at different levels (e.g., middle school, high school, or college).

During my doctoral studies, I took a sabbatical from Marcos de Niza for a full school year, which allowed me to complete my remaining coursework and immerse myself in the university environment. During this year of focused study, I had the chance to perform for the first time with the Arizona State University Mariachi Ensemble, led by Miguel. I was immersed in a diverse range of music and styles within the mariachi repertoire, gaining a deeper appreciation for the genre's breadth and rich history.

Reflecting back, I do not think I fully realized how much my time in the ensemble enhanced my knowledge and confidence upon returning to my classroom at Marcos de Niza. However, the growth in confidence and knowledge was recognized by students and families; Ann remembered a striking contrast upon my return from the sabbatical:

[W]hen [Sammy first] got to Mariachi with you, you were really focused on the musicality and the culture was a little bit to the side, I guess. But [that's] probably because you didn't know a lot of it yet, you know? You didn't really speak a lot of the language yet. But I think as time went on, definitely, like the second year was better than the first year. . . . But then senior year, the kids were connected and you came back connected with the culture. I don't know what you did during your little break, but somehow you were more connected. (conversational interview, June 20, 2024)

For Toby, a student who has been involved in mariachi at both Marcos de Niza and ASU, my personal growth was demonstrated in my further understanding of stylistic and musical elements:

You definitely seemed more “in the know” of the different styles, which included the rhythms and how each piece should sound and the dance and audience participation that could come with it. You really knew what you were talking about. . . . And so [there was] definitely that growth in there as your research really developed. . . . [I]t showed as you really just felt more confident in what you were teaching. (conversational interview, September 27, 2024)

For others, my enjoyment and investment in the art form was more apparent as I became more knowledgeable with the technical aspects of the genre. Sammy shared her observations:

[T]he connection that you had changed [over time] and it grew to rather than just being like, I don't know, something you were excited about and that you had learned versus something you like personally connected to and cared about more, more deeply than you had before. (conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

Sierra expressed a similar viewpoint, pointing out that my contentment and joy was not just internal, but included those around me:

I feel like over time, like I saw that you started to really love it more. . . . I mean, there's people who just teach but don't like what they're doing. But it was so different with you because you actually loved what you were doing and, like, it wasn't just about you, it was about everyone. (conversational interview, June 22, 2024)

As I gained more experience and connected deeper with the practice and genre, I began to feel more comfortable in the mariachi space, developing a stronger sense of belonging and leadership. As I earned acceptance from families and within the mariachi music community, I also became more confident in embracing my role as a facilitator of mariachi education. Rosa recalls hearing students from Guadalupe and their families talk about me with positivity and affection:

When you have Yaqui [Mexican Native American] kids saying “El Glasser,” you know you’ve made an impact on that community. They all call you “El Glasser,” which means “The Glasser” [and a term of endearment]. I have never known the

Yaqui kids or the community to bring up any teacher from Marcos, and you have been brought up several times because of the mariachi program. . . . When I hear my circle bring up “El Glasser,” I know that you’ve made an impact because I have never heard them [speak about] another faculty member the way that they’ve brought you up. . . . You definitely left your footprint, your impression on the community itself. (conversational interview, October 6, 2024)

From the time Skye began her undergraduate studies at Arizona State University, as I took over directing the mariachi ensemble program, she has observed both the growth of the ASU Mariachi and my own development as a mariachi educator and facilitator:

I've enjoyed seeing how confident you've gotten, especially teaching a group that big [at ASU]. You just take things head on, and you never limit the number or the type of songs we can do. We do a wide variety, and so I admire, like, how dedicated you are to giving everybody in the group a chance to fully be a part of the world of mariachi and expose them to different musical styles and things like that. Yeah. It's been cool to watch and be a part of too. (conversational interview, September 24, 2024)

When Miguel first suggested recommending me for the ensemble director position, I felt extremely apprehensive and anxious, as I was still developing as a mariachi educator. Despite success with the performance groups at Marcos de Niza High School, taking on leadership of a collegiate ensemble felt like a huge leap, one that triggered feelings of imposter syndrome and doubt. Although these feelings persisted while teaching at both Marcos de Niza and Arizona State University, participants offered perspectives that

helped me to realize this was normal and acceptable, all stemming from my desire to do a good job. Nancy expressed her appreciation for my continued professional development, citing how I attended workshops and other events to further my knowledge and understanding in order to better serve my students:

I like how you always mentioned where you're trying to . . . keep adding to your education and, like, bettering yourself. . . . [Y]ou mentioned a lot of going to workshops and conferences and things for educators and teachers, so, you know, that just really shows the effort you're trying to put in to learn something that . . . is new to you in a sense, right? I know it's not new, but . . . that just shows how much effort and . . . willingness you're trying to do to really learn and master a genre or [understand] a community. (conversational interview, June 25, 2024)

Recalling the masterclass our Marcos de Niza Mariachi had with Mariachi Cobre, the professional mariachi-in-residence at Disney World, while on tour in Orlando, Florida, my student Argos observed a shift in my demeanor as we worked with experts from the mariachi tradition:

It felt like there was a moment where you kind of became more reserved . . . because it was like they were coming in and they were very, you know, assured and confident with what they were saying. I'd say specifically with the armonia section because the strumming patterns were different and they're like, "What are you guys doing?" It's like, "Well, this guy told us." And so it was, I'd say, it was good to hear after that you took those notes and remembered them very well and repeated them consistently to kind of remind yourself and also remind the group like, "Hey, I have a certain way of teaching it, but it's like this isn't super correct.

There's mainly this sort of sound you want to get with it.” (personal communication, June 21, 2024)

I remember that masterclass vividly. While I was proud of the work I had done with the students, it was a humbling experience to watch them collaborate with renowned performers who effortlessly revised the music and spoke in depth about techniques for each instrument in the ensemble. Though I felt a bit insecure in the moment, I was also inspired to take notes, listen closely, and actively continue learning from these professional musicians with decades of experience.

As my knowledge of mariachi music and technical skills have grown, so too have my confidence and sense of belonging within the mariachi music community. I've come to accept that while moments of imposter syndrome will arise, they will be balanced by experiences of success and empowerment. Jackie shared her insight from watching the growth of the Marcos de Niza Mariachi Program as a parent: “I saw more confidence in you. . . . The more you became, the more the kids became. And they were more excited. The music advanced more. And it became fitting for the group that you had” (conversational interview, September 19, 2024). I often think back to when I first started teaching mariachi music at Marcos de Niza High School and how unfamiliar I was with the repertoire and the contextual significance of the musical selections. I remember choosing arrangements based on their sound and the technical skills they addressed. However, I soon learned that the setting in which you perform and the message you aim to convey are key factors in selecting appropriate repertoire for your ensemble. While this may seem like common sense, it can be overwhelming when you are learning a genre that you are completely unfamiliar with.

Though I still see myself in the grey area of “the space between,” participants noted that I have found acceptance within the mariachi music community and feel that my work has been viewed as both authentic and impactful. Referencing back to his initial feelings of my identity as an outsider, Vincent states:

I feel like the community has accepted you. But until you accept that you're part of it, then you'll never stop seeing yourself as the outsider. I get how smart people think differently. So maybe the literature is correct to think that you're an outsider forever? (personal communication, September 4, 2024)

This is a topic that Vincent and I had discussed at length previously when he was recording a podcast for one of his music learning and teaching courses. I continue to struggle with labelling myself in the mariachi music community. While I have had success as an educator, facilitator, and practitioner, I am extremely cautious about inadvertently presenting myself as an expert or true insider of the culture.

There are always additional steps to take in order to further yourself and your education, both in formal contexts and informal settings. My colleague Veronica shares a sentiment on what the next step might be in my mariachi journey:

I do want to add that I feel like, just like anyone else in your position, there's always more to learn. . . . [O]ne of the areas that I feel like would give you a lot more understanding is something that we've actually talked about, [which] is playing with a gigging group, right? Because that also has to do a lot with, I think, the culture, right? Because when you're [in] a gigging group, you're getting called in [for] events that have mariachi incorporated within the culture, right? So I think

that that's definitely an aspect that you might want to consider too. (personal communication, July 9, 2024)

Miguel and I have also discussed the idea of gaining “street cred” through gigging within the mariachi community, which would allow me to further my experiences with mariachi and bolster my reputation as someone who has practical performance experience in addition to pedagogical training. He asserts:

Put the time into the culture, put the time into the music. You don't get respect by being on the outside and telling people on the inside how to do it. You have to be inside of it. . . . Part of mariachi culture is, yes, the classroom, but that's the newer part. The older part is gigging, the older part is going to gigs and understanding that it . . . can be messy and not like you're on a concert stage. . . . You have done some of that and you're continuing to do so. . . . Part of the mariachi culture is [also] getting your instrument out, singing with a guitar, or getting your violin out and playing songs and jamming out. If you can't contribute in those arenas, then they kind of go, “Oh, I get it now. You're an outsider, you're not really in this.” (conversational interview, July 16, 2024)

As Veronica mentioned, performing with a gigging mariachi requires a different set of abilities than playing in a concert group; you often learn songs by ear or by observing other musicians, adapting your playing to match theirs. As I continue to build on my abilities and experiences in mariachi, I want to challenge myself to step further outside my comfort zone and immerse myself in the gigging scene and culture.

Reflecting on my efforts to connect with culture and traditions of our community, Rosa shares:

One thing that I can say about the Hispanic and Yaqui cultures is that, yes, they may be tight-knit, but when they see someone who is genuinely, authentically appreciating their culture and loving their culture to the extent that you appreciated it, they open their arms and accept you as family. (conversational interview, October 6, 2024)

The conversational interviews with the participants in this study were eye-opening, providing me with deeper insight into my own journey while also exposing me to perspectives and experiences I hadn't previously considered. I've also come to realize that we are often our own harshest critics; much of the doubt and pressure that I've felt throughout my journey has, in a sense, been self-inflicted. Looking back, I realize that I placed a great deal of expectation on myself, primarily because I didn't want anyone to think I was not fully committed to this journey. I also wanted to create rewarding and fulfilling experiences for my students—experiences that the community would recognize and appreciate.

I appreciate being seen as a resource for others, helping them navigate similar experiences of learning and teaching as cultural outsiders. I recognize that I have reached a level of acceptance, finding a place in “the space between,” and being regarded as a colleague on an equal footing with those who are insiders to mariachi culture and traditions. I look forward to continuing to expand my learning, both in the realm of education and within the gigging scene. Becoming a gigging musician requires a different set of abilities, including adjusting and transposing on the spot, picking up songs by ear, and trusting your instincts as a musician. I also believe that this venture will help me to gain a deeper acceptance within the mariachi music community,

demonstrating that I "walk the walk" in both the educational and performance aspects of mariachi.

Participants' Suggestions for Music Educators Facilitating a Cultural Music Tradition Outside of Their Own Heritage

During the conversational interviews, I sought advice from the participants on how educators could effectively facilitate a cultural music tradition outside of their own heritages or backgrounds. The depth and thoughtfulness of their responses were both inspiring and insightful, offering suggestions that would enable music teachers to approach such an endeavor with an open mind, authentic intentions, a willingness to learn, and a commitment to transparency and feedback.

Several participants emphasized that understanding the culture surrounding the tradition, recognizing the stylistic elements of the music, and learning about its history are crucial for music educators to effectively facilitate a cultural music tradition that is unfamiliar to them. Elle shares:

For cultural music, I think it's definitely important to learn about the culture first before anything. That way you can get an idea of what their culture is, what special meanings everything has, and the traditions that they celebrate. There's some songs in culture that do have a special meaning to some of their celebrations and traditions that are tied in. So that's the key importance for cultural music. . . . [Talk] to people who are familiar with that culture as well, so they can talk about their experiences and what they're familiar with. (conversational interview, September 20, 2024)

Lupe elaborates on Elle's sentiments:

[J]ust reaching out to the community because they all bring different perspectives, different life experiences. But as an educator, if you want to connect with culture, ask, reach out to the community because those are your best supporters. Those are your biggest cheerleaders and they bring different perspectives that not one human being can have alone. (conversational interview, September 28, 2024)

Sammy asserted her viewpoints:

[I]t's important to understand the culture and the cultural significance of the music. . . . I think it's important to remember that, and to remember that you have to connect with the culture first before you can connect with the music. I think another really important aspect that sometimes gets ignored is learning how to teach the music the way it's taught in that culture versus . . . the skills you already have. You have to learn how it's taught and used in that culture. (conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

During our conversational interview, Sammy recalled instances where my stylistic interpretations and technical execution were clearly rooted in a classical approach. Reflecting on this, I realized how often music educators, whether consciously or unconsciously, teach in the manner in which they were taught. Coming from a background as a classically trained violinist, I had to adjust to the technical and stylistic differences between the classical music I had grown up performing and the mariachi music I was eager to learn and play alongside my students.

While the practical aspects of teaching a mariachi ensemble, such as maintaining a steady pulse, adjusting intonation, and fostering group listening, are similar to those in orchestra, band, or choir, the stylistic nuances, tone color, and instrumental techniques

are distinct. Participants emphasized the importance of learning through experience, trial and error, and engaging in educational opportunities such as conferences, concerts, and travel. Adonis, who teaches high school band and has an extensive background in mariachi, compares this to understanding jazz music:

This is parallel, runs parallels with jazz. Jazz was a very cultural thing at first. Only certain groups knew how to master it. But, it just takes [a] moment to venture to, let's say, experiment with it, understand the point and the groove. So I think that it's going to follow the same rules here where you're just learning a style. You're trying to understand the style. What influenced the style or what influenced the technique? . . . Trial and error. Go for it. . . . You never stop learning. . . . But give yourself a grace period to learn that. Involve yourself [in] the culture. . . . What's the feel? What's the culture? What's the message you're trying to create within that group or setting? (conversational interview, August 24, 2024)

Argos, one of my former students from Marcos de Niza who now attends ASU, echoed similar sentiments with a slightly different approach:

[H]aving that very distinctive watermark, I'd say, of sound and color is very important. And it's like, unless you're, like, in it all the time and . . . you grew up around that, it's, like, very hard to imitate. And luckily, there are usually people in the group who are able to kind of facilitate that. So it's like, even if you do have some shortcomings, there's . . . others to help you expand . . . on that. (conversational interview, June 21, 2024)

Nancy, a student in the ASU Mariachi, expands upon these thoughts, asserting the importance of pursuing professional development opportunities in a variety of ways:

Find resources out there, like conferences [and] workshops, even other colleagues you may have that might have more experience in that area that you don't. . . . I think it's better to ask for help than, you know, like, be struggling with something, right? Not only that, but you as an educator learn, and also your students learn. And it's like a win-win situation. . . . [T]his is more expensive, but travel. Like for instance, . . . Mexico, Guadalajara, you know, the big parts where . . . mariachi is. Traveling and listening to these people, . . . the research you do can really help out a lot. And not only that, but inspire you more. (conversational interview, June 25, 2024)

Argos also expressed the importance of first-hand contact with the cultural music tradition and those who are performing it:

If you're able to go to some live shows, talk to the musicians after, and be like, “Hey, how do you do what you do? Like, when did you guys start? Like, how did this group form? Did you guys have backgrounds?” And kind of get into what their sound is about. I feel like [that] would give [you] a really good advantage and kind of [feel] a bit more comfortable. And to have it be more of a wider point, instead of being specific examples of what you could do. It would be like, making sure that you do research, whether that be through reading, or personal anecdotes and testimonies kind of explaining like, “This is what the music means to me. This is where it comes from.” And . . . make sure that you know why. Why you're

doing what you're doing and why the sound sounds the way it does sound.

(conversational interview, June 21, 2024)

Skye, who started playing mariachi music in college after only having orchestral experiences in her K-12 education, reflects upon her own journey of becoming familiar and confident with mariachi performance through active listening:

I think just immersing yourself in the music, listening to it a lot is the way to go. I definitely do that when . . . there's a specific song I need to learn. Like, I listen to it on repeat. And then definitely, if possible, talking to people who have done it or are doing it is a good resource. (conversational interview, September 24, 2024)

Understanding the background or intention of the repertoire is also at the heart of mariachi music, which often lends itself to storytelling alongside the celebration and observance of important moments within Mexican culture. Ann, a parent who has learned about Mexican culture as a cultural outsider like me, shares:

[Y]ou can teach the music, but you can't do your best job unless you learn the culture. So, that is learning the words, learning the Spanish that goes along with it, understanding what the words of the songs are. Because if you don't understand the words of the song and you're having somebody sing it that doesn't make sense for that person to sing it, [then it doesn't work]. Because even some of the kids don't speak Spanish well enough to understand what they're singing about, you know? I think you really have to do the work to get immersed in the culture.

(conversational interview, June 20, 2024)

Participants also discussed approaches that educators can use to build rapport and trust with students and their families. In addition to learning about the culture and

understanding the significance of the music, they emphasized the importance of intention, communication, and a willingness to learn and be open to feedback. Darbin shares insight from his tenure as choral music educator at Marcos de Niza High School:

[L]earn in conversation and in relationships with the people that you're teaching because most of the people, I think, that you're teaching are coming into it either because they're very interested in it as a topic or a style of music, or because it reflects their own personal history. So, if they come in because they're passionate about it, they probably have knowledge about it. If they come into it because it's part of their personal history, then they have [likely] knowledge about it. And so, by creating an environment where you learn the cultural aspects of it with an understanding that, as the trained musician, you can flip that script and teach them the [musical foundations] of it. (conversational interview, June 13, 2024)

Toby, who has been my student at both Marcos de Niza and ASU, expanded upon this idea of cultural and familial knowledge that students bring to the classroom that can benefit the educational environment:

[I]t's definitely good to hear your students out, learn about their funds of knowledge in a way so that you can take their backgrounds, any information that they have, and build the class and shape it in a way that's meant for them. And go into this class with your heart in it. Going in with . . . good intentions is definitely key. Because even if you get things wrong, your intentions will always be pure-hearted and good. And it shouldn't be seen in a way that you're purposefully misleading them or purposefully changing the culture in a way for your benefit. (conversational interview, September 27, 2024)

The concepts of inclusivity and adapting one's teaching to meet the needs of students were also key points of discussion with a number of participants. Veronica asserts that educators need to approach cultural music traditions with a sense of humility:

[I]t . . . takes humility to know that you are not the expert by far. And there will always be people who not only know more than you, but understand it better than you. Because it's culturally tied. The music is culturally tied to something, and that cultural tie is the part that is probably the most difficult to understand when you're not part of that culture. But I think, through music, there is a lot of understanding that comes with that. And so that's why I think that the research part is really important too, to not just know the music, but to understand [and] to research the culture as well. . . . Visiting the country where the music originates from, playing in a group that plays that music. All those things are important parts of creating a better, more well-rounded understanding of different music genres. (conversational interview, July 9, 2024)

Darbin spoke about his own teaching philosophy that allowed him to assess his progress in truly acknowledging and teaching directly to the students in his choral program from year to year, generation to generation:

Teach who is in front of you. So, whoever is sitting in front of you on any given day, that's who you have to communicate with. That's who you have to learn from and teach to, and bring from wherever they are to wherever you envision them to be. And then, reflecting on who is in front of you, [ask] the questions: Are you honoring? Are they being seen in the choices that you make? And if they're not,

then [come] up with a plan. And then [be] honest with them about those choices.

(conversational interview, June 13, 2024)

As a Music Learning and Teaching student taking part in the ASU Mariachi program, Vincent provides perspective that sums his ideas of inclusivity and responsiveness in a succinct way:

I think at the end of the day, it comes down to intention. Are your students aware of your true intentions? Do you show them that you care? Do you show them that you're there for them? I think you have to realize what's important to you. And at the end of the day, I think no matter what, you're going to realize that what's important are those who you care about. For some, I guess it might be themselves. We have a word for those people. But I would say just show [your students] your intentions, do your research, [and] be genuine about it. (conversational interview, September 4, 2024)

The messages and perspectives that I received from the participants were both insightful and empowering for me. Their insights may also be useful to other music educators: Do your homework and be proactive in your learning; aim to understand the components of culture first, followed by the significance and nuances of the musical tradition. Address the students in front of you and meet them where they are. Be authentic in your intentions, and recognize who and what are most important in your teaching. Be open to constructive criticism and honest feedback, understanding that these insights can improve your teaching and enrich your relationships with students, their families, and the greater community. Realize that students bring a wealth of knowledge into the learning space. It is perfectly acceptable not to always be the expert in the room—sometimes,

admitting your shortcomings and providing an avenue for students to facilitate their learning, as well as your own, is the best approach.

Participants' Own Outsider/Insider Stories and Experiences

When I began my journey into mariachi performance and education, I initially saw myself as the sole outsider looking in. I didn't consider that some of my students, their families, and other community members might also have their own stories of feeling outside the cultures and communities that they were part of. However, through our conversational interviews, I gained valuable insight into these personal journeys, which deepened my understanding of the participants' backgrounds and histories.

Vincent

As mentioned earlier, Vincent grew up listening to mariachi music, largely due to his father, who frequently performed karaoke renditions of songs made famous by Vicente Fernandez. While he has fond memories of the music culture at home, it was disconnected from what he had learned through school music experiences, which were primarily focused on Western classical music in band, choir, and orchestra settings. When researching music schools for his postsecondary education, Vincent knew that he wanted mariachi to be a part of his collegiate experience. He cited the growing mariachi ensemble at Arizona State University as a major factor in his decision to enroll, allowing him to explore a genre of music that was a crucial component of his upbringing but that he did not get the chance to participate in early on.

While he had familiarity with mariachi prior to joining the ASU Mariachi, Vincent expressed mixed emotions of uncertainty, self-doubt, and work ethic when first joining the ensemble:

I consider myself new to it and I think it's very intimidating. . . . When I hear mariachi, like the people who are really experienced—whoa! And that might be because I value mariachi more than other genres. But ultimately, I've found that at the end of the day, it's not how long you've been in it, it's what you dedicate to it. (conversational interview, September 4, 2024)

However, it is through Vincent's involvement in mariachi that he has been able to develop a deeper connection with his father. He shares:

Every time I step on stage and if I have a [vocal] solo, my dad always tells me how proud he is of me. . . . I've seen it in his eyes, he's proud of me, and I think he knows that, like, I don't do it only for him because, obviously, I love it for myself, right? . . . But to me, it's like I'm proud of where I come from. And because my dad is known for his voice in our family, I feel like I get to keep that legacy going. . . . It definitely has strengthened my relationship with my dad. (conversational interview, September 4, 2024)

Further, mariachi has become an outlet of expression for Vincent and has inspired him to navigate his future career as a music educator. He states, "I feel like mariachi expresses [things] so perfectly. Like when there's, like, the macho moments, right? And then when there's sad moments and everything in between. But I'd never experienced that until here" (conversational interview, September 4, 2024). Throughout our time together, Vincent has articulated his desire to become a mariachi educator, bringing cultural music opportunities back to the community which supported his musical growth and development. Within his church parish, he has established a mariachi club that has

grown over the past year; through this venture, he has gained insight on teaching and also experienced validation for the work he has done:

You helped me a lot with the mariachi club that we started up in my parish and the people there are very appreciative. And to me, it's . . . rewarding. I haven't done anywhere near to what you did for your students, but, for me, . . . I have little girls who are wanting to learn and that's great [that] they get to learn. . . . And then I have this lady, I think she's in her 70s, and she's learning guitar. . . . [F]or me, it's been very rewarding, like, to be able to share that with them. . . . [W]hen it comes to me teaching [mariachi], the little that I know, I love to teach it. And those who do want to [learn], accept it in such a way that they're so excited about it that you don't feel [like] an outsider. . . . I feel empowered because I'm empowering others. (conversational interview, September 4, 2024).

While Vincent does not believe in labeling individuals as outsiders or insiders, he feels a strong sense of acceptance within the mariachi musical community, which has allowed him to grow as both a musician and educator, better preparing him to serve his community and future students.

Sammy

Sammy grew up in a home that blended cultures and backgrounds, identifying with traditions from both her white and Mexican American heritages. She enjoyed listening to mariachi music alongside her dad and also fondly remembers the traditions that she carried with her paternal grandmother, who lived with Sammy's family during the final years of her life. While Sammy feels confident and comfortable in her identity as a young adult today, she voiced that it was not always that way.

Sammy's academic environments varied as she navigated her K-12 education. In her early school years, she felt cautious about fully sharing or embracing her identity as Mexican American:

I went to a predominantly white elementary school . . . so being diverse, I guess, or being different than what the normal kid was, I guess, in elementary school was very weird. And being somebody who's shy and already kind of didn't fit in, I kind of just didn't want to acknowledge that part at all. I was like, "Well, I just want to be like everyone else, so I'm just going to ignore that and not talk about it ever because it'll make me seem more normal." (conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

As she enrolled in predominantly Hispanic middle and high school institutions, Sammy began to realize that her Mexican American identity was something to celebrate rather than hide:

[W]hen I was little, I felt ashamed [of my Mexican American heritage], I think. . . . I wish I hadn't been so ashamed and I think it would have helped my experience now. Being older, [I realize] that it's not something to be embarrassed about. (conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

However, she recalls how she encountered challenges being seen and accepted in the Hispanic social circles within middle school and high school:

I think, at first, it was really difficult to feel like I belonged all the way in [the community] because, I mean, I'm very white passing. I don't necessarily look Hispanic. . . . [W]hen I speak Spanish and things like that, people can see it. But

when they look at me at first, they're confused. (conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

Entering the mariachi classroom at Marcos de Niza, Sammy was joined by students who came from a different middle school and did not know her yet. She remembers feeling conflicted and questioned her belonging:

I think [being white passing] impacted . . . my mariachi experience at first because I was like, "Oh, I'm not Mexican enough for this" or "people are going to think that I don't know what I'm doing because I look white" and things like that. (conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

She mentioned that she would find herself code switching in her identity at times, depending on the environment that she was navigating:

[E]specially at the beginning, [I felt like] I needed to act way more Hispanic for people to accept and understand. . . . When I look back now, that's kind of silly of me to think, but I think back then it was very, like, I need to act a certain way [around the mariachi kids] and then around other people I need to not act that way. [It's] like I have to have a mariachi persona, and then everywhere else, I just don't have that. But, definitely now, it's like they're the same thing. There is no difference. [T]he experience you have in mariachi, at least my experience, has changed from having to feel like I need to switch back and forth to just being who I am and, like, combining both parts together to be one. (conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

As Sammy has become in tune with her identity and has gained more experience in mariachi performance, she has been able to form her own beliefs of what it means to be Mexican American:

I think, over time, I learned more at least what it meant to me to be Mexican and to be okay with that part of not being “all the way” Mexican, but being Mexican enough for it. People aren’t judging as much as you think they are about that. . . . There are definitely people who are . . . surprised when they see . . . people that they’re [not] expecting to see, I guess. And I think that was hard to let go of at first, but I think it’s definitely not something I’m worried about [now]. I feel like I belong in the community and I feel like I’m taken seriously in how I play my instrument . . . and that I know what I’m doing. (conversational interview, June 19, 2024)

For Sammy, the journey to acceptance has been both external and internal, allowing herself to develop a sense of belonging and realizing that she brings knowledge and talent to the mariachi music community.

Ann

Sammy’s mother, Ann, grew up in what she describes as a “very white” family in a community that did not reflect Hispanic or Mexican American culture. However, through a church mission, she traveled to Panama, became fluent in Spanish, and gained a deeper understanding of Latinx/Hispanic culture. Ann’s specific connection to Mexican culture and mariachi music developed through her husband’s Mexican heritage; it was during the earlier years that her mother-in-law lived with them and helped care for Ann’s young children.

Ann discussed the journey of finding acceptance from her mother-in-law as someone from outside Mexican culture trying to find a sense of belonging:

I think I had a little bit of a leg up [on you] . . . because I spoke Spanish already. I was fluent and I had that experience in Panama, and I think that helped my mother-in-law to accept me a little bit. Just a hint, like not all the way. I mean, she was always very critical and not my biggest fan until the very end. [It was then that] I'd won her over. But yeah, I [lived and] was in that middle space a lot.

(conversational interview, June 20, 2024)

It was through cooking and food that Ann was able to connect with Sammy's grandmother, sharing traditional Mexican recipes and learning about the cultural significance of different dishes. Ann shares:

I can make tamales and do pretty much anything that she could do. She taught me how to do all of those things and that's how we connected. So, I get the middle, being kind of in the middle of it all. Not really accepted all the way, but I tried.

(conversational interview, June 20, 2024)

While Ann was not fond of mariachi music when Sammy first began performing it, she grew to love the genre and the Mexican culture that it celebrates. As she reflects, she realizes that she loves the culture and everything that she has learned along the way; she feels a strong connection to Hispanic/Latinx cultures through her experiences in Panama, cooking alongside her mother-in-law, and bond with her children. She states:

Interesting enough, once Sammy started with the mariachi, I didn't feel so much outside the culture anymore. And I don't know why I feel that way. And maybe I should feel more outside of the culture, you know? Sometimes I forget because I

speaking Spanish, I'm fluent, and because it's been a part of my life for so long, sometimes I forget that I'm white. . . . But, Sammy will remind me sometimes, right? (conversational interview, June 20, 2024)

Toby

Growing up in Arizona, Toby remembered the traditions his parents brought from their upbringings in New Mexico, which his family continued to observe during his childhood. In his younger years, recalls being very connected to these Mexican cultural traditions; however, he also shared that the connection to his family's Mexican roots faded as he got older. As mentioned in his introduction, Toby is not sure where this disconnect came from or why it happened, but he became aware of it in middle school when listening to his friends talk about their home lives and realizing that his home was "more typical of the white American household more than it [was] of the Hispanic heritage household" (conversational interview, September 27, 2024).

For Toby, mariachi was a way for him to rebuild his connection to Mexican culture and heritage. He shares:

[M]ariachi was a definite part of the rebalancing. . . . It helped me build back the connection that I thought I had to this culture. But then, during a good period there, during the middle teenage years, I definitely felt apart from the culture and I shouldn't even be a part of it. But mariachi was something that drew [me] back to it and helped me rebuild that connection and feel like I was a part of this.

(conversational interview, September 27, 2024)

Throughout our conversation, Toby's perspective of his upbringing reminded me of the research that I had read about "the space between" and Banks' classification of

indigenous-outsider as someone who was a part of their indigenous community or culture, but through cultural assimilation, has become a member of an outside culture, adopting the values, beliefs, and knowledge of the latter. Toby provided insight during our time together:

I guess that's really how I would define the experience a lot based [on] those terminologies. At the early ages of my childhood, I really felt [like] an insider into the culture. Though, as I grew up and recognized the differences, I was in that space between because I had the skin tone to prove that I was a part of the culture and the knowledge of my background, though it was the lack of practice that made me feel like I wasn't fully an insider. (conversational interview, September 27, 2024)

Skye

Skye grew up in a household closely connected to Mexican culture and traditions, primarily through her mom's side of the family. As mentioned earlier, her memories of holidays and family gatherings center around food and a tight-knit family circle. She recalls making tamales and setting up the ofrenda, or altar, for Día de los Muertos, an observance to remember and celebrate loved ones who have passed on, allowing their spirits to return. Her mother, Lupe, has played a crucial role in her understanding and observance of Mexican culture and tradition.

While she was exposed to Mexican culture at home, the schools that Skye attended did not offer programming that incorporated mariachi and other elements of Mexican heritage. It was in middle school that Skye joined the orchestra, focusing her musical aspirations on the viola. Through her experiences in both school orchestras and

private lessons, she honed her skills and excelled as a violist in the classical tradition, performing recitals and auditioning for honor ensembles. She recalled one of her friends wanting to start a mariachi ensemble at their high school, but there was not enough interest from others for the idea to gain momentum.

Enrolling at Arizona State University to focus on a discipline outside of music, Skye was committed to continuing her participation in music, an activity and creative outlet that was a tremendous part of her life. As my former private viola student and learning that I was taking over direction of the ASU Mariachi, she was excited to take part and began performing in the ensemble on violin. Discussing her initial experience, she shares:

I still remember when we played in the little room in [the music building]. And definitely, like, a memory that I think about a lot when I think about the ASU Mariachi is, like, the first notes that we played. . . . I had seen mariachi groups, but I had never been a part of [one], and it's like the sound just consumes you when you're in the middle of it. (conversational interview, September 24, 2024)

For Skye, mariachi has been very different from the classical music that she was used to playing for the prior six years. She cites the liveliness of mariachi music and how her experiences participating in the ASU Mariachi and Mariachi Nueva Fusión, a community-based professional mariachi ensemble made up of ASU Mariachi members, have differed from her engagement with orchestral ensembles:

The music is just . . . super lively, and so it gets people in a good mood. And I feel like I've seen a clear connection, like people's moods are pretty uplifted by the music and . . . it was like a party. . . . [E]specially gigging in mariachi also, that's

a different type of performance of it. . . . [With classical music,] you never really get people to, like, dance or the crowd isn't really that interactive. (conversational interview, September 24, 2024)

Skye also discussed how she feels a great cultural connection with mariachi music, alluding to something that might have been absent in her previous music-making experiences. She shares:

I play with . . . more expression in mariachi. I don't know, the music is so passionate that, like, you subconsciously move with it a little bit more [than classical]. . . . [T]here's just something about the culture that's connected to mariachi versus classical. I don't know, classical has this, like, feel of . . . like it's a bit more serious a lot of times. (conversational interview, September 24, 2024)

Usually reserved and soft-spoken, Skye described how the mariachi *traje*, the suit that musicians wear for performances, allows her to better embrace her cultural persona, reminding me of Clark Kent adorning his cape to become Superman:

I carry myself differently. . . . I feel like the mindset when I'm in concert black for a classical concert is different than the mindset of me in a *traje*. It feels like a different persona is taking over. . . . I have this mindset of, "Oh, I need to make people dance and, like, feel this music." And so when I put [the *traje*] on, I'm just ready to, like, play away. . . . I just feel that energy come in and then want to give it out when I perform for people. . . . I definitely feel the switch, like it's very prominent. I put the *traje* on and then I take it off and I'm, like, me again, but I'm like a different me than like the performance me.

Discussing her experiences further, I asked Skye if she feels seen as a more complete version of herself when participating in and performing mariachi music, asking her to expand on why this might be the case. She shared:

Yeah, I do, and a lot of it has to do with the people. They're just more outgoing in a way . . . I definitely feel more connected with the culture and I feel like . . . my Spanish has gotten way better just from being around people who speak it a lot. . . . I definitely feel more in tune with the culture and just lucky to be a part of it because it's been such a new and, like, fulfilling experience. . . . It's just nice to be a part of that kind of community. (Skye, September 24, 2024)

Through her participation in mariachi, Skye has strengthened her connection to the cultural traditions that are important to her family, bridging her home culture with her formal music-making experiences.

Lupe

Lupe, Skye's mother, is the child of a bicultural household; her father is Puerto Rican while her mother identifies as Mexican. As mentioned in her introduction, Lupe was a child of the 1980s and was classified as an English Language Learner (ELL) while a student in elementary school. Reflecting back, she recognizes that her mother was on a journey of transition and assimilating to American culture, and wanted to make sure that Lupe was able to fit into the culture of the majority. She recalls that even though her mother grew up celebrating Día de los Muertos, they did not practice or acknowledge it during Lupe's childhood:

My mom thought it was too much and it could be a little too mystical for people on the outside. . . . So that wasn't something that I was raised with. I wasn't raised

with that acknowledgement of my ancestors. I was more encouraged to assimilate and try not to stand out. (conversational interview, September 28, 2024)

However, as she grew up and became a mother herself, Lupe felt that it was important to celebrate her Mexican heritage, encouraging her daughters to take part in the celebrations and traditions. “I decided I wanted to bring that back because I love the symbolism behind it. I love that, in my head, I love that I can build something in honor of my ancestors and loved ones, and maybe in spirit they come back” (conversational interview, September 28, 2024).

As a dual language teacher in a public elementary school, Lupe has made a point to celebrate the cultural backgrounds of the students in her classroom, encouraging their families to get involved in recognizing traditions and celebrations from their different countries and communities of heritage. She recalls seeing a TikTok video that made her reflect on her reasons for becoming a teacher:

[I]t was a Mexican teacher celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month, and [she] was . . . talking about why she went back into education, because she wanted to see somebody like her in the classroom. And it got me thinking. I’ve never had a Hispanic teacher growing up. All my life, I never had a Hispanic teacher. And so I started thinking, “Wow, I never thought [about] it from that perspective. I want to go into education because I wanted . . . to help children that didn’t have the best start in life. That’s where my journey through Title 1 started. I wanted to go back and support them. (conversational interview, September 28, 2024)

For Lupe, being a teacher is a way to pay it forward and an avenue to allow her students to express themselves while celebrating who they are and where their families come

from. She feels fortunate that the parents and families of her students have been supportive of this approach, assisting her in making cultural connections through food, projects, art, music, and festivities within the classroom. She states, “You never know who has an experience that can help support your lesson and support your understanding” (conversational interview, September 28, 2024).

Chapter Summary

Throughout the processes of data generation and analysis, I identified overarching themes and ideas presented by the participants in our conversational interviews. In this chapter, I shared the voices of the participants alongside my own perspectives on my journey into mariachi and navigating acceptance within the mariachi music community. In addition to reflecting on my own journey, I also gained a deeper understanding of the participants' viewpoints, including insight into their own experiences of navigating outsider/ insider contexts and settings.

To be honest, I expected more criticism and negative sentiments than I encountered in the conversational interviews with participants and their optional follow-up video/written journal testimonials. Maybe it was the way in which I approached and prepared to begin my journey in the mariachi classroom? Perhaps it had to do with the prior relationships that I had established through other music ensembles and avenues? Maybe it was the way in which I communicated with others and was open to being vulnerable about my doubts and shortcomings? Or were they worried about saying anything negative to me?

These questions prompted me to reflect on my ongoing struggle to understand my own positionality and the potential power dynamics present as a White music educator

engaging with students, parents, and community members who predominantly identify as Latinx or Hispanic. Although I remain conscious of my positionality, I have consistently worked to present myself as someone who is trustworthy, open, and affirming. While participants validated these aspects of my personality and approach, I continue to wonder whether there were thoughts or experiences that they chose not to share. Even with the opportunity to record a video diary or journal without my presence, some participants may have withheld certain perspectives in order to protect my feelings or to avoid conflict, given my concurrent roles as the educator being studied and the researcher navigating the inquiry. Even so, I remain aware that this community places value on general respect for teachers and, with a reluctance to contradict this respect, I might still not have heard each participant's honest opinions.

In Chapter Six, I explore these themes and findings in relation to the existing literature, illustrating how the participants' perspectives align with and validate scholarly research on these topics. Additionally, I offer recommendations for music educators and provide insight and recommendations for future research and inquiry, concluding with final reflections on the study.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter discusses the emerging themes in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. I also offer recommendations for music educators and suggestions for future research in the field of music education. To conclude, I reflect on my personal journey into mariachi, urging readers to step outside their comfort zones and challenge the boundaries we often set in music education, fostering deeper connections with our students in meaningful ways.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this self-study was to examine the evolution of my journey in understanding student and community cultural backgrounds through experiences as a music educator learning to teach and perform mariachi, both within and outside of the classroom. Through my personal narrative and reflections as a researcher co-participant, along with insights and recollections from interviews and conversations with those close to me—colleagues, former and current students, students’ parents, and community members—I sought to understand the continuous development and reshaping of my role and sense of belonging, from beginning as a cultural outsider to becoming a resident of “the space between” (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Trulsson & Burnard, 2016) and ultimately an accepted member of the mariachi music community.

Since this inquiry focused on the journey to acceptance and belonging within a culture and musical community distinct from that of my own heritage, my literature review examined definitions of culture and societal perspectives on culture, particularly in relation to mariachi and music education. In addition to describing various definitions

of culture, I explored how culture is situated in various contexts: Family and Home as Culture, Gender as Culture, Music as Culture, Conflict Between Home and School Musical Cultures, and Liminal Spaces and Cultural Straddling. I also provided a historical overview of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy, two pedagogical frameworks that support educators in addressing students' home cultures within the school learning space. Finally, I discussed how these frameworks have been advanced by contemporaries of Ladson-Billings and Gay to better address the needs of today's students and guide music education practices.

Drawing on the framework of outsider/insider research and “the space between” (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007), I chose self-study as the methodology to guide my inquiry. The interactive, hands-on nature of self-study made it the ideal approach for this research, allowing me to reflect on and refine my practice, while also providing a space to articulate my insights and analyze pivotal moments of discovery and growth in my journey from cultural outsider to navigating “the space between.” By comparing the perspectives of the participants with my own, I gained a more comprehensive and informed understanding of my development as a mariachi educator and my journey toward acceptance within the mariachi music community. Through this research, I aim to inspire others to take similar actions in their communities by connecting with and engaging in musical traditions and cultures that are meaningful to their students, families, and educational settings.

Discussion of Emerging Themes and Findings in Relation to Literature

When analyzing the data generated by the participants through conversational interviews, video/written journals, and my own self-reflections and journaling as a co-

participant, five recurring themes emerged. The analysis of these themes shaped the findings of this self-study, providing deeper insight into my journey from cultural outsider to “the space between” relative to the mariachi music community. In this section, I discuss each theme and corresponding findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, as well as additional resources that support these results.

Views of a Cultural Outsider Teaching Mariachi

Throughout our conversational interviews, many of the participants mentioned that, while it was clear that I was initially an outsider to mariachi music and the culture from which it emerged, I was always honest and authentic in my intentions and interactions. Freire (1998) asserts that individuals, both educators and students, are continuously developing their identities based on what they already know about themselves and what they are learning. He shares, “In truth, we are neither only what we inherit nor only what we acquire but, instead, stem from the dynamic relationship between what we inherit and what we acquire” (Freire, 1998, p. 69). Others spoke about how they noticed that I had put in the effort and work to gain a well-informed understanding of the culture, history, and stylistic nuances surrounding mariachi music. The desire and commitment to learn from students’ cultures is what Ladson-Billings (1995) refers to as cultural competence; she asserts that “[c]ulturally relevant teachers utilize students’ culture as vehicle for learning” (p. 161) for both educators and students. Further, culturally responsive teaching requires that educators have explicit knowledge about cultural diversity in order to meet the needs of students from ethnically diverse backgrounds, including understanding the characteristics and contributions of ethnic groups represented within the academic space (Gay, 2002).

Despite actively participating in professional development opportunities and working to expand my understanding of mariachi music and its cultural and historical contexts, I often struggled with feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. However, most participants provided positive feedback regarding my role as a cultural outsider teaching and facilitating mariachi ensemble programs, acknowledging that they noticed and understood the steps that I was taking in order to provide a worthwhile educational and musical experience for students. In the conversational interviews, the participants expressed that my feelings of doubt and imposter syndrome were normal and expected, given that I was putting in the effort to connect with and understand aspects of a culture in which I had limited experience. If these thoughts were not present, perhaps it would have been a sign that I was not doing the necessary work to expand my knowledge and grow as a music educator. Gay (2010) emphasizes the importance of educators “building bridges of meaningfulness” (p. 31) to connect students’ lived experiences between school and home; perhaps, despite my own struggles to fully acknowledge or embrace my effort, the participants saw this as a strong demonstration of this bridge-building.

Vincent, one of the student participants who met me at Arizona State University six years into my journey, expressed frustration with my labelling myself as an outsider. He felt that I had done the work and advocated for the inclusion of mariachi in K-12 public schools and postsecondary institutions, earning a place at the table in the mariachi music community. As I refer back to Banks (1998), it is clear that Vincent viewed me as an *external-insider*, or someone who was initially outside of a cultural group but, through distinctive experiences, has found a home and embraced the values of the community that they have studied; in a sense, they become an “adopted insider” (Banks, 1998, p. 8).

While it felt reassuring to hear Vincent's sentiments and have his support at the time of this study, in the beginning of my mariachi journey, I saw myself as the outsider that Merton (1972) describes: neutral and unfamiliar, and viewing things from a "bird's-eye view" (Simmel & Wolff, 1950, p. 405).

In addition, Argos, another student, pointed out early outreach experiences that might have been misunderstood by those on the outside looking into our program at Marcos de Niza. She specifically spoke about times during some of our first community gigs and performances when audience members or event organizers would engage with me, the white music teacher, instead of our student musicians who possessed first-hand cultural knowledge. While Argos did not feel offended by these moments, Abril and Kelly-McHale (2016) reference both the work of Gay (2002) and Ladson-Billings (1995), providing insight into the experiences of students alongside our own journeys as educators:

Gay (2002) described culturally responsive pedagogy as using the experiences and referents of students to build understanding and knowledge. As such, the culture, language, and perspectives of students are privileged and not viewed as something that needs to be overcome. Ladson-Billing's [*sic*] emphasis on critical theory in the development of classrooms that demand high academic achievement adds a dimension to the conversation that opens the door to the discovery of the ill effects of uneven power structures on the achievement of underserved students.

(Abril & Kelly-McHale, 2016, p. 250)

Argos' perspective prompted me to reflect on how even small moments, such as an interaction after a performance, could reinforce norms or assumptions, potentially

influencing how those outside of our mariachi community might perceive me and the students in ways that were not intended. While I was the facilitator and director of the ensemble, I wanted the students to feel engaged and empowered to speak about *their* ensemble and *their* experiences in the mariachi program.

My Teaching Approach

In our conversations, the participants identified a number of elements within my teaching approach in the mariachi learning space that contributed to a successful experience and allowed all parties to feel comfortable and empowered to take part. These effective components included the creation of a supportive learning environment and the inclusion of students' voices and perspectives. They also appreciated my willingness to admit my mistakes, weaknesses, and shortcomings, my demonstration of respect for mariachi music and culture, and my passion to deepen my knowledge of mariachi music and history. As I reflected back on these findings and the viewpoints of the participants, I came to realize that much of my approach has often aligned with the frameworks and values of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching.

Darbin, my choral colleague at Marcos de Niza High School, pointed out that I worked diligently to create a space that was both welcoming and affirming—one where students could feel valued and accepted, acknowledging their individual levels of musical skill and the experiences, both musical and cultural, that they brought to the table. From that foundation, we worked together to build a fledgling ensemble that held all participants to a growing standard, helping all of us, myself included, to reach a higher level of understanding and knowledge of mariachi music and culture. Gay (2002) asserts that part of culturally responsive teaching is developing community among diverse

learners in our academic spaces. Placing emphasis on shared community development and progress, she states:

Many students of color grow up in cultural environments where the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual and where individuals are taught to pool their resources to solve problems. It is not that individuals and their needs are neglected; they are addressed within the context of group functioning. When the group succeeds or falters, so do its individual members. As a result, the group functions somewhat like a “mutual aid society” in which all members are responsible for helping each other perform and ensuring that everyone contributes to the collective task. (Gay, 2002, p. 110)

By working in tandem, both educators and students can create an environment that is inclusive and also holds all participants to a high standard of accountability and academic achievement.

The incorporation of students’ cultural knowledge, perspectives, and viewpoints has played a prominent role in my approach to teaching mariachi in the academic setting. Researchers acknowledge that students’ prior experiences and knowledge are a valuable resource in creating successful learning communities that center around cultural music traditions (Lum, 2007; Soto, 2012, 2015; Teicher, 1995). Soto (2015) shares:

It is evident that Mexican American communities are encouraging children to develop their ethnic identities through knowledge of their heritage, language, and culture, including musical practices. The research suggests that these children are entering the music classroom with musical skills and knowledge that may not be acknowledged or valued within the mainstream culture, or that may not be related

to the music that is taught in the common curriculum for general music, concert band, choir, and/or orchestra.” (p. 640)

Recognizing the knowledge and skills that the students brought to the academic space, I was able to incorporate their understanding and perspectives into the curriculum (e.g., repertoire, stylistic interpretation, language, and cultural significance/meaning). When I first started my journey, I chose repertoire that was familiar to me from my limited exposure to mariachi, such as *Cielito Lindo* and *De Colores*. However, as I grew more acquainted with mariachi techniques and resources, I was able to expand my expertise and knowledge of repertoire. This allowed me to select songs that were not only suitable for the age and skill levels of my students but also better highlighted cultural significance and meaning. As the participants pointed out, I treated the mariachi space as a two-way street of learning and teaching, acknowledging that I was learning alongside the students in the further development of the mariachi programs at both Marcos de Niza High School and Arizona State University. Ladson-Billings (1995) writes that the inclusion of students’ ways of interacting, their languages, and cultural traditions and customs (e.g., food, observances, and music) can act as an avenue and resource for learning, bridging the gap that exists between home and school environments.

The participants also highlighted my commitment to deepening my understanding and respect for mariachi practice and culture, while demonstrating a willingness to acknowledge my shortcomings and mistakes in order to grow as an educator and facilitator. Gay (2002) and Ladson-Billings (1995), along with their contemporaries, emphasize the importance of educators actively developing and expanding their

knowledge of students' home cultures and finding ways to relate them to the academic setting. Gay (2002) asserts:

The knowledge that teachers need to have about cultural diversity goes beyond mere awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in various ways. . . .

[Teachers need to acquire] more knowledge about the contributions of different ethnic groups to a wide variety of disciplines and a deeper understanding of multicultural education theory, research, and scholarship. (p. 107)

Multiple participants mentioned the professional development conferences and workshops I attended over the years. They recalled me approaching mariachi as an individual still learning and growing—someone willing to acknowledge mistakes and errors. From these missteps, I learned valuable lessons about my development as a mariachi educator, regularly seeking the guidance of others with extensive experience in mariachi performance and pedagogy. At times, I felt unfit and deficient. Perhaps these feelings were tied to the introduction to mariachi later in my career or the constant second-guessing of my decisions because I feared offending families or being perceived in a negative light? It was through these feelings and experiences that I was able to demonstrate to my students that we should all strive to be lifelong learners.

My learning extended far beyond gaining familiarity with mariachi music or understanding how to teach it in an academic setting. As I described in my reflections in Chapter Five, my journey through mariachi also deepened my understanding of language, customs, traditions, food, and family dynamics. Participating in community events in Guadalupe, sharing in familial culinary traditions, and attending significant milestones in

students' lives, such as quinceañeras, offered profound insight into the vital role that family and cultural traditions play in the lives of those who I engage with on a daily basis. Through these experiences, I came to understand that invitations to community and familial events were not automatic or to be taken for granted, but rather an honor and a meaningful sign of acceptance. Being included in these significant and celebratory moments allowed me to form stronger connections with students, their families, and the broader community. Such engagement proved essential in deepening my cultural competence and enhancing my role as an educator within the community. Through these moments, I discovered that some of the most powerful learning often happens outside of the academic space, in the shared spaces of life and tradition.

Culturally responsive caring is a key component of a culturally responsive teaching approach, positioning “teachers in an ethical, emotional, and academic partnership with ethnically diverse students, a partnership that is anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the possibility of transcendence” (Gay, 2000, p. 52). By my diving in, being willing to take risks and make mistakes, and consistently striving to learn, the participants in this study recognized that my intentions were authentic, honest, and respectful. They understood that I was committed to creating a learning environment that acknowledged and celebrated a cultural music tradition that was, and continues to be, an essential element in students' lives and identities. Similarly, McKoy and Lind (2023) state, “Teachers who exhibit [culturally responsive caring] are persistent; they continually look for ways to connect with their students. They recognize and value individual differences and work to find multiple ways of working with students” (p. 73).

Connection with the Surrounding Community and Mariachi Music Community

The development of connections to both the community in which I taught and the mariachi music community was a recurrent topic in the conversational interviews with the participants, as well as in my own reflections. The participants who knew me before the mariachi program began at Marcos de Niza High School recalled my continuous efforts to build relationships both on and off campus, even before mariachi was a consideration. Darbin remembered, “You were constantly reaching out to connect with [whoever] was in your world. . . . And I think you still do that today, . . . reaching out into the universe and making as many contacts as humanly possible” (conversational interview, June 13, 2024).

Several participants recalled the disclaimer that I often provide at the beginning of performances, acknowledging my identity as a cultural outsider while also expressing my passion for learning and my desire to provide opportunities for students and the communities that they live in. They believe that this honesty and candor has allowed the community to see me as someone who is genuinely interested in embracing the needs and desires of those around me. I knew that in order for the programs at Marcos de Niza High School and Arizona State University to be successful, the support of the community was vital. Examining families of color or immigrant descent, McKoy and Lind (2023) assert:

Drawing upon rich histories and cultural traditions, we see a reflection of the values we often promote in schools such as strong work ethics and complex problem-solving. . . . [F]amilies and communities reflect rich and vibrant music traditions. We will be better situated to provide for the needs of our students if we

recognize and capitalize on the strengths of their families and community members. (p. 82)

Participants in this study also recognized that my willingness to listen to the voices of students, families, and community members played a key role in fostering trust and building relationships that encouraged open dialogue and communication. The incorporation of these individuals' perspectives and ideas created a space where they felt seen and validated for the knowledge and experiences that they brought to the table, empowering them to contribute meaningfully in a setting that is often viewed as gate-kept and unwelcoming to those who are unfamiliar with academic institutions (McKoy & Lind, 2023; Sheehy, 2008).

When my principal first approached me about starting a mariachi program at Marcos de Niza High School, I had concerns about teaching such a culturally rich musical tradition and how it would be received by both the school and the community. However, in my discussions with study participants, the support from administrators, the fine arts department faculty members, and the students in elevating mariachi to the same academic standing as our other music ensembles played a crucial role in its success on campus and connection with the community. Argos, one of the mariachi students at Marcos de Niza, specifically mentioned that the mariachi program allowed the community to see that there was a space within the academic institution where mariachi could be studied and celebrated, providing an avenue for students to express themselves artistically through music strongly tied to their home culture. Colley (2009) supports this notion when asserting, "If music making is to thrive in learning environments and *music* itself is to be valued as a school subject, the music education community would do well

to expand its definition of *music ensembles* in teacher education programs” (p. 57, emphases in original). Further, Argos noticed that the development of our mariachi program fostered a deeper connection between our school and the community around us. Researchers have discussed how the inclusion of mariachi as well as other cultural music ensembles and offerings can enrich school music programs as well as empower the voices of students, parents, and stakeholders in traditionally underrepresented and marginalized communities (Colley, 2009; Escalante, 2019; Regus, 2025; Sheehy, 2008; Soto, 2015, 2018).

Acceptance, Growth, and Next Steps

As mentioned in the findings of this study, the connections I developed with my students, their families, and the surrounding community enabled me to gain acceptance as a mariachi educator, despite initially being an outsider to the genre and culture. The participants spoke about the growth and development that they witnessed in relation to my confidence and knowledge of mariachi music and pedagogy. Along with acceptance from those around me, they also spoke about how I better embraced myself as a facilitator and practitioner, becoming part of the mariachi music community in a more invested manner, one where I saw myself as a contributing member.

The conversational interviews reflect the evolution of my identity from a cultural outsider to someone inhabiting "the space between" (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Trulsson & Burnard, 2016). Individuals in “the space between,” also referred to as *external-insiders* (Banks, 1998), work to deepen their understanding of a new culture or community, gaining insight into the value systems of the group with which they are interacting. While those who inhabit “the space between” and *external-insiders* may not

be native to the culture or community with which they interact, they earn membership within the group, often being recognized as adopted members.

In addressing the next steps for furthering my journey, the participants highlighted that I continue to explore and deepen my knowledge and understanding of mariachi music and cultural traditions. Both Veronica and Miguel emphasized the importance of gaining experience in the mariachi gigging scene, enabling me to lead by example and truly “walk the walk” of professional mariachi musicians. These thoughts align with Clandinin and Connelly (2000), who suggest that our positioning within a community shifts as our skills and knowledge develop. Furthermore, Dwyer and Buckle (2009), along with Serrant-Green (2002), acknowledge that identity is fluid and evolves in relation to the participants, community, and culture with which one engages.

Participants’ Suggestions for Music Educators Facilitating a Cultural Music Tradition Outside of Their Own Heritage

During our conversational interviews, I asked the participants for suggestions on how music educators can approach teaching and facilitating cultural music traditions outside of their own heritages and backgrounds. I received a plethora of ideas, including researching the culture that surrounds the tradition, engaging with culture bearers and community stakeholders, learning how the cultural music is traditionally taught, recognizing stylistic nuances, and demonstrating humility and a willingness to learn from students who bring a deep wealth of knowledge to the music learning space.

The participants’ suggestions that focused on an educator’s knowledge of culture, pedagogical understanding, and engagement with culture bearers and community stakeholders align with the frameworks developed by Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay

(2000, 2002), and further expanded by scholars such as Paris (2012), Paris and Alim (2016), and McKoy and Lind (2023). Both Elle and Sammy, two students that participated in mariachi at both Marcos de Niza and ASU, discussed the importance of understanding the culture and its significance for families and communities, as well as how the music is traditionally taught and passed down. In her discussion of cultural competence, Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that incorporating students' cultures into the curriculum can serve as “a vehicle for learning” (p. 161) while also strongly encouraging the building relationships with parents, community members, and culture bearers who may assist in teaching. This approach allows students to learn from those with first-hand knowledge and helps to validate and expand the cultural knowledge that they bring to the classroom. Supporting Ladson-Billings’ ideas specifically in music education, McKoy and Lind (2023) assert:

Music educators may be the experts in the music they have been trained to understand and perform, but both their students and the culture bearers/cultural informants in the communities in which they will teach may be the experts in other forms of musical expression, and music teachers should be encouraged to seek out the resources they need to “fill in the gaps” where their own knowledge might be insufficient. (pp. 34-35)

Lupe, a community member and dual language educator, echoed these sentiments and noted that parents and community members are frequently our biggest cheerleaders and supporters as teachers; the voices of many stakeholders bring a variety of perspectives that we cannot provide alone.

Building on ideas presented in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies, McKoy and Lind (2023) state, “Developing cultural competence requires that we get to know more about the culture of our students, learn about their worldview, and work to better understand their expectations for schooling” (p. 33). By continually expanding our knowledge of others’ cultures and their musical experiences at home and in the communities in which they live, we are better equipped to address the needs and musical passions of all students (Gay, 2018; Howard, 2020; Lynch, 2011; McKoy & Lind, 2023). Gay (2002) positions students and teachers in a partnership that fosters mutual learning and academic success, creating a classroom environment that engages all members of the teaching and learning community. Reflecting on the two-way street approach I have taken in my own teaching, I can see that I have made an effort to align with these recommendations and encourage others to proceed similarly. However, because of my position as an authority figure in the learning environment, I need to keep checking that I maintain clear communication in both directions of this two-way street.

Expanding on the idea of partnerships, the participants emphasized the importance of building trusting relationships with students, their families, and the surrounding community. Toby, Darbin, and Vincent all discussed a teacher's intentions and the efforts taken to honor the cultures of the students with whom they work. Reflective of *culturally responsive caring*, researchers have expressed that this kind of caring should be persistent: “[Teachers] continually look for ways to connect with their students. They recognize and value individual differences and work to find multiple ways of working with students” (McKoy & Lind, 2023, p. 73; see also Gay, 2002, 2018). Specifically in music education, teachers often have the opportunity to work with

students over a number of years, allowing them “to develop deeper relationships with their students” while also fostering “culturally affirming perspectives” (McKoy & Lind, 2023, p. 73). As we honor cultural music experiences in relevant, responsive, and sustaining ways, it is essential that educators are mindful of the students who share the learning space, providing meaningful experiences that recognize both traditional and evolving perspectives (Paris, 2012). Referring to Argos’ sentiments discussing my intentions as a teacher in conjunction with viewpoints of those from outside the program, educators need to understand that even small efforts and actions are often noticed by our pupils. These moments are an opportunity to demonstrate care for students and acknowledgement of their home cultures.

The participants recommended that teachers continue to pursue knowledge and understanding in developing their skills as an educator and facilitator. Nancy, a student in the ASU Mariachi, expressed that professional development and further research will not only benefit student learning and an educator’s teaching, but might also inspire different approaches and connections in the future. McKoy and Lind (2023) acknowledge that collegiate music and teacher education programs frequently place a large emphasis on the Western European classical tradition. However, they suggest:

Given that music-making and music education in some world macro- and micro-cultures do not necessarily occur in the kinds of institutional settings that are most frequently associated with formal music education in Western society, music teachers should be encouraged to consider that music learning can, and often does occur in many different instructional contexts. Music teachers can learn to become facilitators of their own as well as their students’ learning by identifying

opportunities to gain musical knowledge beyond the four walls of the music classroom. (p. 34)

The participants suggested that professional development and research in cultural music traditions should not be limited to institutionalized opportunities, but also include traveling, attending concerts and cultural events, and speaking with culture bearers and musicians who are able to provide insight, expertise, and guidance. Educators should seek out those around them who can assist and contribute cultural knowledge and understanding in a way that they cannot readily do so; working alongside Lucia, my Spanish language colleague at Marcos de Niza, allowed me to develop and become more confident with my skills in language comprehension as well as recognize important cultural connections within mariachi music.

Participants' Own Outsider/Insider Stories and Experiences

One unexpected theme that emerged from this study was the participants' own outsider/insider stories and experiences. Although this is a self-study, I found it valuable to include their experiences here, as they highlight that even those who are part of our journeys into "the space between" have their own moments of feeling like outsiders. Polanyi (1985) asserts that these storied experiences have significance and allow individuals to share their viewpoints and perspectives about the world around them. In support of Polanyi's sentiments, Chase (2003) suggests, "If we want to hear stories rather than reports then our task as interviewers is to invite others to tell their stories, to encourage them to take responsibility for the meaning of their talk" (p. 274).

A number of the participants' experiences centered around navigating "the space between" (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Trulsson & Burnard, 2016), albeit in different

ways. For Skye and Vincent, their strong ties to Mexican American familial culture were evident; they had been exposed to mariachi music through family gatherings and cultural observances. However, they never had the opportunity to engage with mariachi in an academic setting as musicians until attending Arizona State University, as their elementary and secondary schools did not offer such programming. Reflecting on Soto's work (2015, 2018), both Skye and Vincent were able to participate in school music programs, but they struggled to connect with their home or familial music cultures until joining the ASU Mariachi program. Connecting her own journey to those of students like Skye and Vincent, who are of a younger generation of Mexican American students, Soto (2015) shares:

Children who are of a different generation of Mexican Americans are trying to understand their own cultural identity and to assimilate within [and connect to] mainstream American culture. This can be done in many ways, but it is always done with music. People have the music of "home" and of "family," which represents their personal and ethnic identities. (p. 642)

Speaking with Sammy and Toby, both expressed feelings of uncertainty regarding acceptance due to their ethnic or racial identities. Sammy, who is half Mexican American and half white, often worried about not being "Mexican enough," feeling the need to adjust her identity depending on the environment she was in (conversational interview, June 19, 2024). Toby realized that his familial culture aligned more with that of Anglo-American families; although he identifies as fully Mexican American and outwardly appears to fit the part, he didn't feel the same connection to Mexican American culture or mariachi music as many of his classmates did. While Toby could not pinpoint exactly

when or why this happened, he voiced that his household did not celebrate Mexican American heritage or observe cultural traditions as others' did. Through these peer interactions, he came to understand that something was missing, and he wasn't as connected to the culture as he had once believed. Sammy and Toby's experiences echo Brewer's (2010) description of students navigating liminal spaces: "students' experiences depict the supposed dichotomies as fluid and in constant friction, creating a third, liminal space where the intersection and interaction of realities takes on new life" (p. 55). Through their involvement in mariachi, Sammy and Toby have found a sense of connection, enabling them to more fully understand and embrace their identities. This process has allowed them to feel immersed in the cultural music tradition, even though they may have initially felt somewhat detached and "outside."

Expressing similarities to my journey, Ann, Sammy's mom who identifies as white, was a cultural outsider who navigated to find a home in "the space between" within her own family and household. As mentioned in Chapter 4, she gained acceptance from her mother-in-law through her interest in and willingness to learn about Mexican culture, particularly through cuisine and cooking. Based on Banks' (1998) classifications, Ann can be seen as an *external-insider*, acknowledging her effort to learn about and embrace her mother-in-law's cultural traditions in order to better understand and appreciate her family's Mexican heritage on a deeper, personal level. Through these experiences, Ann gained a sense of inclusion, allowing her to assist her children in recognizing, connecting, and celebrating their cultural identities both at home and within broader familial contexts.

Lupe, a first-generation Mexican American, recalled navigating American culture alongside her mother. Reflecting the ideas of Rothman et al. (1985), she struggled to maintain a connection to her cultural identity while feeling pressure to assimilate into Anglo-American society within the school setting. However, as I reflected on our conversational interview, it became clear that Lupe's journey also aligns with Carter's (2006) ideological types (cultural mainstreamers, cultural straddlers, and noncompliant believers). As an ELL student in Arizona in the 1980s, facing pressure from her mother to fit in and the expectation of her American school to conform, Lupe acted as a cultural mainstreamer, assimilating into school culture. Her memories of this time were negative, as she was often removed from the classroom for hours each day to receive English instruction, feeling like an outsider and questioning her value in the classroom. In her current role as a dual-language educator, Lupe exemplifies the characteristics of a cultural straddler, helping her students to navigate and connect their home cultures and values with the expectations and norms of the school community. Lupe's approach embraces cultural scaffolding, "using [students'] own cultures and experiences to expand their intellectual horizons and academic achievement" (Gay, 2002, p. 109). The incorporation of cultural scaffolding allows her to foster and build a sense of community that she did not experience in her own academic journey.

Connections to Family, Gender, and Music as Culture

By listening to the participants share their personal stories and experiences, I gained a deeper understanding of how culture plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' lives from various perspectives. Family and home life are essential in the development of one's identity, both culturally and within the academic context. Rothman et al. (1985)

offer a traditional three-part framework to explain Mexican American familism (*la casa*, *la familia*, and *los compadres*) while also providing valuable insight into the struggles different generations face in seeking connection and acceptance within the United States (see also Rodríguez, 2002).

Mariachi has evolved over time to become more inclusive of women, especially within the United States and American music education. Although there is still progress to be made on a professional level, the expansion of mariachi education in American schools has provided female students with the opportunity to participate in an important Mexican cultural tradition (Sheehy, 2008; Sinta, 2020; Smith, 2018). As mentioned in the literature review, Smith (2018) asserts that women are not trying to change the traditional characteristics of *machismo* and *mexicanidad* in mariachi; rather, they are navigating ways to be included in the tradition and create their own musical space.

As expressed by the participants, music itself is an essential part of an individual's identity as well as a way for them to connect with familial culture and traditions. Soto (2015) points out that children of different generations in Mexican American heritage are constantly navigating to understand the culture of home along with assimilating and taking part in mainstream American culture; exploring and developing connections between communal music-making and the institutionalized music education environment allows individuals to negotiate their identities more readily (Campbell, 2018).

The opportunity to participate in mariachi within the school setting allowed students and their families to see their culture represented in an institutionalized music environment. The inclusion of mariachi in both high school and university music curricula allowed students and community members who identify with this cultural

tradition to feel acknowledged and validated for the knowledge and cultural practices they brought to the learning environment (Abril & Kelly-McHale, 2016; Colley, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2002). In my own learning and development as a music educator, I was able to provide a musical learning space that embraced the culture of a large portion of the student population, taking on the role of a collaborative facilitator rather than director or expert (Abril & Kelly-McHale, 2016; McKoy & Lind, 2023; Powell, 1996).

Recommendations for Music Educators

As music education continues to evolve, K-12 schools and music teacher preparation programs must keep developing music offerings and instruction that resonate with the students and communities they serve. While it is common for educators to teach in ways similar to how they were taught, it is crucial that music teachers address the backgrounds and needs of the students with whom they work on a daily basis. This includes recognizing that many students bring musical experiences from outside the academic setting; these exposures and involvements often shape their understanding, knowledge, and sense of identity, as well as their connection to their home or community culture. As I learned and have shared from my own experience, the journey will not be flawless; however, taking a chance or risk can lead to a rewarding outcome, even if it involves challenges, missteps, or setbacks along the way. In my experience, students, families, and communities recognize and appreciate these efforts put forth by music educators, allowing home/community cultures to be acknowledged and incorporated into the school music program.

The integration of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies enables music educators to acknowledge, validate, and honor students' musical cultures in genuine and inclusive ways. Although this study focused on mariachi, it is vital for teachers to research and understand the cultural traditions and populations within their schools and local communities. As participants associated with this study have emphasized, supported by researchers in education, teachers should actively seek out the expertise and assistance of culture bearers and individuals with extensive knowledge and experience in cultural music traditions that are significant to their own students' home and community cultures.

By embracing a commitment to include the cultural music traditions connected with the communities in which they serve, music educators are able to foster deeper relationships with students and their families. It is essential that music educators approach cultural music traditions with respect and care, understanding that students come with prior knowledge from home and community musical experiences; we should not be afraid to embrace this knowledge and allow the music learning space to be a setting of mutual learning and teaching. By incorporating musical traditions from students' home cultures and lived experiences, music educators are opening doorways for a larger community of music-makers in the academic music setting. McKoy and Lind (2023) share, "Music is one of the most natural things for many of us. It's in our homes, our places of worship, it's a part of our celebrations, and it helps us mourn" (p. 155). If music educators aim to make our subject matter and our learning spaces inclusive of all students, we must continue to expand our own horizons, exploring avenues and pathways that acknowledge and honor the student populations in front of us.

Reflecting on my own journey, I encourage music educators to jump in, learning and developing knowledge as they go. While this might seem nerve-wracking or uncomfortable, the student participants in this self-study were not bothered by my lack of knowledge or experience because of my honesty and candor upfront as well as my willingness to learn alongside them and create something together as a community and a team. Music educators should not feel intimidated to bring the experience and musical knowledge that they *do* have, working with students and communities to establish programs and opportunities that are linked to cultures and traditions important to the populations represented within the school setting. In workshops that we co-presented, Miguel, my colleague and former student teacher, conveyed that music will always be music, but the inclusion of mariachi and other cultural music traditions allows for more voices to be heard and acknowledged within the music education setting.

I challenge music teachers and those who work with preservice teachers to question and confront the current systems in music education and performance that do not address the voices of all students and learners. By allowing for the continuation of the status quo and a hierarchy that places Western classical music on a pedestal while the cultural music traditions of others vie for an equal space at the table, we are contributing to an ongoing problem in music education.

As my dissertation committee and others pointed out to me, I have been culturally responsive in my own teaching journey and have embraced the first two pillars of Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy: academic success and cultural competence. However, in order to truly demonstrate a culturally relevant approach and mindset, educators need to understand the importance of critical consciousness as they

continue to develop a field of music education that reflects and serves all students.

Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts:

Beyond those individual characteristics of academic achievement and cultural competence, students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities. If school is about preparing students for active citizenship, what better citizenship tool than the ability to critically analyze the society? (p. 162)

Educators, while developing their own critical consciousness alongside students, need to lead by example and advocate for substantial change that will place cultural music traditions on an equal stage to Western classical music and curricula. Ladson-Billings (2016) further states:

To be able to function well in complex democracies, our teachers must help students make sense of [social and political] complexities. . . . Helping students make sense of these realities and rhetoric is what we must do to increase their engagement and help them see the relevance of schooling to everyday life. . . . It is not about holding hands and singing “Kumba-Ya!” Culturally relevant teachers have a deep investment in their students, the community, and the social context in which they do their work; and they are prepared to teach all of our children. (p. 36)

Music educators who did not grow up within cultural music traditions such as mariachi, hip hop, or conjunto might ask themselves, “How can *I* be the one to push boundaries or advocate for these traditions if I am not an insider?” As individuals and practitioners in

the field of music education, we must learn to embrace the discomfort that arises when facilitating a musical tradition that is not our own, while also committing to the work of advocacy and change in music learning spaces.

Through reflection on my own journey, I have begun to confront the ways in which I have not always acknowledged my White privilege, or the fragility and fear that can accompany my social position. This process is ongoing, and it requires both humility and a willingness to critically examine my role within systems of power and cultural representation. Kruse (2020) states, “Of the many ways that music educators and scholars might enact White fragility, racial silence may be one of the most powerful. Leaving White hegemony unnamed allows Whiteness to persist as the cultural norm in our field—even while we wave banners with notions of inclusion, diversity, or social justice” (p. 144). I was fortunate that my principal supported the addition of mariachi in our school music program, sending me to a professional development workshop to grow my knowledge and skills, along with purchasing high-quality instruments for the students to use. He saw the importance of this cultural music tradition for the community. However, in spaces that are not familiar with a cultural music tradition like mariachi, music teachers must advocate for the art form and provide understanding as to why the music holds importance to the students, their lives, their families, and their education.

Through hesitation or apprehension to challenge the status quo and push the boundaries, music education continues to be dominated by Western classical practices and Anglo-centered perspectives (Hess, 2017; Kruse, 2020). DiAngelo (2018) asserts that White individuals often reconcile their racial discomfort through defensive responses:

These responses include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation.

These responses work to reinstate [W]hite equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our [White people's] racial comfort, and maintain our dominance. (p. 2)

To create the change that we wish to see in music education, we must first acknowledge our own positionality and the discomfort that may come with it. By critically examining the current system and advocating for the equitable recognition of cultural music traditions beyond the Western classical canon, we affirm the value of all students and validate their identities and lived experiences in the music learning space.

Recommendations for Future Research

In examining existing studies about music educators and preservice teachers through a similar lens, a number of scholars and researchers have addressed working with culturally diverse students, adjusting teaching approaches to better address home and community cultures, and integrating cultural musical traditions into music teaching without preparation from university programs (Abril, 2009; Benham, 2003; Kruse, 2013, 2020; Palkki, 2015; Shaw, 2015; Thibeault, 2009). Looking ahead to future research, it would be valuable to explore the stories of other music educators who have navigated similar journeys within mariachi and other cultural music traditions that were initially unfamiliar to them. By learning from these experiences, music educators can be inspired to step outside their comfort zones, enhancing their understanding of the students and communities they serve.

Additionally, from learning about the outsider/insider experiences of some of the participants in this study, it is pertinent that we share the stories of students and their

families (with their permission) in order better understand and serve the communities in which we teach. What are the outsider/insider experiences of K-12 and college students in music classes and programs? How will sharing these stories move music education forward? How might they better inform our understanding and practices as educators and facilitators?

What If?

As I reflect on my journey of acceptance into mariachi education and the mariachi music community, I am amazed at how much I have learned and continue to develop, the relationships and trust that I have built with students, their families, and our community, and the path that my career has taken as a music educator. All of this happened because I considered Miguel's advice and accepted my principal's suggestion to step outside of my comfort zone and take a chance on incorporating a cultural music tradition into the academic music space that honors the familial histories and home cultures of a large population of students within the learning community. Was my journey smooth, organized, and flawless the entire time? Of course not. There were challenges, alongside the constant presence of imposter syndrome and doubt, mixed with excitement, success, and hope.

However, I often think to myself: *What if more educators took a chance and stepped out of the box? What effects might we see on our students and communities?* McCombs and Whisler (1997) state, "Learning occurs best in a positive environment, one that contains positive interpersonal relationships and interactions, that contains comfort and order, and in which the learner feels appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and validated" (p. 10). Our students want to feel seen and heard, but they also want to be

recognized for what they bring to the table. They wish to celebrate who they are and proudly share their experiences in a communal learning space. When educators acknowledge and validate students' perspectives, it fosters a relationship built on mutual trust and respect. By creating an environment that embraces a two-way street of learning and teaching, we can cultivate acceptance and a sense of belonging, even in spaces where we once assumed we would always be outsiders as learners and facilitators. As my colleague and mentor Darbin suggested, "The best teachers are the most curious, I think" (conversational interview, June 13, 2024).

I do not want to suggest that my journey ends with a perfect "happily ever after" or that I have become fully accepted and embraced within the mariachi music community. When I reflect on the anonymous evaluation I received from a student in the Arizona State University Mariachi, I am reminded that I will always live in "the space between." Despite the effort that I have put in to becoming a capable facilitator and a knowledgeable educator of mariachi music, there will always be those who view me as an outsider. Still, through the process of navigating and negotiating my identity within both the mariachi music community and the broader educational landscape, I have come to understand my responsibility. I must continue to act as an advocate—both for myself and for students—in cultivating a space for the development of critical consciousness. This includes working toward a more equitable music education learning environment that challenges existing hierarchies and ensures that mariachi and other cultural traditions are not marginalized but are recognized as equally valuable and deserving of presence alongside Western classical music practices and traditions.

I conclude this chapter and leave readers with a quote from Lupe, a parent and present-day dual language educator, who deeply desired to be appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and validated for the cultural knowledge and experiences that she brought to the classroom as an English Language Learner. She told me:

I remember being shocked that you were a mariachi teacher. You're a mariachi teacher? Do you know all my life I would have loved to have somebody acknowledge me and my culture? I would have loved that. I would have dreamed for that. Instead of being told, "English only. Don't eat your burritos. Eat your peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Assimilate." All my life I've been told, "No, blend in, don't stand out, don't do anything crazy, don't bring your culture, don't bring your jewelry, your color, your everything. Assimilate." And when you first told me that you were a mariachi teacher, I was blown away. Blown away! First of all, you're my daughter's private viola teacher. You're so lovely. You've always been so lovely. But add the cherry on top of the sundae that you are celebrating my people, my culture, my music. I was just blown away. Blown away that, wow, I would have loved to have a teacher like you growing up. Someone that sees me. (conversational interview, September 28, 2024)

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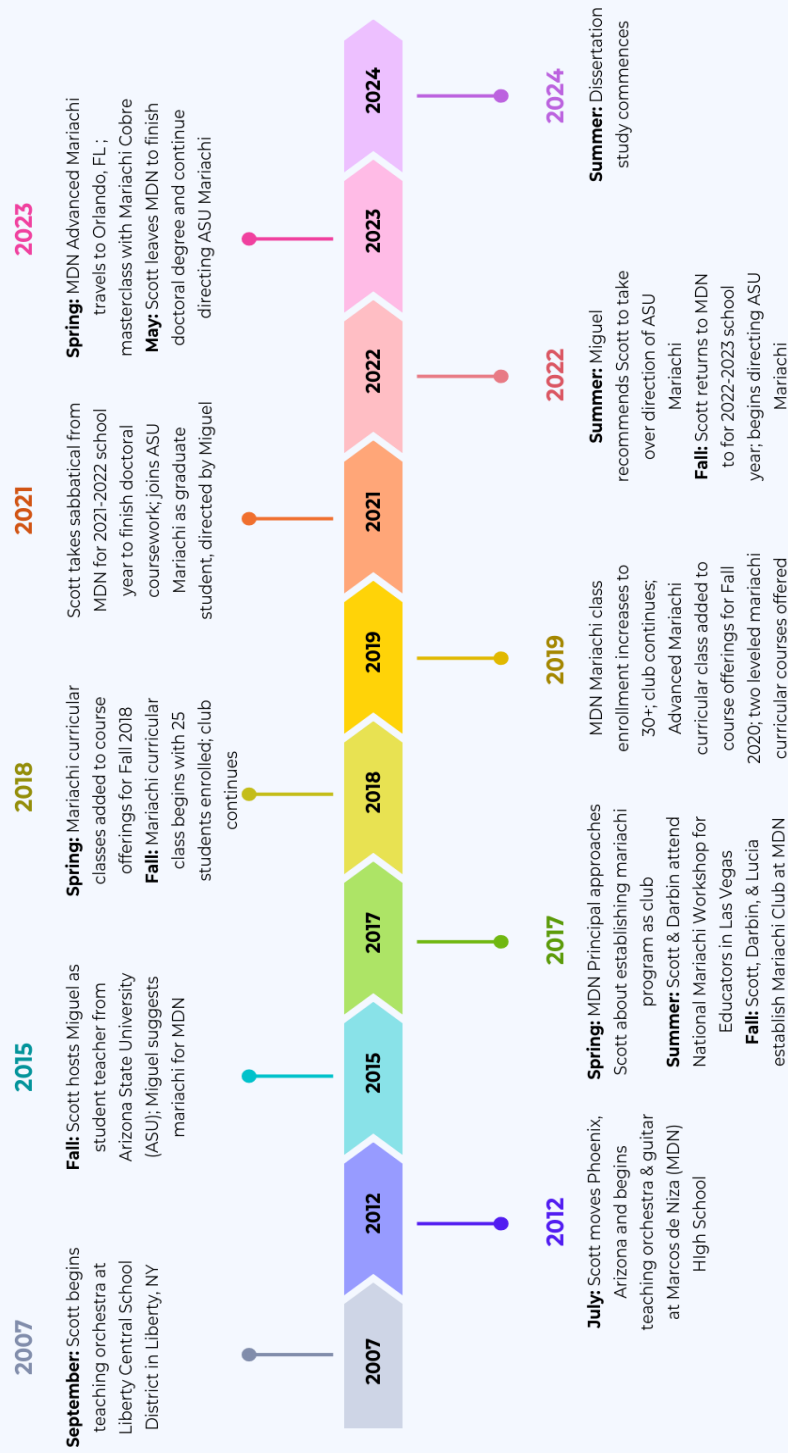
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APPENDIX A
JOURNEY TIMELINE

Journey Timeline



APPENDIX B
CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Glasser Sample One-on-One Interview Questions

Students

- Tell me about yourself and your family. What traditions and events stick out prominently in your memories while growing up and in the present day?
- Can you tell me about your introduction to mariachi music? How did you first become interested in it?
- Tell me about your experience(s) in the Marcos de Niza High School and/or Arizona State University Mariachi program(s). What memories or moments resonate with you?
- What were your initial thoughts about a white guy like me teaching mariachi? Did you have apprehensions or concerns about this?
- How did your thoughts about a cultural outsider teaching the class change or evolve over time? Why do you think this occurred?
- Share with me moments of friction or conflict during your time in the mariachi in relation to me as the teacher. How were these moments addressed and/or resolved?
- Tell me about the evolving relationship between me and our community of practice. Did you notice instances of growth? What stuck out to you about my approach as a newcomer attempting to connect with mariachi tradition?
- Music teachers sometimes get asked to teach music they don't know much about, whether it's popular music, creating music using software, mariachi, or hip hop. What suggestions do you have for other teachers like me, who want to learn to teach some music they don't know much about?

Parents/Community Members/

- Tell me about you and your family/cultural experiences. What traditions and events stick out prominently in your memories while growing up and in the present day?
- Did you grow up with mariachi music? How has this genre been a part of your life and your community?
- Tell me about your experience(s) in the Marcos de Niza High School and/or Arizona State University Mariachi program(s). What memories or moments resonate with you?
- What were your initial thoughts about a cultural outsider teaching mariachi? Did you have apprehensions or concerns about this?
- How did your thoughts about a cultural outsider teaching the class change or evolve over time?
- Tell me about the evolving relationship between me and the community. Did you notice instances of growth? What stuck out to you about my approach as an outsider attempting to connect with a culture that is not my own?
- From your perspective, share with me any moments of friction or conflict in relation to me as an outsider teaching mariachi and attempting to connect with the surrounding community. Were there missteps that I made? How were these addressed?

- How might educators best approach teaching and facilitating a cultural music tradition that is not their own?

Colleagues

- Tell me about your familial and cultural backgrounds as well as your experiences in education.
- Tell me about our relationship. If someone was thinking about joining the Marcos de Niza and/or ASU mariachi, what would you tell them about me? What would you tell them about how we have worked together over the years? What prominent moments or elements stick out to you?
- What are your memories of my journey as a mariachi educator? What are experiences that stick out to you as positive and/or negative?
- Tell me about the evolving relationship between me and the community. Did you notice instances of growth and/or challenge? What stuck out to you about my approach as an outsider attempting to connect with a culture that is not my own?
- From your perspective, share with me any moments of friction or conflict in relation to me as an outsider teaching mariachi and attempting to connect with the surrounding community. Were there missteps that I made? How were these addressed?
- How might educators best approach teaching and facilitating a cultural music tradition that is not their own?

Glasser Sample Focus Group Discussion Questions

- Discuss your experiences in relation to the Marcos de Niza High School and/or Arizona State University mariachi programs. What experiences stick out to you? What did you really enjoy? Were there things that impacted you negatively?
- What makes a good mariachi teacher/educator? Can a person from outside of the culture be authentic and successful in connecting with the community of practice? How did your experiences with me confirm or conflict with these thoughts?
- What does participation in mariachi mean to you? How has my role as your teacher affected your thoughts and feelings? How might your experience have differed if your instructor was from the culture?

Glasser Sample Follow-Up One-on-One Interview Questions

- In our first conversation, you expressed [insert idea/thought/feeling]. Could you expand upon this so that I have a better understanding of your perspective?
- In our first conversation, you spoke about [insert idea/thought]. Could you describe this further to provide more context?

APPENDIX C

OPTIONAL PARTICIPANT JOURNAL RESPONSE PROMPT

Glasser Sample Video Diary Prompt

While conversations are a great way to gain insight into your perspective and viewpoints, I want to also allow you to tell me about some things you have been thinking about since we met together, or anything else you would like to tell me.

In a video recording of yourself, I would like you to share your *open* and *honest* thoughts about these questions. Your recording can be informal and conversational; if you prefer to write out your thoughts or audio record, that is fine as well. You can talk for as long or as little as you want, or you can stop your recording and come back later. Your response will remain confidential and will only be viewed by me and Dr. Schmidt, my dissertation advisor.

Prompt:

- As someone who has been a part of my continuous journey and development as a mariachi educator, what have you observed?
- What concerns do you have about a classical violinist like me trying to teach and perform music like mariachi, music that wasn't familiar to me when I first started the group at Marcos de Niza High School?
- How do you view your experience(s) with the Marcos de Niza High School and/or Arizona State University mariachi programs and with me as the teacher/instructor?
- Did I ever do or say anything that made you think I shouldn't be teaching mariachi? Did you or others try to tell me about any of these times?
- As a cultural outsider who is continually navigating the mariachi community of practice, I would like to hear your viewpoints on positive steps that I have taken as well as missteps or missed opportunities that you have observed. Please tell me about things I did that you thought were helpful to the ASU and/or MdN mariachi. I would also like to know what you think I missed or could have done better.
- What would you recommend to educators who want to teach and connect with a cultural music community which is not their own?
- If you could say whatever you wanted without fear or judgment, what would you share with a friend about your experiences working with me during my journey learning to teach and perform mariachi music?

APPENDIX D
IRB APPROVAL



EXEMPTION GRANTED

Margaret Schmidt
 MDT: Music
 480/965-8277
 Marg.Schmidt@asu.edu

Dear [Margaret Schmidt](#):

On 5/29/2024 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Self-study: From Cultural Outsider to "The Space Between" in the Mariachi Community of Practice
Investigator:	Margaret Schmidt
IRB ID:	STUDY00020212
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SchmidtGlasserRecruitmentScript, Category: Recruitment Materials; • SchmidtGlasserSampleInterviewFocusGroupFollowupQuestionsVideoPrompt, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • SchmidtGlasserSampleParticipantTimeCommitmentTable, Category: Other; • SchmidtGlasserSelfStudy, Category: IRB Protocol; • SchmidtGlasserShortConsentwithFG, Category: Consent Form; • SchmidtGlasserShortConsentwithoutFG, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk) on 5/29/2024.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

It is the research team's responsibility to notify the IRB of 'reportable new information.' (an RNI) During a research study, any adverse events, unanticipated problems involving risk, and non-compliance **must** be reported to the IRB as an RNI. Please see the following link for details:

APPENDIX E
STUDENT CONSENT FORM

Short Consent Form

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Margaret Schmidt in the Department of Music Learning and Teaching within the School of Music, Dance, and Theatre at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to examine my journey as a music educator learning to teach mariachi. When I began this journey, I did not know much about this genre of music, and I would like your help in remembering what I have learned and how I have developed to become an accepted member within the mariachi community.

I am inviting your participation, which might involve one-on-one (1 hour) and small-group conversations and discussions (1 hour) as well as a video diary entry recorded on your own (30 minutes). A follow-up one-on-one conversation (1 hour) might be scheduled as needed. The total time commitment should be approximately 2.5-3.5 hours over the course of the study. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 or over to participate in the study.

Although there is no direct benefit or compensation to participants, possible benefits of your participation include shared understanding of my journey as a developing mariachi educator and helping other music educators understand how we can better become accepted members of a different community of musicians. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Throughout the research process, the following measures will be taken to protect confidentiality:

- Only the Principal Investigator (PI) Dr. Margaret Schmidt and Co-Principal Investigator (Co-PI) Scott Glasser will have access to the data generated from this study.
- The data, audio/video recordings, any photos or other resources you choose to share, and consent forms will be stored on an ASU secure server with access only by the PI and Co-PI.
- Data will be coded using pseudonyms to protect your identity.
- All data will be destroyed once the project is complete (within a period of two years).
- Your responses will be confidential; the results of the study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your name will not be used.
- De-identified data collected as a part of this study will not be shared with others (e.g., investigators or industry partners) for future research purposes or other uses.
- Due to the nature of focus groups (small-group discussions), complete confidentiality among the participants cannot be guaranteed.

I would like to audio record or video record the one-on-one and focus group conversations/discussions. These will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want to be recorded; you also can change your mind after the discussion starts, just let me know.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: Scott Glasser, sglasser@asu.edu or Dr. Margaret Schmidt, marg.schmidt@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please sign and return this consent form if you wish to be part of the study, or bring it to our first meeting.

By signing below you are agreeing to be part of the study.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

APPENDIX F

COLLEAGUE/PARENT/COMMUNITY MEMBER CONSENT FORM

Short Consent Form

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Margaret Schmidt in the Department of Music Learning and Teaching within the School of Music, Dance, and Theatre at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to examine my journey as a music educator learning to teach mariachi. When I began this journey, I did not know much about this genre of music, and I would like your help in remembering what I have learned and how I have developed to become an accepted member within the mariachi community.

I am inviting your participation, which might involve a one-on-one conversation (1 hour) as well as a video diary entry recorded on your own (30 minutes). A follow-up one-on-one conversation (1 hour) might be scheduled as needed. The total time commitment should be approximately 1.5-2.5 hours over the course of the study. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 or over to participate in the study.

Although there is no direct benefit or compensation to participants, possible benefits of your participation include shared understanding of my journey as a developing mariachi educator and helping other music educators understand how we can better become accepted members of a different community of musicians. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Throughout the research process, the following measures will be taken to protect confidentiality:

- Only the Principal Investigator (PI) Dr. Margaret Schmidt and Co-Principal Investigator (Co-PI) Scott Glasser will have access to the data generated from this study.
- The data, audio/video recordings, any photos or other resources you choose to share, and consent forms will be stored on an ASU secure server with access only by the PI and Co-PI.
- Data will be coded using pseudonyms to protect your identity.
- All data will be destroyed once the project is complete (within a period of two years).
- Your responses will be confidential; the results of the study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your name will not be used.
- De-identified data collected as a part of this study will not be shared with others (e.g., investigators or industry partners) for future research purposes or other uses.

I would like to audio record or video record the one-on-one and focus group conversations/discussions. These will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want to be recorded; you also can change your mind after the discussion starts, just let me know.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: Scott Glasser, sglasser@asu.edu or Dr. Margaret Schmidt, marg.schmidt@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please sign and return this consent form if you wish to be part of the study, or bring it to our first meeting.

By signing below you are agreeing to be part of the study.

Name:

Signature:

Date: