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## La Joya ISD Fine Arts: Teaching Mexican Identity Through Music and Dance

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LA JOYA ISD FINE ARTS: TEACHING MEXICAN IDENTITY  
THROUGH MUSIC AND DANCE

A Thesis

by

KATRENA H. HENRY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Major Subject: Music



LA JOYA ISD FINE ARTS: TEACHING MEXICAN IDENTITY  
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May 2013



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## ABSTRACT

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The La Joya Independent School District has made a serious effort to cultivate and promote mariachi, conjunto, and folklórico programs at the middle school and high school level. Students give numerous performances throughout the year and these programs have exposed thousands of people to the music and traditions of Mexico and the border region. What draws so many students to these particular programs in La Joya ISD? What sense of "Mexican identity" do these programs create for its participants? Through observing various performances, interviewing educators, students, and community members, I explore why these programs are considered essential by the school district and what meaning they have to the students participating and the community at large. Examining this data will give a better understanding as to why students choose to participate in these groups and what effect this experience has on how they value their Mexican heritage and traditions.





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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In fall of 2002, I began working as a high school band director in La Joya Independent School District. We had just concluded our first high school pep rally of the school year and as I walked back to the band hall with a colleague, I suddenly heard some music coming from a distance. It sounded like nothing I had ever heard on a high school campus before. As I approached the bus pick up area I saw a student sitting on a tree stump playing his accordion while waiting for his bus to take him home. As I tried to understand what I had observed, my colleague put his hand in my shoulder and chuckled, “Welcome to La Joya.”

Although I knew that La Joya bands had a reputation for developing competitive groups, I was surprised to discover that our marching band was not the dominant fine arts group on campus. La Joya mariachi, conjunto, and folklórico programs are the most popular and well known organizations throughout the school district. Over the past 10 years, I have seen other fine arts groups struggle to recruit and retain students while these programs have continued to flourish. Community support for them has been overwhelming. Witnessing the successes of these organizations I began to ask myself, “Why are these programs so popular? What are the students learning about Mexican culture through them? Why is the local community so proud of these groups and what effect do they have on cultural preservation amongst students and their



families?” Through the implementation of multicultural music education, La Joya Independent School District has developed a model that meets student needs and cultivates students’ self-awareness of their Mexican identity.

### **Research Methods**

An ethnographic study was conducted at Juarez-Lincoln High School which included participant observation of eight rehearsals, three dress rehearsals, and four spring concert performances at the La Joya Performing Arts Center in La Joya, Texas. After permission to conduct the study was granted by principal Clem Garza, and parental consent forms were signed, 80 students participated in an anonymous questionnaire and survey. Seven students participated in interviews. Three teachers and the La Joya ISD fine arts director were also interviewed. Three parents of current participants and former La Joya folklórico participants also granted interviews. All ethnographic fieldwork was conducted from January 2012 to April 2012.

## CHAPTER II

### LA JOYA INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

#### **La Joya ISD: Overview**

The La Joya Independent School District is located in the western portion of Hidalgo County and consists of more than 226 square miles, stretching west of Mission to Sullivan City, and including the smaller communities of La Joya, Palmview and Peñitas. Boundaries extend from the United States border formed by the Rio Grande River to the 13 mile line near McCook. Current enrollment is over 25,000 students. La Joya ISD is one of the fastest growing school districts in Texas with an estimated increase of 1,400 students per year. Hispanic students account for over 99% percent of La Joya ISD's enrollment. Ninety percent are considered to fall below federal poverty guidelines. In 2008, the district opened two new high schools to alleviate overcrowding issues at La Joya High. After only 4 years, La Joya High School, Palmview High School, and Juarez-Lincoln High School have reached 5A status and are indicating student enrollment at over 2100 students each.

#### **Juarez-Lincoln High School**

Benito Juarez- Abraham Lincoln High School is home to students living on the central and north side of La Joya ISD. Twenty percent of the school's population consists of Limited

English Proficient Students. Ninety eight percent of Juarez-Lincoln students are considered to be economically disadvantaged. The majority of the students attending Juarez-Lincoln depend on school buses because their families cannot provide transportation to and from school. Infrastructure is limited in the surrounding community so families must travel quite a distance to obtain employment and household necessities. The majority of our households are located in *colonias* that usually lack paved roads (see fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Many of the families experience high levels of unemployment, low levels of education, illiteracy, poverty, and poor health. Consequently our students experience the repercussions of economic stress, financial constraints, and emotional distress associated with poverty. Parents and students look to the campus as the stability in their lives. Juarez-Lincoln High School provides ongoing support not only in the area of academics, but also in their social and emotional well being. It is important to note that despite the school's proximity to the students' homes, the school continues to suffer from the lowest amount of parental involvement in comparison to other high schools in the district.

**Figure 1**



**Homes such as these are commonly found in colonias  
surrounding Juarez-Lincoln High School.**

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<sup>1</sup> *Colonias* - rural communities and neighborhoods that lack adequate infrastructure and frequently also lack other basic services.

## **La Joya ISD Fine Arts**

La Joya ISD is well known for its mariachi, conjunto, and folklórico programs. After thirty years in existence these programs have expanded to include beginner, intermediate and performing classes scheduled during the school day. These groups began with 8 to 15 students and have grown to include 80 students currently participating in the performing ensembles. There is a variety of performances throughout the school year including parental involvement meetings, open house, and Mother's Day celebrations. Healthy start up budgets ranging from \$25,000 for folklórico and \$72,000 for mariachi/conjunto were allocated to teachers to purchase all items needed to outfit a full performing group. From shoes to instruments, the district provides everything a student needs to perform. Current budgets of \$17,000 for folklórico and \$32,000 for mariachi and conjunto are meant to supply students with additional items as needed.

Juarez-Lincoln's two major performances consist of a fall and spring show. The fall concert consists of a three high school joint performance highlighting various regions of Mexico. During the month of February and March each high school is given its own week to present a 2-1/2 hour show highlighting regions of Mexico, Spain, and Latin America.

In addition to having to prepare over 20 different dances and over 12 different songs for a single show, one must also make note of the great expense these shows require. When designing mariachi and conjunto uniforms, it is important that they are elegant, high quality, and look great on a stage. The district spends \$550 for every mariachi and \$350 for every conjunto uniform constructed. Because these shows attract a loyal audience that returns year after year, it is important that the shows be completely different each season. In order for this to occur, choreographers and dancers from all over Mexico and Latin America must be contracted, custom

costumes must be made to represent a variety of regions, and several detailed backdrops must be displayed throughout a performance. One spring show production can cost anywhere from \$15,000 to \$20,000 per school.

Each high school is assigned its own week for its Spring Performances. During that given weekend, each school gives a total of 4 performances. Tickets to these performances are sold for \$6.00 apiece. Depending on the number of tickets sold, each school's potential profit can range from \$20,000- \$29,000 for a Spring Concert Weekend. It is a common misconception that the district must spend a lot in advertising because of the high turnout. This is not the case. The posters displayed are geared towards attracting more community members and students from the local high schools. These advertisements show the variety of entertainment found at the shows and the professional photos are a reflection of the performances themselves (see fig. 2). Because the district has developed a great reputation for producing high quality performances, most people call ahead to find out the schools' show schedules. Large groups of Winter Texans always attend the weekend performances. It is not uncommon for these performances to sell out. All profits are used to for a banquet at the end of the year and senior scholarships.

For several years, these shows were performed at the McAllen Civic Center, 18 miles away from the city of La Joya. The district recognized the popularity of these performances and wanted to bring them back to La Joya in order to make them more accessible to its local community. In August 2000, La Joya ISD opened its own \$9.8 million 1500 seat auditorium next to its high school (see fig. 3).

Figure 2



These posters can be found throughout LJISD.

Figure 3



The La Joya Performing Arts Center  
was opened in 2000.

## CHAPTER III

### INITIATIVES AND MULTICULTURALISM

#### **District Initiatives and Outcomes**

You might ask yourself, why would a school district feel the need to create programs such as these that ultimately require such large amounts of money to sustain? The answer is student retention. In 1981, La Joya ISD found itself with a growing problem. Its dropout rates were steadily increasing and no intervention plan that had been enforced had actually made a difference in the issue. Due to its proximity to the US/Mexico Border, La Joya was enrolling many recent immigrants into its schools. Many of the students were having difficulty adjusting to life in their new surroundings and would ultimately drop out of school. But they were not the only issue. The problem also included students who had been born and raised within the La Joya community. As the district brainstormed for solutions, one school board member by the name of Amancio Chapa proposed a completely different approach. While attending meetings in Austin and San Antonio, he had witnessed high school mariachi performances and felt that similar performances could be very popular with La Joya students. He explained that the students not only needed extracurricular activities, but more importantly, they needed a way to participate in activities that spoke to who they were and keep them connected to their cultural

heritage. The board expressed its reservations but Mr. Chapa responded, “We are all Mexicans here. This is our music and we are a Mexican community. If they can do it, why can’t we?”<sup>2</sup> The board agreed to give it try, and the Rio Grande Valley’s first high school mariachi program was established.

These courses quickly became popular with students and La Joya High School found itself needing to expand the number of periods the courses were offered during the day. Due to high student demand, these courses are now offered at every middle school throughout the district. In addition to increasing the number of students graduating from high school, the district has seen other benefits. The size of audiences attending shows is not comparable with any other fine arts program in the district: the shows attract numerous community members. Many former dancers and performers have in turn encouraged their younger family members and sometimes even their own children to become a part of these programs. If the district ever needs to draw parents to a meeting, they ask one of these groups to perform because it is well known that if they perform, the parents will attend.

Mr. Amancio Chapa, the fine arts director at the time of this study, mentioned to me that he recently heard a school board member say, “Any time someone mentions La Joya, all they can think of is our mariachi.” Another responded, “Well of course, it’s a part of us. We should be proud of that.”<sup>3</sup> La Joya ISD sees itself as having a duty to teach their 99% Hispanic population that although education is the key to their future, it is important to remember their cultural background and always be proud of their Mexican Heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> Chapa, Amancio. Personal interview. 6 Mar. 2012

<sup>3</sup> Chapa, Amancio. Personal interview. 6 Mar. 2012



## Multicultural Education

As La Joya ISD has demonstrated, it is an important goal for a school system to help students develop insights into their own cultural identity that can lead to better understanding of other cultural groups found within American society. These experiences provide educational equality for all students and promote academic achievement. This is consistent with the Council on Anthropology and Education's (CAE) efforts to promote anthropological efforts in education. The CAE believes it is the responsibility of educational agencies at all levels to focus attention on comparative cultural diversity in their programs. All cultural backgrounds are recognized and integrated to create programs that are culturally compatible and enriching to students (DeVillar 81). Young Pai explains, "There is no escaping the fact that education is a sociocultural process. Hence, a critical examination of the role of culture in human life is indispensable to the understanding and control of educative processes" (33).

The civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s led to the development of school reform that would help education systems prepare students to live and function effectively in a culturally diverse world. Multicultural education is a concept in which all students are afforded equal learning opportunities regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity or social class (Banks, *Educating Citizens* 68). It is important that students are provided a means to come to terms with their own histories and cultural roots. Dilg sternly supports the need for multicultural education by explaining that without such an approach, "They're left not knowing crucial aspects of their past and therefore of themselves and each other" (16). Through the restructuring of educational institutions, all students will develop the skills and knowledge needed to function in a culturally diverse world (Banks, *Race, Culture, and Education* 129).

According to Nieto, multicultural education should be an integral part of school curriculum and lists its seven basic characteristics as:

1. Multicultural education is antiracist education.
2. Multicultural education is basic education.
3. Multicultural education is important for all students.
4. Multicultural education is pervasive.
5. Multicultural education is education for social justice.
6. Multicultural education is a process.
7. Multicultural education is critical pedagogy. (44)

James Banks, a leader in multicultural education, argues that schools should not ignore ethnicity and should implement curricular reforms related to ethnic diversity. Through multicultural education, he believes children can better understand their own culture, promote respect for others who are different, and help them function effectively in more than one culture (*Multiethnic Education* 19). Some students suffer from a “lack of cultural congruency” between home and school, something that does not exist for Anglos (Dreifuerst 12). This disconnect, resulting in lower academic achievement in some minorities, has encouraged the need for exploration in multicultural education. Low achievement in minority students is also caused by low expectations by teachers, special education, and bilingual programs. Many students find school to be an “unaffirming place” and cite their main reason for dropping out to be their perception that the school curriculum was not connected to their lives (Nieto 324). Many students have discovered that fine arts programs offer an opportunity to explore and ultimately express their heritage and culture in an otherwise unwelcoming school environment.

Engen explains, “By finding a commonality of interests between home and school, students can better focus on the advantages of education and increase their empowerment” (257).

In an effort to provide a multicultural framework for effective educational reform, Banks has developed a concept he refers to as *multiethnic ideology* (*Multiethnic Education* 122). This position makes various assumptions about national goals, research, school curriculum, teacher training, and learning. Multicultural education not only helps students visualize concepts from different cultural perspectives, but also promotes the acquisition of ideas, skills, and information needed to cultivate and function in an *open society*. Banks defines an open society as:

one in which individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural, and social class groups have equal opportunities to participate. Individuals can take full advantage of the opportunities and reward within all social, economic, and political institutions without regard to their ancestry or ethnic identity. They can also participate in the society while serving their distinct and cultural traits. (181)

Multiethnic ideology supports the belief that although ethnic minority cultures do have some unique cultural characteristics, they still share many values and learning characteristics with other groups. Its goal should ultimately be to help students learn to function both within their own culture and the common culture. This can be achieved through qualified teachers that are sensitive and knowledgeable about ethnic cultures (123). Furthermore, the curriculum within multiethnic ideology should always respect a student’s ethnicity and find ways to use it in a positive manner.

## **Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education**

As Hispanic populations in schools across the United States increase, instrumental music programs have seen little change in response. Abril describes traditional music ensembles such as band and orchestra as becoming “subcultures” in public education. (77) This shift has increased the need for educators’ awareness of cultural diversity in all facets of school. As regional ethnic music cultures are becoming threatened or are disappearing, efforts must be made to teach and preserve them. Margolies explains that this Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which includes music and dance, has been primarily left to the care of ethnomusicologists and folklorists, and has not been the focus of music education (38). Seeger states “A multicultural music education can prepare creative musicians and also increase the cultural awareness and respect in the cultural mosaic of the United States and the world” (29).

Music educators must implement cultural diversity into their instrumental programs through a variety of methods. Shehan suggests the following methods for incorporating multiethnic music into the music curriculum:

1. Lesson in geography, including the study of cultural characteristics found within local communities, ethnic foods, and festivals:
2. Presentations of ethnic culture, including songs or recordings by local community members
3. Museum visits
4. Listening and discussing music of famous performers from the country being studied

5. Composing music that can be used in performances of tales from culture being studied
6. Examining similarities between ethnic instruments and Western Instruments
7. Examining and identifying ethnic elements in Western music (25)

It is important that materials used be checked for authenticity. Judith Tucker, founder and publisher of World Music Press, provides several recommendations for purchasing materials to accurately teach multiethnic music education:

1. Materials prepared by a musician or an expert from the culture
2. Inclusion of cultural elements such as celebrations, instruments, or clothing that pertain to the music
3. Arrangements or accompaniment that are typical to the particular piece of music
4. Clear instructions for games or dances
5. Geographical or historical background included
6. Lyrics in ethnic language included
7. Translation must be checked for accurate meaning and singability
8. Examine recordings for quality and accurate ethnic background of the performer (38)

Although repertoire is the most popular method, it is important that all music performed is a valid and respectful representation of the specific cultural group. Music educators can further develop cultural diversity by encouraging students to learn about the historical and cultural contexts of the music they perform. The International Society for Music Education

states that the contextualization of music is a vital element in music teaching and learning processes. (McCarthy 150) Although these methods help promote awareness of cultural diversity, Abril argues that a sociocultural approach to teaching music is most effective. (78) This “inquiry based space” provides students with the opportunity to discuss, question, and examine music experience from different social and cultural positions. Abril suggests that through this approach students may be armed with a more realistic understanding of music that is also more relevant to their personal lives.

Teachers and school systems alike should take into account the cultural needs, experiences, and perspectives of their students. The concept of culturally responsive teaching focuses on teachers connecting with students’ cultural and social identities in ways that make learning more effective and relevant. Through more music education opportunities, students can feel like music programs are inviting. Music’s relevance to their lives and interests creates a better connection between school and home.

As music educators explore alternatives to the traditional ensemble, many schools have begun to explore the mariachi ensemble as a method to attract and include Hispanic students. mariachi music can symbolize Mexican heritage and provide a sort of vocational training that may be used in students’ communities. Additionally, Ensley suggests that Hispanic parents may be more open to supporting a music program that they can relate to such as mariachi ensembles (54). Through the creation of these ensembles, mariachi music is able to be further legitimized as quality music worthy of a place in school curriculum and cultivates cultural awareness in students and their communities.

Although conjunto music is considered to be “an unusually potent symbol of Texas-Mexican working- class culture”, few music educators may be familiar with this music or have any idea how to incorporate this genre into their classroom (Margolies 42). Some may ask why it is necessary to include conjunto music into the curriculum. Music educators must face the continuous changes in the classroom with students from diverse ethnic, racial, language, and cultural backgrounds. Soto argues that “the introduction of conjunto music into the classroom is a validation of multiculturalism” (56). Although music educators may be hesitant about reaching beyond their expertise due to language barriers or fear of misrepresentation, they must realize that this is a genre that students and community can relate to through its presence at family functions such as weddings, quinceañera, and other celebrations. Soto explains that teachers must “reach out to culture and music bearers, and just jump in” (56). As music educators we must be open to the idea of incorporating and legitimizing a variety of music in our programs. A culturally diverse music education is valuable to the education of all children in America. It is important to remember that “schools are the agents for the transmittal of culture. Schools reaffirm what the culture values as knowledgeable” (Tucker 37).

## CHAPTER IV

### PERFORMING MEXICAN IDENTITY

#### **The Spring Concert Experience**

The show opens with a “primal” eighth note ostinato drum beat coming from the stage. In the darkness the audience is surrounded by the sounds of shouts and wails. As the lights begin to focus on the stage, the audience is introduced to a lone Aztec drummer on top of a large boulder. Behind him the backdrop depicts a large pyramid with the glowing red sun at the top. The crowd watches silently. The stage is soon filled by dancers all in Aztec regalia of a variety of colors. The chest plates and skirts are in a variety of colors such as green, red, purple and gold and are adorned with gold beaded fringe. As the dancers move, the costumes’ metallic and reflective material gleams in the light. Gauntlets and shin covers contain the same Aztec patterns and help extend the color of the costume to catch the observer’s eye with every movement. Large shell ankle bracelets emphasize the dancers’ percussive movements. Although the costumes are detailed, the accessory most noticed by the crowd is the head dress. These ornate pieces contain the same colors used in the breastplate and fans out into ten large feathers in a variety of bright colors. Accessories included a gold shield and silver rattle that help add to the dramatic emphasis of the performance (see fig. 4). Although the audience members are passive



participants, the spectacle created through the indigenous costumes and the intensity of the performances create an energy felt throughout the auditorium.

**Figure 4**



**Folklorico Sol Azteca performs Conchero Aztec dance.**

Audience members interviewed expressed their admiration and respect for the dancers in the production. One spectator commented, “I have no idea how they could do that with high school kids. They must work so hard. I always say it can’t get any better and it always is.”<sup>4</sup>

Folklorico Sol Azteca features 20 dances in one spring show performance. Their 2012 spring concert featured Spain, Panama, Veracruz, Costa Rica, Baja California, and dance rituals of the Aztec Empire. Performing these not only requires a great deal of practice and stamina, but also a variety of costumes. Thirteen different costume changes were necessary for this particular production. Sol Azteca is responsible for approximately 50% of the show material.

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<sup>4</sup> Harris, Mary. Personal interview. 5 Mar. 2012

When Mariachi Sol first appears on stage, one can't help be drawn to the beautiful suits or *traje de charro*.<sup>5</sup> These gray cashmere uniforms have a great deal of intricate detailing. In keeping with school colors, the floral embroidery consists of bright red roses evenly distributed throughout the metallic silver foliage and is found all over the uniform. The front and back of the pants are decorated with the floral embroidery, running up the legs and across the top of the pants. Metal gala adorn the sides of the pant legs from top to bottom. The females in the group wear long ankle length skirts displaying the same floral pattern as the males' pants. The embellished embroidery continues all over the arms, chest, and shoulders of the jacket which is held closed by a large silver brooch. The vest worn underneath shares the same floral detail. The bright red satin bow also has the silver foliage' embroidery and has the initials M.S. embroidered for Mariachi Sol. A plain white shirt, white belt, and black boots complete the ensemble. In order not to detract from the elegant *trajes*, the mariachi performs without a backdrop and uses colored lighting instead to complement the look of the ensemble.

As the red lights begin to brighten the stage, the crowd grows rowdy and starts screaming and whistling. Someone on the balcony shouted "We love you!" and the entire audience erupts into applause. As the singers take the stage, people are calling out their names. It is obvious that these students' talents are known and respected by the audience. The male singers in the group involve the spectators in their performances. The audience follows them as they dance through the audience during the performance. The mariachi members on stage can frequently be heard interjecting with "Échate otra" and "Ándale Mariachi Sol!" During romantic pieces, the singers pick females from the audience to be the focus of their love songs by taking their hand

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<sup>5</sup> *Traje de charro*- Formal mariachi uniform consisting of tightly fitting ornamented pants, short jacket, pointed boots, wide bow tie and sombrero.

and singing directly to them. The crowd hoots and hollers in response. All the ladies in the auditorium have a smile on their face. After the show, many females that I interviewed gush that they've "fallen in love" with the mariachi singers.<sup>6</sup>

Conjunto Sol stepped out for its portion of the concert. Their navy blue polyester cowboy suits give the group a formal, polished look. The two button jacket is adorned with white embroidery on the arms, midsection, and chest of the jacket. Their satin lapels shine as they move on stage. Their vaquero look is complete with a white wide collared shirt, polished black boots, and an ivory cowboy hat. Behind them hangs a detailed cantina backdrop with bottles on a rack behind the bar counter, a poker table in the center with cards and glasses set out, a piano off to the side, a sombrero hanging on the wall, and saloon doors leading to outside. The hard wood floors are made to appear as if they have been scratched and worn by the many customers of the cantina. To add a three dimensional feel to the space, whiskey barrels are set out on stage. As the set begins, audience members quickly become active participants in the conjunto's performance. The lead singer enthusiastically yells to the audience in Spanish, "Un grito para las muchachas bonitas!" He continues to encourage the audience to clap along, "Así! Órale!" The audience cheers and whistles as the group continues to play. As the conjunto performs, folklórico and mariachi performers invite audience members to dance on stage. There are at least ten couples dancing on stage during each song. A variety of people are invited to dance: students, teachers, parents, even winter Texans (see fig. 5). It feels like a performance one would witness at a dance hall, not an auditorium. This continues for about 15 minutes. Conjunto Sol's set provides audience members an opportunity to escape the confines of an

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<sup>6</sup> Flores, Annette. Personal interview. 18 Feb. 2012

auditorium and briefly have a realistic *baile* experience that can be commonly found throughout the Rio Grande Valley.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 5



Conjunto Sol plays “Potpurri de Polkas” as audience members are brought up to dance on stage.

### Student Perspective

Although one may understand the district’s intent for creating the programs it is ultimately the students who decide what organizations they join. In regards to their motivation to participate, students initially refer to the fun that they have in the programs. In addition to making new friends, they enjoy that the organization allows them the opportunity to continue dancing and creating music. Students find that these groups also become communities that help and support each other. During rehearsals, students not only hold each other accountable for

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<sup>7</sup> *Baile*- a social gathering for dancing.

their work, but they also provide encouragement for one another. When someone was unsure of choreography or even chord progressions, I found that another student would immediately assist and model for each other without being negative or disruptive. Teachers of these groups credit the students for the quality of the performances explaining that they could not be successful without the students being able to help each other.

For many participants, parental and family influence played a major role when joining these groups. They explained that many of them either have family members that participated in the programs at La Joya or they come from families of musicians where mariachi and even conjunto is a way to make a living. Many of the musicians in these programs were self-taught or were instructed by family members. The primary accordion player for Conjunto Sol explained how he began playing accordion, “My parents love listening to conjunto music. So I told myself I’m going to learn to play the accordion. I asked my parents if they would buy me one and even though they didn’t have a lot of money they got me one. Then I just got on YouTube and learned from there.”<sup>8</sup> Other students describe attending the spring shows to watch older siblings perform and left feeling inspired to do the same. The opportunity to perform for large audiences is also a big motivator for these students who often are looking for ways to showcase their talents.

All students expressed the major impact that participation has had on their academics. They are very much aware that they must pass all of their classes every six weeks in order to continue performing with their program. Having described their groups as “families”, they feel a strong obligation not only to themselves, but to the other participants and their instructors. Students provide tutoring sessions for those who are struggling to pass their courses. When asked

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<sup>8</sup> Diaz, Jose. Personal interview. 21 Feb. 2012

why they choose to provide help they explained that every member has an important role in the productions and that one person failing a class directly affects the entire group. One student explained, “We have to help each other. If we don’t, it hurts all of us.”<sup>9</sup> These students are graduating from high school as a result of belonging to the programs. Another student admitted, “If it weren’t for folklórico, I wouldn’t be here anymore. I wouldn’t even come to school. I come for this and that’s it.”<sup>10</sup>

Many students express that although their undocumented status is a major concern for them and their families, their teachers’ unending support makes them believe that college is a possibility. Students are reminded daily that regardless of documentation, college is a necessity. Mrs. Garza-Cantu, folklórico teacher, explained, “I tell them that I came from Mexico too. We are the same. You need to go to school and do something with your life. Think of your family and the family you will have. They need you to be successful. You have no excuse.”<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Garza-Cantu and Mr. Garza, mariachi teacher, both shared that too often students only see the road blocks and have to be constantly reminded that they control their own futures. In order to help promote college enrollment, every senior in the three performing groups is guaranteed a \$250 to \$450 college scholarship.

Senior principal dancer Hanss Mujica was selected as a 2012 Young Arts National Finalist. Out of 5,000 seniors from across the country only three percent of these participants were selected to advance. Mujica traveled to the “Young Arts Week” in January, where he participated in auditions and interviews. Mujica was nominated to be a U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Arts and received an award of \$5,000 for college. Only 20 of the 150 finalists were

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<sup>9</sup> Magallan, Nelly. Personal interview. 20 Mar. 2012

<sup>10</sup> Juarez, Mariana. Personal interview. 24 Feb. 2012

<sup>11</sup> Garza, Daisy. Personal interview. 10 Feb. 2012

selected for this national recognition. Mujica auditioned in the category of world dance with Mexican folk music. His selection was a song titled “La Iguana” from the state of Veracruz. Hanss acknowledges that without the training of his dance teacher he would have not achieved such a prestigious level.

Students are appreciative of the travel opportunities that these groups provide. Many of them come from families where travel is impossible. They either don’t have the resources or cannot travel due to family members’ undocumented status. Often times these students only leave the district through these school sponsored trips. Parents have learned to trust that the district will keep their children safe and provide measures to minimize the risk of detention and deportation of undocumented students. Many of the students had never been outside of the Rio Grande Valley until they began travelling with these groups. Through these performance opportunities, students have been able to visit a variety of places such as Bastrop, Corpus Christi, San Antonio, Austin, Lubbock, and even Miami. One student described it as “a dream.” She explained, “I’m not supposed to go anywhere. My parents are scared, but they let me go because they know it’s the only chance I will get.”<sup>12</sup>

Students credit the three programs with helping them create a more solid cultural connection. Many explain that they feel participation has helped them better relate to their families, especially their parents and grandparents that moved here from Mexico. Students admit that this was not necessarily a concern of theirs when they initially joined these groups, but has become a very positive result. One student described how he went home and showed his grandmother a dance he was preparing and she in turn began to tell him stories of the small Mexican town she came from where she actually performed that particular dance as a small girl.

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<sup>12</sup> Garza, Beverly. Personal interview. 28 Feb. 2012

He said, “If I hadn’t shown her that, she wouldn’t have ever told me that story and I wouldn’t have learned that about her. It would have been forgotten.”<sup>13</sup>

As they learn new dances/songs, students become more knowledgeable about the various areas of Mexico. Students who previously couldn’t pick out a single Mexican state on a map are now able to not only identify, but discuss the music/dance traditions found within them. Sol Azteca’s principal dancer explained, “I didn’t know where anything was. I just thought it was Mexico, you know? But now, I hear music or I see dances and I recognize them I can say oh yes that’s from Nayarit or that’s from Jalisco. I can picture where it comes from and it makes more sense to me.”<sup>14</sup> Through this knowledge the student gain a greater respect and understanding of the people they represent in their performances.

Through these organizations, students have found a way to bring pride to their families. Student participation provides parents with a sense of acknowledgement that may not otherwise have been felt. Through their performances, students are able to pay homage to their parents and their ancestors. The act of performing is the student’s way of embracing and respecting their culture.

It is important to note that although 78% of these students’ parents moved here from Mexico, only 33% of the students were actually born in Mexico (see fig. 6, 7). Seventy nine percent of all of these students said they considered Spanish to be their first language (see fig. 8).<sup>15</sup> This raises a very important question, are these kids Mexican or Mexican American? This is very difficult to answer because the students themselves are many times unsure of how to identify themselves. They often find themselves torn between trying to become “American” in

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<sup>13</sup> Chavez, Emiliano. Personal interview. 8 Mar. 2012

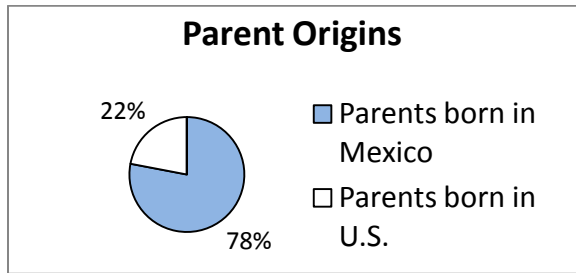
<sup>14</sup> Magallan, Nelly. Personal interview. 20 Mar. 2012

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous questionnaire. 3 Mar. 2012



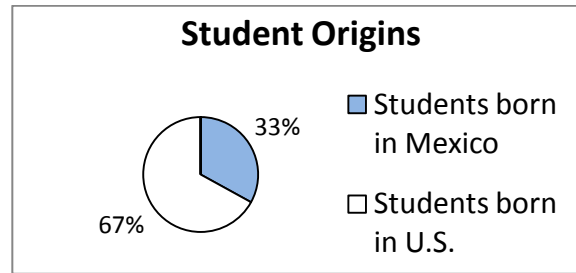
order to fit in outside of the home and trying to remain respectful of their parents' background. Some students on the other hand, are confident in identifying themselves as Mexican.

**Figure 6**



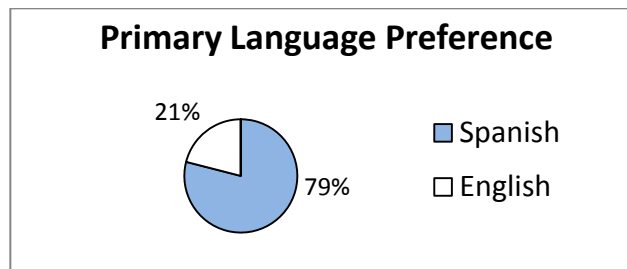
**78% of students participating have parents who were born in Mexico.**

**Figure 7**



**67% of students participating were born in the U.S.**

**Figure 8**



**79% of participating student considered Spanish to be their first language.**

One student explained that he dropped classical guitar for mariachi because “Classical guitar had nothing to do with me. I am much more Mexican than that.”<sup>16</sup>

When asked about their performances, all students expressed the importance of being true to the dances and songs being performed. Every costume accessory is important to paint an accurate picture of the people and the region being represented. Every scarf, skirt, and hair piece is essential to the authenticity of the performance. As students rush through costume changes they make sure to examine each other to ensure that everyone is uniform before returning to the stage. “It gets crazy back here, but we have to make sure we get it right. The earrings, the apron, everything. You don’t want to look like you don’t know what you’re doing.”<sup>17</sup> Facial expressions and body gestures are recognized by students as vital components of an authentic performance. Choreography must be perfected in order to truly represent the region depicted. Mariachi members emphasize that songs must only be sung by students who sound like “real” mariachis. They explained that you don’t just dance the dance or play the song, you BECOME the character. In becoming the character, one has a responsibility to be as authentic as possible. Anything less is considered to be extremely disrespectful. One student explained this concept to me, “When you learn a dance, it’s not just about the steps. Anyone can do that. Mrs. Garza makes sure we understand the details. Our gestures, our posture, every accessory we wear with our costume is supposed to represent a group of people. If we do not get it right, someone in our audience will know and more importantly, we will know. We will know that we are not teaching our audience the truth and that is disrespectful to our culture.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ruiz, Isaac. Personal interview. 2 Mar. 2012

<sup>17</sup> Garza, Beverly. Personal interview. 28 Feb.. 2012

<sup>18</sup> Chavez, Emiliano. Personal interview. 8 Mar. 2012

In the process of becoming the character, all students describe the sense of also becoming Mexican. When asked what it meant to be Mexican, students reported that it meant being proud of their families and background. Celebrating and performing aspects of their cultural heritage made them Mexican. Students also consider their costumes as an extension of their Mexican identity. The costumes help represent their roots and their history. Regardless of the region represented, they associate the Hispanic ties with their own Mexican Identity. Students often times feel outside pressure to distance themselves from the Mexican traditions and histories of their parents. This brings up feelings of shame and guilt that without this outlet may have gone on unresolved. Performing in these shows provides an opportunity for students to exude pride in their Mexican upbringing in an environment that doesn't evoke feelings of embarrassment or judgment. Some say that they do identify themselves as Mexican American and embrace both cultures equally but explain that they feel a change within themselves when they are in costume (see fig. 9). One mariachi student explained what the mariachi *traje* or suit meant to him: "I am proud of being Mexican American and I'm grateful to my parents for raising me on this side. But when I put on that *traje*, it all changes. When I put it on, I AM Mexican."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> De Leon, Jose. Personal interview. 9 Mar. 2012

**Figure 9**



**The use of the mariachi *traje* helps students feel connected to their Mexican roots.**

### **Community Perspective**

In addition to considering how these programs have affected students' perspectives about their culture it is important to also consider the community's perspective of these groups. The La Joya ISD community provides a great deal of support for the three organizations. Parents interviewed explain that they attend folklórico, mariachi, and conjunto performances because unlike band or even choir concerts, which they consider to be strange and foreign, they “understand” the shows and do not feel out of place. In fact, they make it a point to attend as many performances as possible and always invite extended family to attend as well.

One parent explained, “When my son started singing, I called all my family to come and see him. And they did. We go to every show to see him. Even my sister living in California came to see him. It is something special he is doing.”<sup>20</sup>

Parents expressed fear that their children are losing touch with their culture and often are unwilling to learn about something they consider being old fashioned. Seeing their children show interest in these programs has been a relief to many who felt their culture would not be passed on to the next generation. “I would look at my kids and I saw they didn’t want to be like us. I thought my grandchildren will be Americanos. They won’t understand us. But I see her dancing and she is so happy and she is proud. Proud of who she is.”<sup>21</sup> Parents credit these programs with helping keep the culture from disappearing and provide opportunities to not only learn but perform the very traditions that the parents are fighting to keep alive. Furthermore, there is a sense of appreciation for the district’s efforts to ensure that the community continues to consider their Mexican culture as something important and irreplaceable.

When moving to the U.S., many of these community members left behind an entire way of life. Undocumented or not, all immigrants have had to try to adjust to life in their new country. Attending these shows is a way for individuals to lose their sense of isolation, if only for a moment. Performances spark the memory of a life long left behind but never forgotten. Many are unable to travel to visit their home country. The shows allow one to revisit the past and make connections with the future, specifically their children. These programs have found a way to bring Mexico back to the La Joya community.

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<sup>20</sup> Aguilar, Josue. Personal interview. 18 Feb. 2012

<sup>21</sup> Sanchez, Mario. Personal interview. 19 Feb. 2012

## **Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic identity refers to the sense of belonging and pride in a particular ethnic group. Through membership, an individual constructs certain ideas, feelings, perceptions and behaviors. Phinney's review of literature on ethnic identity discusses the importance of ethnic identity in the study of psychological functioning. Ethnic identity exploration accelerates during early/mid adolescence resulting in a declaration of ethnic identity formed by late adolescence. Most research available is concentrated on young children and theoretical work done on adolescents and adults does not have consistency in regards to definitions and terminology (Phinney 500).

Phinney explains that ethnic identity can be viewed from one of three conceptual perspectives: social identity theory, acculturation and culture conflict, and identity formation. Social identity theory has been presented by social psychologists who believe that people must have a strong sense of group identification for their own well-being. This theory discusses how an individual copes with the involvement of two cultures, specifically one's native culture and one's new culture. The main idea of the issue is whether or not people have to choose between cultures or can they establish a bicultural ethnic identity (501).

Understanding the concept of acculturation is important to the second conceptual perspective. Acculturation refers to the changes that may occur in an individual's or a family's values, attitude, knowledge, and behaviors as they begin to interact with a new cultural environment. Acculturation may also expand to include a process in which ethnic or cultural groups borrow from each other resulting in either a new or blended set of patterns. One should take care not to confuse acculturation with assimilation, in which the individual takes in new cultural traditions and becomes similar to the new cultural environment without the use of

blending or retaining old patterns. Padilla (1980) identifies two components of acculturation. The first is cultural awareness which refers to the individual's knowledge of native and host culture. The second, ethnic loyalty refers to the individual's preferences for one cultural environment over another (56). Ethnic identity fits into this component of acculturation because it is how a person relates to his/her own group as a subgroup of the larger society. An individual's ethnic identity will depend on their level of acculturation in the host culture. Frucht describes two processes of acculturation. The first argues that the strengthening of one identity requires the weakening of the other. Secondly, within this process it is possible for people to have a strong identification with both one's ethnic culture and new culture or even a weak identification with both cultures (24).

The third conceptual perspective, identity formation, describes ethnic identity as a process that can change over time. Phinney explains that ethnic identity happens in stages. This begins with a lack of thought in one's ethnic identity. It is followed by exploration of one's ethnic identity (501). Finally, this results in a gained understanding and appreciation of one's ethnic identity. One must keep in mind that there are certain factors that can impede or facilitate the development of ethnic identity. Bernal and Martinelli list those factors as the following:

1. Age at immigration
2. Education
3. Ethnic construct of neighborhood
4. Family cohesion
5. Access to social networks
6. Gender
7. Experience with discrimination

## 8. Occupational status (184)

Quintana et al. state that research has shown the protective effects of ethnic identity (12). High levels of ethnic identity development helps individuals combat the negative effects of discrimination. Additional research indicates that Latinos cope with stress better when ethnic identity was considered central to one's sense of self and positive feelings about one's ethnicity are present, even when the cause of stress was not of an ethnic nature (12).

Through public acceptance of one's group and culture, a positive group identity is developed that promotes feelings of self-respect and self-esteem. Burnet describes the multiculturalist assumption as "the idea that social acceptance and recognition of cultural diversity and cultural identity is crucial for personal self-feelings" (44). In his essay, "The Politics of Recognition", Taylor argues that, "Misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victim with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (26). Strong and secure ethnic identities can have positive impact while the rejection of one's group and culture perpetuates feelings of insecurity and decreases self-worth. Recognition and acceptance is important for psychological well-being and for the education process (Verkuyten 419).

The correlation between ethnic identity and self-esteem can be found within school settings. Umana-Taylor's exploration of ethnic identity and self-esteem among students of Mexican origin showed that there was a significant relationship between the two. Umana-Taylor's findings show that students who attended schools that were predominantly non-Hispanic experienced higher levels of ethnic identity and lower self-esteem than those who attended predominantly Hispanic or balanced Hispanic/Non-Hispanic schools (785). Similar



results were found in Quintana et al.'s investigation into the relationship between discrimination and ethnic identity. Quintana et al. argued that the negative effect of discrimination on students was reduced when ethnic identity was affirmed (12). Bejarano explains:

Youth of Mexican descent differentiate themselves through youth cultures, language use and educational status, varying conceptualizations of citizenship status, and the social hierarchies and levels of discrimination they encounter within the school setting (4).

Quintana et al.'s model of Mexican American adolescent's ethnic self-concepts and identity explores the three subcategories that make up Ethnic Identity (cultural self, transcending self, possible minority self) and how it is ultimately affected by the external influences of family, the Mexican American community, and the Anglo community. Quintana et al.'s study is consistent with other literature identifying three basic components of ethnic self-concepts (11). The first concept, the cultural self, refers to cultural practices, heritage, and values held by the individual. Second, the stigmatized minority self deals with internalized stereotypes and racism. Lastly, the transcending self explores one's need to assimilate or bridge ethnic group boundaries.

### **Mexican Identity**

During interviews held at Juarez-Lincoln High School, students participating in the programs were asked what they believed it meant to be Mexican. Students indicated that recognizing their families and background through performing aspects of their cultural heritage made them Mexican. This raises the question, what does it mean to be Mexican? Anzaldua defines what it is to be Mexican as follows:

We say *nosotros los mexicanos* (by *mexicanos* we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one). We distinguish between *mexicanos del otro lado* (from the other side) and *mexicanos de este lado* (from this side). Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not of citizenship (84).

As demonstrated by the students interviewed at La Joya ISD, ethnic identity and a sense of Mexican identity is greatly affected by parents and family as they are influential transmitters of culture. Identifying one's self as Mexican refers to specific customs, memories, and places of familial importance. Proximity to the international border magnifies their ethnic identities and continues to emphasize a "Mexicaness" or *Mexicanidad* (Alvarez 22). The community surrounding Juarez-Lincoln High School consists of a large percentage of Mexican immigrants. In order to recoup what has been left behind, these immigrants participate in a "*patria chica*" (small homeland) identity which consists of creating a close-knit, like-minded community (Bernal & Martinelli 42). It is within these communities that parents and children alike are able to demonstrate allegiance and devotion to their homeland through the continued social practice of customs, values, and sharing of experiences. This results in what Bernal & Martinelli refer to "intergenerational transmission" of ethnic identity (42). For young people, reidentifying with *being* Mexican stems from contact with people of the same cultural group and personal experiences in Mexico which sharpen the sense of difference and reaffirms their ethnic identity (Alvarez 18).

The United States continues to experience ongoing Mexican immigration. This constant "Immigrant Replenishment" has provided a means for Mexican Americans to feel more

positively attached to their ethnic roots (Jimenez 5). Immigrants replenish access to symbols and practices encouraging ethnic expression. Many groups in the United States have experienced a loss of “ethnic distinctiveness” because immigration for those groups stopped long ago. If not for this immigrant replenishment, the prominence of Mexican American’s ethnic identity would be greatly diminished (21).

Although immigrants’ presence bolsters ethnic identity, the ongoing Mexican immigration has brought about a large obstacle for Mexican Americans. Continued immigration promotes the view that all Mexicans are foreigners, making Mexican-Americans seem like they are not as much a part of the U.S. population. They are ultimately excluded from the “ethnic quilt” that makes up the country (5).

Jimenez states:

Precisely because immigration is an important part of both their historical and their present day experience, immigration and the struggles associated with immigration and assimilation have become central to what it means to be Mexican American (24).

### **Mexican Identity and Music**

Unable to take many material possessions with them, immigrants have held on to things that they could transport: language, customs, values, experience and music. Music is a cultural expression that members of cultural groups can take with them anywhere. Music is used to “relocate” one self to their homeland. Chew explains that music can create a home within a host

country, a “third space” (31). Through music, these people are able to recreate life in their home country through the memory of lived experiences. Their memories are linked with others’ memories, creating a way for us to remember as part of a specific group, creating a community memory.

Music expresses the substance of a group through the blending of personal, social, and cultural meanings. Chew states:

Music is part of the collective memory and the continuing social dialogue... Music plays an important role in shaping identity through the experience of listening, dancing, or singing with group contexts. Such contexts enable people to place themselves in specific cultural narratives (29).

Music provides a sense of self and others. Because music and identity are mobile, they should be seen as a continuous process of “becoming”. Music, like identity, is representative of characteristics of a group. Chew describes music as “capable of crossing spatial and time borders” (30).

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Through this study it is evident that multicultural education has many benefits and has proven itself a necessity in communities with culturally diverse population. Studies have shown that teaching students about their culture has been beneficial in establishing self-esteem, sense of self, cultural awareness, ethnic identity, coping mechanisms, and academic achievement.

In an effort to better engage students, La Joya ISD created mariachi, conjunto, and folklórico programs that not only encourage high school graduation, but also help participants gain a better understanding and appreciation for their Mexican heritage. Regardless of the initial reason for creating, participating, or supporting these groups, one outcome stands out: the cultivation of Mexican identity. La Joya ISD has developed programs that not only encourage students, but speak to the very heart of the community. These groups have become instrumental in developing La Joya youths' Mexican identity. It is my hope that other districts will look at the model implemented by La Joya and realize the benefits that can be attained through promoting their own communities' cultural heritage.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Katrena H. Henry was born in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico on May 22, 1978. She graduated from Pharr-San Juan- Alamo North High School in 1996. She graduated with a Bachelor of Music in Music Education in 2001 from the University of North Texas. She has worked as a high school band director in La Joya Independent School District for eleven years. In 2013 Henry earned her Master of Music degree from the University of Texas – Pan American. Her current residence is 1321 Kendlewood Avenue, McAllen, TX 78501.