

## **Hispanic Children: Pioneers For Cultural Change**

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### **Abstract**

Hispanic children across the United States, but more specifically in Watauga County, North Carolina, are serving as cultural pioneers for their people. Through a recent phenomenon known as Cultural Diglossia, Hispanic youth are creating a new and unique culture evolving from the two most prominent cultures they experience in their day to day life: American and Hispanic. These youth have taken elements, such as traditions, customs, and languages from both cultures and combined them to create their current cultural standing. As if they have one hand in American culture and one hand in Hispanic culture, Hispanic youth have then taken part in cultural diglossia. Out of cultural diglossia comes a process known as selective assimilation. The Hispanic youth flourish in selective assimilation because it allows them to adapt to a variety of experiences they encounter regularly. For example, most Watauga County public schools have less than a two percent Hispanic population; on another note, many Hispanic families in Watauga County are often immigrants or contain parents whom are immigrants that come to this particular region to work in one of the abundant Christmas tree farms. Children in these Hispanic families encounter a very American lifestyle while at school, by associating with mostly white Americans, speaking only English and partaking in typical American customs. However, being immigrants or American-born children of immigrants, the term “selective” assimilation is almost unfitting, because in order for these children to be able to function in the widely varied aspects of their day, they have no choice but to “select” assimilation into whichever culture stands in front of them. After various interviews with Watauga County Public School employees, as well as the director of a local medical program working to serve Hispanics of all immigration statuses, children clearly create a cultural life for themselves, much different than the culture of their parents and older Hispanic generations, as well as the culture embraced by their American peers and neighbors. With a recent rise in Hispanics across the United States, most Americans are realizing that its not simply children who are our future, but instead it is Hispanic children. With the recent cultural accomplishments made by these Hispanic children, the support from Americans of various ethnicities will propel the United States into a better future.

**Keywords: Hispanic, Children, Culture**

### **1. Introduction**

Gagger ball, silent ball, and World War III: all, crazy and wild games that I, as well as my peers, made up as young children. As indicated by their names, these games were all very different from traditional games, American kids played all over the country. However, these games were not completely prototypal; instead, they evolved from typically universal games for kids, like dodge ball, soccer and tag. These evolutionary games, created by my peers and I, came about as a result of a natural instinct found in most children. That is, the need to take pieces of information you already know; for example, the premise of dodge ball, soccer, or tag, then, combine it with unrelated information you also already know; for example, the premises of the other games. Together, these two separate concepts evolved into a new game, one that embodies the elements of multiple games.

This exact idea of a mixture or blend, specifically one created by children, mimics a current cultural paradigm shift among Hispanic children. Hispanic youth currently living in two different cultures, American and Hispanic; are no longer deciding between the two. Instead, they are choosing to create their own culture using premises of these cultures that they are already familiar with. Similar to the concept used by my peers and I creating brand new games to play, Hispanic children are serving as pioneers in this cultural movement.

Hispanic children, both immigrants and decedents, located in Watauga County have built a new culture for themselves. This culture is separate from the traditional Hispanic culture, practiced by their parents as well as the older generations, and separate from traditional American culture, practiced by their peers. Hispanic children have gone down the path of cultural diglossia, where they live separate lives at home or at school, depending on wherever they may be. These children have discovered a new culture in lieu of trying to maintain one specific culture. Through quick adaptation and the capability to fit many molds, they have enabled themselves to culturally adapt to both their Hispanic heritage and everyday American influence leading their generation in a new breed of cultural success.

## **2. Educational Role**

The education system in the United States, specifically public schools, serves as a gateway for the Hispanic youth to dive into cultural diglossia. American Schools give Hispanic children the widest variety of opportunities to select assimilation into typical American culture. Through the friends they make, activities with classmates, clubs they join, and sports they play, Hispanic children begin to embrace a new culture, one that they eventually learn to embody.

While their experience in public schools is one of the greatest influences that allow Hispanic children to assimilate into American culture, often times they neglect to bring this culture into their home lives and instead live in two separate cultures, based on where they are and who they're with. "They really start to have those two separate identities of their home life and their school life it seems" (Dickson).

The conscious decision, made by Hispanic youth, to choose assimilation into American culture, alongside maintaining important elements of their native Hispanic culture, is more than just a conscious decision, it is an instinctive survival technique. It is clear that the United States offers an abundance of opportunities for individuals of all ages and ethnicities, however, if these opportunities are left in the dust and not taken advantage of by those who need it, the ability to survive in this society is no more. As a large contingent of this country's minority and immigrant base, Hispanic youth have instinctively recognized this theory and have worked in schools to take advantage of opportunity; "Interestingly, however Hispanic immigrant children score higher than native-Hispanic immigrant children on ATL skills such as initiative and self control (DeFeyter & Winsler, 2009). In fact, some evidence suggests that there is little or no difference between Hispanic immigrant children and their native-White peers on ATL" (Bumgarner 242). All over the country, but most often in rural areas with small Hispanic populations like Watauga County, Hispanic students are seeing success in public schools.

North Carolina particularly, has seen the dramatic effects of the newly created culture presented by Hispanic youth. Because this select group of young people has mastered the art of selective assimilation, they are better able to adapt to any scenario they might find themselves in; for example, school. In most of North Carolina, but Watauga County especially, Hispanics make up a very limited portion of the school. This small minority easily serves as an academic hindrance to students who feel removed from the majority of their peers. However with the recent cultural shift happening with Hispanic students, they are embracing the predominately White, American culture found in their school using this selective assimilation to improve their educational careers. "Results show that Hispanic students who begin attending public school in North Carolina between prekindergarten and third grade and remain through eighth grade post substantial gains in test scores and eliminate test score gaps with non-Hispanic Whites conditional on basic indicators of socioeconomic status (SES)" (Clotfelter 1609).

### **2.1 Assimilation**

The creolization of culture, created by Hispanic youth who consciously assimilate to either American or Hispanic culture when need be, is much like a coming of age event. Most often, adults and elders in Hispanic families around the United States feeling overwhelmed by the vast differences in American culture and in an attempt to maintain a familiar lifestyle, try to maintain elements of their native culture, sometimes at the expense of the youth. "Latino children are underrepresented in early childhood education programs that could teach social and language skills to

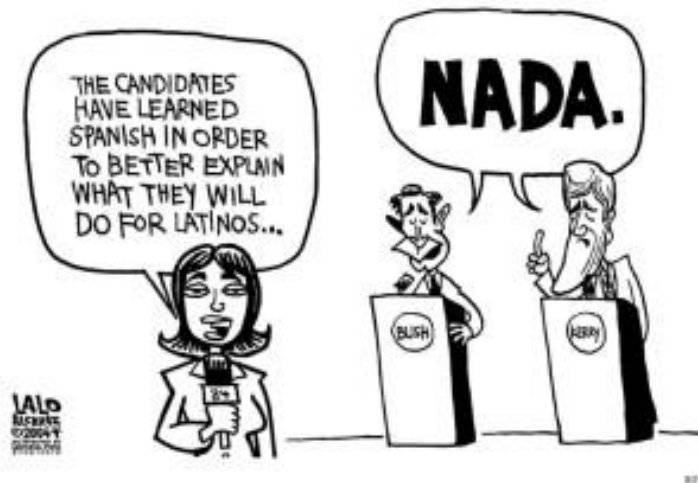
help them succeed in school. Latino children are much less likely than non-Hispanic white and black preschoolers to be enrolled in preschool” (Mather).

Many people question if the growing Hispanic population will continue to work at assimilation into American culture or instead try to take over American culture and replace it with traditional Hispanic culture. In areas like Austin, Texas, the second option is becoming more likely. “Schools are playing catch-up as they try to offer more bilingual education, outreach programs for non-English-speaking parents and an array of support services, including tutoring, basic computer skills classes and health clinics” (Taboada). Schools are one of the many organizations struggling to push Hispanics into assimilation and are likely on the track to adapting to Hispanic culture, instead of having Hispanic culture adapt to them.

Outside of schools, and in some cases inside as well, the young Hispanic population constantly faces various difficulties in their assimilation process. However, the Hispanic youth have pioneered a movement of cultural assimilation where they have served as soldiers for both themselves and their older generations.

For young, Hispanic children, dealing with the constant pressure to embody a variety of cultures, the inevitable route of cultural creolization has been taken. “The idea that cultural encounters lead to cultural hybridity or mixing of some kind is, appropriately enough, a middle position between two views of the past, both of which may be criticized as superficial” (Burke 112). This birth of a culture is however, not superficial and instead reaches beyond merely generational; the culture created by Hispanic youth embodies elements of influence from parents, peers, and modern day American society.

Politically, Hispanics of all ages rarely ever see support.



(Digital Image).

Hispanic youth found themselves with no other option than to choose selective assimilation after the constant neglecting faced by older generations. While the government provided no sense of stability or protection with Hispanic elders, who most commonly kept all aspects of their native culture and assimilated little to no aspects of American culture, the youth were in dyer need to ensure their future by assimilation into crucial aspects of American culture like education and still maintain Hispanic traditions to keep strong family ties.

## 2.2 Looking to The Future

However, with the increasingly growing Hispanic population, this is surely going to change in the near future. Not only are the numbers of Hispanics growing but the ages are too. In past years the large number of Hispanics had a little impact on political issues due to the great number of them who were under age 18. Now, this is no longer the case. “The last time the United States saw such a dramatic increase in voters of a particular race or ethnicity was after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which swelled the ranks of black voter and changed the political landscape of the entire nation. A similar increase in Hispanic voters – especially when they are concentrated in specific locations – will have an equally enormous impact on politics and parties from courthouses all the way to

Congress” (Editorial). A political impact is necessary for Hispanics in the future, but in order to make this impact, the need for expansion and perfection of their new culture is crucial.

Joining Hispanic youth in their battle to maintain their new evolutionary culture, are organizations like the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC). This organization provides another outlet for Hispanic youths where they are simultaneously assimilated into both American and Hispanic culture. This empowerment that the youth receive through the various programs and activities that LAYC provides, builds the backbone needed for this newly created culture to be able to push through and survive in the future. However organizations like LAYC are often overlooked by the United States government, and during a time of need, they are abandoned quickly. “The reckless battle going on in Congress is impacting our services... In order to ensure the long term health of our programs, on Wednesday October 9<sup>th</sup> the LAYC will reduce services to ESSENTIAL operations only” (In the News). Without that constant reassurance and support, Hispanic youth struggle to bring their new culture into adulthood.

One of the biggest issues in expanding the culture created by Hispanic youth is modern day multiculturalism. Many people like to think that the diversity in the US builds our country to be something beautiful and unique to the rest of the world. The US embodies multiculturalism and most people are perfectly all right with this, yet some believe that it is actually tearing down our nation. “Multiculturalism is a leftist political ideology that sees all cultures, their mores and institutions, as essentially equal. No culture is considered superior or inferior to any other; it is merely different. Criticism of other cultures, especially non-Western/minority cultures is labeled “insensitive” or “bigoted.” There is one major exception, however. The Euro-American culture with its Judeo-Christian underpinnings is not only criticized but often condemned, being accused of racism, sexism, and classism” (Lott 3). However, if the US could embody a culture like the Hispanic youth, one where selective assimilation is available and effective, we could beat multiculturalism.

Youth, regardless of race or ethnicity, often find themselves in a great deal of conflict when learning how to incorporate various, contrasting cultures into their lives. “Born in Poland, my father in his early youth moved with his parents to West Prussia, that part of Germany where the Germans and the Poles were in continual conflict with each other, both before and after World War I... The conflict between them was rooted in cultural and ethnic hostilities and was not the product of a social movement or ideology now known as multiculturalism” (Schmidt). Where current Hispanic youth are deemed revolutionary, is in their recent ability to form a new culture, unique to them, where they can, by choice, embody either American culture or their traditional Hispanic culture.

Clearly over the past few decades, a huge demographic shift has illustrated the rising number of Hispanic youths in the United States. While the youth have seemingly created a new culture for themselves, separate from traditional culture practiced by their parents, and separate from American culture practiced by their peers, but instead a culmination of both cultures which allow the youth an easier day to day life by learning how to interact with and be a part of multiple lifestyles. However, part of the reason this movement has been so strong is because the United States are learning how to accept Hispanic culture the more they grow. “By 2016, Hispanics will contribute roughly \$14.0 billion to the car and automobile manufacturing industry, representing annualized growth of 7.4 percent from 2011-2016... From these statistical facts and projections, its clear the role of Latinos, regardless of citizenship, is and will continue to be a vital component on strengthening the health of the US economy” (Treviño 5). A rapidly growing Hispanic population means a greater potential for expansion of culture among the youth but the future for Hispanics is still unknown.

While it is clear that the Hispanic youth are the ones pioneering this current cultural movement, it remains unclear how the new culture they’ve created will transfer over into their adult lives and futures. It is also unclear how long their current success will last. The road to success is never an easy one, so for Hispanic youth and their accomplishments thus far, questions often arise regarding the projected failure in the nearby future. Many Hispanic children face various problems regarding poverty, assimilation, and opportunity, meaning their unlikely success, is unlikely to last.

Hispanic youth, like all other minorities, want nothing more than a future where they can overcome the odds. From the start, their futures are seemingly not the most promising; “Hispanic children are more likely to live in a metropolitan statistical area (MSA), in a single-mother household, and in households with lower income, lower education, and a non-English primary language. They are also younger, on average, and are much more likely to be first- or second-generation immigrants than nH-white children” (Avila 419). The struggles faced by Hispanics at young ages are unfortunately likely to carry over into adulthood.

While America is the land of abundant opportunity, cultural and ethnic limitations take away from the futures of many Hispanic youth. As the youth try and work their magic by displaying their versatile culture and easy ability to assimilate, and even though much of America has shaped itself around the growing Hispanic influence, the boundaries set up by various reasons are a major set back for Hispanic youth. However, many organizations such as

The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families work to extend opportunities, through education and advocacy, to Hispanic youth (The Committee).

Another large problem for Hispanic youth in the United States is poverty. Poverty serves as yet another motivation for Hispanic children to assimilate into American culture because with the success often brought along with the American lifestyle, Hispanic children see this as an escape from poverty. According to [childrensdefense.org](http://childrensdefense.org), as of March 2013, “each day 893 babies are born into poverty” (Each Day). This number is rapidly increasing and when Hispanic youth try to hold on to as much of their native culture as they can, they find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to opportunity in the United States.

The largest problem that lies ahead for Hispanic youth is their journey into adulthood. “Children of Latino Immigrants begin life with a substantial advantage over the children of U.S. born Hispanics, faring better across areas such as education, health and economics, says a new study released today by the Foundation for Child Development. Yet over time, the study finds persistent disparities in income, health insurance coverage and education disproportionately affect the children of Latino immigrants” (Terrero). While Hispanic youth have adopted a new and diverse culture the question becomes where do they go with it? Will the selective assimilation be ineffective in years to come?

### **3. Current Cultural Standings**

Even though the cultural success received by Hispanic children has been a total shot in the dark, because of the large increase of Hispanics as well as the impact their new culture has created, Hispanic youth still have a strong chance to allow their success to carry over into their futures.

While Hispanic youth have rapidly pushed themselves ahead of other ethnicities, the question remains, will Hispanic adults be able to stay ahead in the future? Will they maintain their ability to selectively assimilate to various cultures such as American and Hispanic? After looking at demographic trends in the United States, Mark Mather believes “We need to pay attention to the fact that we have a large and rapidly growing population of Latino youth and many are going to struggle as they make the transition to adulthood. But its there youth who will drive labor force and growth in the coming years...” (America’s Future).

In addition, the doubts many Hispanics, both youth and adults, see in themselves, are because of the generalizations the make. These assumptions about their culture as well as others are irrational and irrelevant and often push them further away from the new culture they strive to create. However, generalizations can serve as motivation, to break the mold and beat the odds. “Generalizations can be helpful but they are restrictive... generalizations didn’t make me culturally literate but they helped me operate in other cultures” (Jones).

America is not the marvelous land that many expect it to be. “These are things that can’t be told... Things like my doing very poorly on an IQ test because I didn’t speak English, and getting tossed into a special education track, where it took until high school before somebody realized I didn’t belong there. Things like a North American hairdresser telling my mother she didn’t do her kind of hair. Like my father, finally realizing he wasn’t going to go back to Cuba anytime soon, trying to hang himself with the light cord in the bathroom...” (Obejas 171). For Hispanic youth, the selective assimilation they have brought into their new culture allows them to disregard the troubles brought on by America.

The assimilation process created and adapted by Hispanic youth all over America, but specifically in Watauga County, came out of pure necessity. Being any type of minority in the United States can in fact be rewarding; however, in most cases, there is little reward and even for a small reward there is a huge price to pay. As minorities, especially Hispanic children, were pushed further down the road, they needed to better assimilate into American Society. However, Hispanic youth took an even better approach to this concept and continued to value traditional elements of their native culture, as well as embracing elements of American society. While the Hispanic youth may have chosen to incorporate two cultures in creating a new culture, they did not make the choice to change anything about their culture at all. It was simply instinctive and necessary for their survival in this country.

The creation of a new Hispanic culture, one which embodies both American and Hispanic elements, was a result of survival tactics by the Hispanic youth. Many are stereotyped to become children stuck in a cycle of poverty, with no hope, no opportunity, and no assimilation what so ever into the American lifestyle. Enrique, a young boy from Honduras, finds himself trapped in these thoughts: “Enrique fears that he will become like the hundreds of glue-sniffing children her sees downtown” (Nazario 36). The lack of potential that Hispanic youth often see in themselves, is unrealistic and illogical.

Often times we look to the youth of our hometown, state, or even nation, to guide us smoothly into a better future. What the Hispanic youth has created, is a remarkable collaboration of Hispanic and American cultures, enabling

them to easily adapt to any situation. Whether it is through simple communication or a wider span of opportunity, the evolutionary culture created by Hispanic youth contains the potential to serve as a model for the ideal cultural makeup of each individual. By allowing oneself to embrace a variety of culture and knowing when it is appropriate to feel in touch with a single, specific culture you embody, as humans, we can better our lives through an expansion in understanding, tolerance, as well as opportunity.

The idea of cultural diglossia, creating a new and improved culture through the combination of two or more other cultures, did not come voluntarily for Hispanic youth. The necessity to assimilate and rapidly adapt to a changing lifestyle pushed Hispanic youth into the concept of cultural diglossia. As for the rest of the United States, this will be the same; individuals, specifically children, of other, various ethnicities will soon see the necessity for cultural diglossia, and embrace a method similar to the one which the Hispanic youth have worked hard at creating.

Children of other ethnicities, in both Watauga County and across the United States, will be the driving force for another cultural paradigm shift, following in the footsteps of the current paradigm shift created by Hispanic children. The reason it is up to the children to pioneer yet another dramatic change in culture is because of their absorbent ways of thinking, and their willingness to inherit the method of cultural diglossia. Like creating thrilling new games when we were children, using the basic premises of traditional and much older games, children are the only ones woven with enough creativity to embrace and carry out such a substantial, yet much need, cultural evolution that will reshape our nation for the better.

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