R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 020 810 RC 000 317

COWBOYS, INDIANS, AND AMERICAN EDUCATION.

BY- HOWE, HAROLD, II
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE

PUB DATE 25 APR 68

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.68 15P.

DESCRIPTORS- ANGLO AMERICANS, *AMERICAN CULTURE, CHILDREN, *CULTURE, *CULTURAL BACKGROUND, EDUCATION, ENGLISH, FOREIGN RELATIONS, FEDERAL AID, *INSTRUCTION, LANGUAGES, LEADERSHIP, *MEXICAN AMERICANS, SPANISH, STATE AID, HEW, USOE,

THE SCHOOLS ARE ACCUSED OF HAVING FAILED IN EDUCATING THE MEXICAN AMERICAN CHILD. ONE OF THE MAIN REASONS UNDERLYING THIS FAILURE IS ATTRIBUTABLE TO AN ANGLO AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW WHICH DISCOURAGES DIVERSE CULTURES IN OUR SOCIETY. THIS SAME POINT OF VIEW REFLECTS THE NOTION THAT THE AMERICAN CULTURE IS SUPERIOR TO ALL OTHER CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS. IT IS SUGGESTED THAT MEXICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN MUST LEARN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE BUT SHOULD NOT HAVE TO REJECT THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF THE SPANISH LANGUAGE OR MEXICAN AMERICAN CUSTOMS. IT IS FURTHER SUGGESTED THAT CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION BE CONDUCTED IN OTHER LANGUAGES. REASONING FOR THIS APPROACH IS THE IMPROVEMENT OF OUR FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS. IN ORDER FOR THE SCHOOLS TO PROMOTE RESPECT FOR DIVERSE CULTURES, THEY MUST HAVE LEADERSHIP AND PROPER DIRECTION IN THE USE OF ADDITIONAL MONEY BEING MADE AVAILABLE THROUGH FEDERAL AND STATE AID. THIS ADDRESS WAS DELIVERED BEFORE THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEXICAN-AMERICANS (AUSTIN, APRIL 25, 1968). (JS)

COWBOYS, INDIANS, AND AMERICAN EDUCATION*

An Address by Harold Howe II
U.S. Commissioner of Education
Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

Some years ago, the New Yorker published a cartoon showing an Indian father sitting inside his teepee and reading a bedtime story to his son. The particular line he read was this: "And just then, when it appeared that the battle was lost, from beyond the hills came the welcome sound of war-whoops."

The punch-line loses in translation from printed to spoken word, of course, and it was much funnier in the original Comanche. I risk what may sound like a lame introduction because it seems to me this cartoon illustrates what we mean when we talk about "cultural difference": where you come from helps determine whether you view salvation as 50 people wearing loin cloths and feathers, or 50 people wearing cavalry blue. And where you come from, moreover, helps determine how you view the schools--and how the schools view you.

Last year a gentleman named Joseph Monserrat, director of the Migration Division of the Puerto Rico Labor Department, gave a paper before a group concerned with the treatment of minorities in jails and prisons. While I do not want to suggest any analogy between the American jail and the American school--the students do enough of that--one of the things that Mr. Monserrat said on that occasion strikes me as applicable today. "A number of years ago," he said,

---

*Before the National Conference on Educational Opportunities for Mexican-Americans, Commodore Perry Hotel, Austin, Texas, 9:30 a.m. April 25, 1968.

I was frequently asked to go out to speak on "The Puerto Rican Problem." To identify what this Puerto Rican problem was, I tried to begin to find out from the groups who placed the "problem" in quotes. The only trouble was that every time I asked what they meant by "the Puerto Rican problem," people would talk to me about housing, about education, or about crime, or any number of things. But no one told me exactly what this "Puerto Rican Problem" really was.

Taking a cue from Mr. Monserrat, I will not attempt to talk today about the Mexican-American problem. In the first place, I suspect that most Mexican-American problems--like most Negro-American, Oriental-American, and White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant American problems--stem from love or money, and as a Federal official, I do not feel qualified to talk about either. At this point in the history of our Republic, much of the electorate does not seem disposed to offer us love, and Congress isn't disposed to offer us money.

Instead, I would like to talk about "the education problem"--and it <u>is</u> basically just one problem: helping every youngster--whatever his home background, whatever his home language, whatever his ability--become all he has it in him to become.

Such a goal is a lofty one, and it is doubtful that the schools will ever achieve it perfectly. What must concern us is the degree to which many schools fail to come within a country mile of that goal. And if Mexican-American children have a higher drop-out rate than any other identifiable group in the Nation--and they do--the schools cannot explain away their failure by belaboring the "Mexican-American problem." The problem, simply, is that the schools have failed with these children.

Schools and educators have been taking what seem to me unwarranted amounts of criticism for the last 10 years. Heaven knows the schools and the people who run them deserve criticism--we all do. But whereas a corporation, for example, is the property only of its stockholders, our schools are everybody's property--and everybody feels justified in having a crack at them. The failures of the schools as exemplified in human beings who cannot read or write or find a job are more conspicuous than are the failures of most human enterprises. Finally, while we complain about a faulty automobile or washing machine, we do not associate these errors of human effort with the essence of our lives. We do make this association with children; to a large degree, our children are our lives, and if the schools fail our sons and daughters, they strike hard at those possibilities for joy, pride, and hope which constitute a satisfactory human life.

So, though educators need and deserve criticism, we should recognize that they risk failure in a more conspicuous and painful way than most of us. More to the point, we should recognize that the people, who ultimately control the schools, have never really given our schools the resources they need to succeed with minority children.

By "resources" I do not simply mean money, or teachers, or the proper kind of textbook. The most crucial resource for any successful educational effort is the point of view it exemplifies. If that point of view fails, the schools are bound to fail, for--contrary to much educational rhetoric--the schools do not change society's

viewpoint. Rather, they perpetuate it. And if I had to sum up this society's viewpoint, I would do it by going back to that cartoon from the New Yorker.

The United States is in many ways a cowboy-and-Indian society. The good guys--whether they're selling automobiles or riding off into the sunset--wear white hats and white skins. They speak unaccented English (unless it's a cowboy drawl), and most important of all--they never lose a fight.

This gung-ho concept has doubtless emerged because our history, like that of most nations, is in many ways a story of conflict between diverse peoples and the eventual emergence of one as militarily and culturally dominant. In our case, of course, it was the English and their American-born, English-speaking, English-thinking descendents who established dominance over the legal, political, professional, and commercial life of the 13 Colonies.

It is interesting to note what happened to the other three colonizers that contended for space in this country. The Dutch, after establishing a foothold in what is now New York, were eliminated rather early, and all but a few traces of their culture vanished with military defeat. The remaining Dutch colonists remained an important force in the social and commercial life of New York, and even furnished the city with its symbol, Father Knickerbocker--but eventually their children adopted the English language and English ways.

Much the same thing happened to the French. Either they returned to Europe, were transplanted to Canada by the English, or

survived in cultural enclaves in Louisiana and Maine. Those who succeeded in American life, however, became assimilated through adopting the English language and abandoning the distinctive traditions of their homeland.

Only one group failed--or refused, depending on your point of view--to be assimilated. By reason of their early colonization of the Southwest, the Spanish were far removed from the English and colonial American influences that compelled assimilation in the eastern part of the country. Indeed, according to Dr. Clark Knowlton of the University of Texas, it was not until after World War II that Anglo-Americans outnumbered Indians and Spanish-speaking Americans in most of the Southwest. By that time, a new culture that mingled elements of the Spanish, the Mexican, and the Indian traditions had grown up--and it stubbornly refused to melt away with the advent of Anglo-American culture.

Last April, at the first Texas Conference for the Mexican-American, Dr. Severo Gomez quoted from a pamphlet entitled "The Mexican-Americans of South Texas" to offer the following viewpoint of an Anglo-American teacher toward her Mexican-American students and their parents:

> They are good people. Their only handicap is the bag full of superstitions and silly notions they inherited from Mexico. When they get rid of these superstitions they will be good Americans. The schools help more than anything else. In time, the Latins will think and act like Americans. A lot depends on whether we can get them to switch from Spanish to English. When they speak

> Spanish they think Mexican. When the day comes that they speak English at home like the rest of us, they will be part of the American way of life. I just don't understand why they are so insistent about using Spanish. They should realize that it's not the American tongue.

To a degree the teacher is right: Spanish is not the American tongue. English is, and I'm sure none of you would dispute the notion that a basic goal of every American school should be to give every youngster a command of English.

And yet the remarks I have just quoted exemplify what I have called the cowboy-and-Indian viewpoint. It equates Anglo-American origin and Anglo-American ways with virtue, with goodness, even with political purity. Other cultures are not merely different; they are <u>inferior</u>. They must be wiped out, not only for the good of the country, but for the good of the child. Not only must he learn to speak English; he must stop speaking anything <u>else</u>.

This notion of Anglo-cultural superiority is reflected in a hundred ways, even in the comic bocks our children read. Batman's real name is Bruce Wayne; Superman's is Clark Kent, and his girl friend is Lois Lane. American detectives are named Nick Carter and Perry Mason and Sam Spade--all names which are either forthrightly Anglo-Saxon or intimate no other national identification. We tell Polish jokes, Jewish jokes, Irish jokes, Chinese jokes, Negro jokes, and--in this part of the country--I suppose they tell Mexican jokes. In Anglo society, however, there is no such thing as an Anglo joke. In all the shabby vocabulary of ridicule which Americans have developed for ethnic groups--spics, wops, kikes, micks, bohunks,

coons--there is no comparable term of derision for the English; limey is such a feeble attempt that it can be used to express affection. Indeed, I think we may even count it as some kind of linguistic triumph that American Negroes have finally come up with a name for whites that packs a bit of bite: older denunciations such as "The Man", "white trash", "Charlie" or "ofay" simply have no force, but "honky" does sound objectionable.

In a hundred subtle ways, we have told people of all origins other than English that their backgrounds are somehow cheap or humorous. And the tragic thing is that this process has succeeded. Of the incredible diversity of languages and traditions that the people of a hundred nations brought to this country, virtually nothing remains except in scattered enclaves of elderly people who are more often viewed as objects of curiosity rather than respect. Most pernicious of all, their children often grow up thinking of their background as something to be escaped from, rather than treasured.

Mexican-Americans are one of the few exceptions to this American rule of cultural elimination through cultural disdain. A distinctive Spanish-Indian-Mexican culture survives in the United States.

As you know, this culture has been a handicap, not a blessing, in the attempts of Mexican-Americans to prosper. Basic to the success of any such attempt is a good education, and the cultural backgrounds of Spanish-speaking children have produced a staggering amount of educational failure. Dr. Gomez pointed out that "about 89 percent

of the children with Spanish surnames, and for the most part with Spanish as the first learned language, drop out of school before completing a regular 12-year program."

Part of the reason is that many Mexican-American children come to school speaking nothing but Spanish, and are immediately expected to start speaking English. Yet I would agree with Dr. Gomez in his belief that an unfamiliarity with English accounts for only part of the failure. There is evidence, he says, that many of the dropouts have succeeded in learning English. "It isn't just the mechanics of learning languages," he adds, "but other factors: certainly the cultural aspect must be considered."

You are more familiar than I with the Mexican-American cultural factors that impede a youngster's transition from home to school. But I would say that the notion of Anglo-cultural superiority--over which youngsters and their parents have no control--is a much larger factor. Until the schools realize how our society projects this conviction of superiority, this cowboy-and-Indians mentality, and takes positive steps to correct it, they will not truly succeed with Mexican-American children.

Today and tomorrow you will have a chance to view some of the "positive steps" that some schools are taking--15 educational projects that have shown promise of redeeming Mexican-American children from the near-certainty of educational failure. They emphasize a bicultural, bilingual approach which says, in essence,

that Mexican-American children must learn the English language and Anglo ways--but that they can do so without having to reject their knowledge of the Spanish language and of Mexican-American ways.

Some of these projects go farther. They suggest that maybe it is not a bad idea for Anglo children to learn Spanish, and to gain a familiarity with another culture. This idea has all sorts of good sense to recommend it.

First of all, the evidence is clear that people learn languages best if they learn them young. It is rather paradoxical that in the southwest, some elementary schools have forbidden children to speak Spanish, while at the same time many of our secondary schools require students to learn another language--and Spanish is one of the most popular electives. Mexican-American children offer their Anglo classmates a great natural teaching resource. It is time we stopped wasting that resource and instead enabled youngsters to move back and forth from one language to another without any sense of difficulty or strangeness.

Second, the proper conduct of bilingual programs should produce dramatic improvement in the performance of Spanish-speaking children. By "proper conduct" I mean those teaching arrangements which permit a child to begin learning to read and write immediately, in Spanish, and learning English in music, art, and recreation periods--rather than forcing him to postpone all serious academic work until he learns English. This latter approach commonly leaves the Mexican-American child three to six years behind his Anglo contemporary by

the time he is a teenager. As Dr. Knowlton points out, "The majority who fight their way through to a high school level often have the dubious distinction of being illiterate in two languages."

What I see as the third advantage of bicultural, bilingual programs for Anglo as well as Mexican-American children may well be the most important for our country.

The notion of cultural superiority has seriously harmed the United States in this century in its dealings with other peoples. Whereas European children grow up with the notion of cultural diversity, and frequently learn two or even three foreign languages in the course of their formal schooling, American schools commonly isolate our children from cultural exchange. Partially this separation stems from the size of our country. As businessman or as tourist, you can go from one end to the other and never have to speak anything but English. There has never been any special reason why our schools should prepare children to speak in another tongue.

In the middle of this century, after nearly 150 years of largely ignoring the rest of the world, we have lumbered into the family of nations as an international force. A position of international responsibility was thrust upon us, and we were ill-prepared to assume it. In fact, one of the great motivations behind the present set of Federal programs for education was the lack of Americans who could speak foreign languages or deal with other peoples in terms of their own cultures. The result was that we often offended people whom we were trying to help or befriend.

The complexity of our international relations has increased since World War II, rather than decreased. Many former colonies of the great nations of the world have themselves become independent nations, their citizens as proud of their distinctive languages and traditions as any free people should be. If we are to gain the friendship of these new nations, and strengthen our ties with much older nations that have felt the strength of American parochialism in the past, we must give our children the ability to move with ease and respect in cultures other than their own.

It would interest me to see what would happen if educators in Chicago translated one of San Antonio's successful bilingual programs into a school in a Polish neighborhood--or in San Francisco, to a school in a Japanese or Chinese neighborhood. Consider for a moment the incredible wealth of linguistic expertise and cultural resources we have in this country, and what American foreign relations could be like in thirty years if, to every country in the world, we could dispatch young Americans versed in the language, the history, and the traditions of the host country as well as of their own. And I do not mean by this only that a Japanese-American youngster should have the opportunity to learn Japanese; what's wrong with a Japanese-American boy's learning Polish? What's wrong with a Filipino-American girl's learning Swedish or Rumanian? Why should we consider so many languages as beneath notice unless the learning is to be done in a college or graduate school for purely academic purposes? And why, indeed, must foreign

languages be taught exclusively in classes formally tagged "language"? If a youngster is introduced to another language at the age of five, and has a continuing opportunity to grow in it, why can't he study high school algebra in Spanish? Couldn't some of the readings a high school history student pursues in learning about the French Revolution be in French?

This argument, that wider cultural exposure will help our international relations, stresses both national purposes and international amity. Perhaps the most important reason for bicultural programs, however, is not international but domestic--our relations with each other here at home. The entire history of discrimination is based on the prejudice that because someone else is different, he is somehow worse. If we could teach all our children--black, white, brown, yellow, and all the American shades in between--that diversity is not to be feared or suspected, but enjoyed and valued, we would be well on the way toward achieving the equality we have always proclaimed as a national characteristic. And we would be further along the way toward ridding ourselves of the baggage of distrust and hatred which has recently turned American against American in our cities.

If we are to achieve this new respect for diversity and this interest in preserving other cultures and languages as part and parcel of building America, there will have to be changes in our schools. Change requires two elements--leadership and money. Neither will suffice without the other.

The group meeting here today can encourage new leadership resources. You can awaken school boards and superintendents and State education authorities and governors and legislatures to the new directions which are necessary. These agencies in turn can provide some of the funds. The Federal government car play a role in both leadership and resources.

The formation of the Advisory Committee on Mexican American Education which is meeting with you here today indicates a commitment by the U.S. Office of Education to seek every possible key to the improvement of educational opportunity for your young people. In addition, the Office of Education is asking the Congress for special funds to pay for effective demonstrations of bilingual education practices. Even in a Congress which seems more committed to economy than to some of the unmet needs of Americans, we have some hope that these funds will be granted.

There is, in addition, one major source of funds which you as local and State leaders in education must endeavor to influence. I refer to the monies which flow through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act into every school district in which Mexican-American children go to school. Decisions on what these funds are to be used for flow from local school district proposals which are approved by State authorities. You and your fellow citizens with a particular concern for Mexican-American children should bring every possible pressure to bear to ensure that Title I funds provide education which allows Mexican-American children to have pride in their

heritage while learning the way to take part in the opportunities this country has to offer. Title I funds are not appropriated by the Congress to promote "business as usual" in the schools. They are appropriated, instead, to help the educationally deprived get a fair chance. The Office of Education will join with you to help see that this fair chance is made a reality.

I would like to close with a quotation from a man whom few of us would regard as an educational theorist: Malcolm X, a leader of the militant Black Muslim movement who was assassinated some years ago. In a conversation with a moderate Negro leader, Malcolm X once said he wished he could talk to some middle-income Negroes, those who had "made it" in our segregated society and tended to turn their backs on the problems of the ghetto. If he had that chance, Malcolm said, here is what he would tell them:

> The people who helped me were the wrong people, from the point of view of the moral society, from the point of view of the democratic society. The people who helped me, whose hands reached out to mine, whose hearts and heads touched mine, were the pimps, the prostitutes and hustlers, the thieves, and the murderers. The people who helped me through grade school were the gangs. The people who helped me through the high school of adolescence were the kids up in the reformatory. The people who helped me through the college of life were the people up in the prisons. And the people who helped me to get graduate training in the university of common sense were the people out on the streets, in the ghettos that were infested with crime and delinquency.
>
> Say this to (those other people), because man, there are a whole lot of kids on this street just like me. They smell bad, they act bad, they talk bad, and their report card says they're dumb. But you know something? These kids are smart. These kids are beautiful. These kids are great. They need to be seen and helped.

The programs you will observe here today and tomorrow represent a start toward making sure that one group of American children will receive its education in school, not in jail or the streets. I hope you will learn from these demonstrations, adapt them, and put them to work as widely as you can, and that educators across the country will learn from you. For the schools can send forth a message that we all badly nee to hear: Ours is not a nation of cowboys and Indians. White hats belong to everyone. As Malcolm X said, all our kids are beautiful and all are great.

I would add that none of our children is hyphenated. All o them are American.

###