

to bring student readers into real contact with *Macbeth* or *Robinson Crusoe* can present only the title or the story of the work, and not worry about the literary experience. This may meet the standard that Hirsch and his colleagues establish for achieving cultural knowledge, which almost exclusively concerns itself with recognition vocabulary, but it clearly does not present the literary experience in the profound ways detailed by Richards, Rosenblatt, and many of the researchers who have written about background knowledge and schema theory.

Better, it seems to me, to identify a

small number of literary or cultural experiences that all children need to share together; and then develop ways of bringing books and readers together. As our best teachers know, some literary pieces and some concepts require intensive teaching. If the number of such critical moments in instruction is not too great, we can do far more than we have in the recent past to introduce young people to major cultural experiences. Readers need help in entering literary experiences beyond their normal grasp, but, properly prompted, they can enter them. One of the functions of the school

must be to define those necessary experiences in education for which "a man's reach must exceed his grasp," and to provide the help for young people so that they, too, can share in "the best that is known and thought" in the world. Not all our curriculum offerings can be circumscribed by the demands of becoming culturally literate, but surely some of them must be. □

James R. Squire is Executive Consultant, Silver Burdett & Ginn, Simon & Schuster School Group, 160 Gould St., Needham Heights, MA 02194-2310.

— GRETCHEN SCHWARZ —

A Good Idea Gone Wrong

Unfortunately, the thoughtful advice Hirsch does offer may be overshadowed by the narrow vision it may prompt policymakers to adopt in yet another attempt to "reform" American schooling.

A better title for E. D. Hirsch's best-seller might be *Cultural Literacy: How Good Ideas Go Wrong*. The major theme is significant: "We will be able to achieve a just and prosperous society only when our schools ensure that everyone commands enough shared knowledge to be able to communicate effectively with everyone else" (p. 32). No argument there. The discussion of schema theory and reading comprehension is also worthwhile. Highly debatable, however, are Hirsch's dismissal of cognitive development theory and his shotgun attack on the critical thinking movement, which he derides as "the latest version of educational formalism."

Most alarming, though, is the implicit assumption that a core curriculum is the panacea for American education. Hirsch's offhand remark, "Of

course, we must always present material to children in an interesting way" (p. 130) reflects the worst danger of the back-to-basics mentality, namely, the notion that education is a matter of serving up tasty bits of information, which students can then spit back on cue. Hirsch's 64-page alphabetical list of "What Literate Americans Know" is therefore alarming, not because it is too elitist or too content-specific. It is disturbing because it presents cultural concepts as unconnected, all equally important "bites" out of context of the disciplines from which ideas arise, and removed from the human context of individual learners and educators.

To redesign curriculum without addressing issues of methodology and the nature of knowledge itself, school organization, and the partnership of school, home, and community in the educational process is to guarantee a

continued decline in cultural literacy. Curriculum is an interwoven element in what John Goodlad calls the school "ecosystem." *How Americans can gain shared knowledge is as essential a question as what knowledge is shared, and there is no easy answer; no simple list will do.*

Insofar as *Cultural Literacy* encourages informed national debate on curriculum, it is a valuable book. Insofar as the narrow vision of the book tempts politicians to prescribe one more facelift of American schooling, another good idea will have gone wrong. □

Gretchen Schwarz is a Foreign Language Teacher at Newman Smith High School, 2335 North Josey Lane, Carrollton, TX 75006.

Copyright © 1987 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.