

In New York

E.P. HIRSCH.....College Professor  
PATRICK WELSH.....High School Teacher

In Raleigh, North Carolina

MAYA ANGELOU.....Poet

In Boston

Dr. ROBERT COLES.....Harvard University

REPORTS FROM NEWSHOUR CORRESPONDENTS:

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Ignorance Quotient

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MacNEIL: Next tonight, it's back to school time across the nation. While students are enjoying their summer off, debate has been raging in education circles over the quality of what American youngsters are getting in those schools. It's an old debate with a new twist, the twist being a best-selling book entitled Cultural Literacy, by college professor E.D. Hirsch. The book has drawn praise and criticism from educators. What has attracted the most attention is the book's appendix, entitled, 'What Literate Americans Know,' and consisting of a list of 5,000 items. Under the letter 'G,' for instance, you'll find Galileo, gall bladder, Gallup Poll, Greta Garbo, Gay Rights, Generation Gap, Genetics, and the phrase, 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.' Our education correspondent took the Hirsch list to the Washington Monument, where he tried it out on a cross section of teenagers. Question Number One, what is Genesis?

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: A group of singers.

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: A book in the Bible.

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: It means, "the beginning."

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: The rock group.

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: The certain portion in the Bible?

JOHN MERROW: Okay, what's that mean?

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: I don't know.

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: It means the birth, it's a rock group. Phil Collins.

MERROW: Cultural literacy, to E.T. Hirsch, means being familiar with the common knowledge that educated people take for granted -- the ideas, facts and assumptions that make up the culture. Cultural literacy means knowing that Genesis is the Biblical story of creation. It means having some familiarity with important historical events and dates.

MERROW: 1861 to 1865?

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: Wasn't that around Columbus?

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: About 1861 to 1865?

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: Nothing.

MERROW: 1861 to 1865?

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: I think it was the Civil War? I'm not sure.

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: Maybe the first depression in the United States. I don't know. I --

MERROW: Let me tell you who was president then. Lincoln.

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: Lincoln? Oh, man, you can't put this on television. Okay, the Civil War.

MERROW: Sheer knowledge, like knowing when the Civil War took place, is the glue that holds society together, according to Hirsch. It provides continuity from one generation to the other, and enables scientists to talk to steelworkers, politicians, poets. Hirsch fears that in future generations, the glue will come unstuck. A recent study of 17-year-olds reveals that 66% do not know that the Civil War occurred

between 1850 and 1900. Seventy-five percent could not identify Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, e.e. cummings, or Carl Sandburg. And 50% of high school seniors did not recognize the names Josef Stalin and Winston Churchill.

MERROW: How about Hoover?

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: Hoover? The dam.

MERROW: Anything else?

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: No. A street.

MERROW: Who is it named after, Hoover dam?

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: Eichman Hoover-- I don't know!

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: J. Edgar Hoover. There's a Hoover vacuum cleaner. Hoover, Hoover, Hoover -- nothing.

MERROW: Who's J. Edgar Hoover?

UNIDENTIFIED BOY: I don't really know.

MERROW: Madonna means what?

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: Means a singer.

MERROW: Anything else? Tell me about her.

UNIDENTIFIED GIRL: Madonna -- there is something else that has to do with Madonna, and it is historical, but I cannot tell you what it is.

MERROW: Cultural illiteracy threatens the fabric of society, Hirsch believes. Individuals also suffer. Those who only know Madonna as a rock star or Hoover as a vacuum cleaner, miss their opportunities to move up. And it's not their fault, Hirsch believes. He doesn't blame parents or television, divorce, Vietnam, or Watergate. He blames the schools.

He's particularly critical of the way reading is taught in elementary schools. Too much stress on skills, and not enough on content. Hirsch wants young children to read culturally rich stories -- Grant and Lee at Appomattox, for example. Instead of culturally neutered paragraphs like, "What is friendship?" But not everyone agrees with Hirsch. His critics say his views are elitist. They ask, "What information

constitutes cultural literacy," and perhaps more importantly, "Who decides?"

MacNEIL: We have with us to share his views on education and cultural literacy, the author of the book, Professor E.D. Hirsch, from the University of Virginia. What is the difference, first of all, between cultural literacy and plain old literacy, which has been so much stressed these days?

E.D. HIRSCH, college professor: Well, plain old literacy is the ability to decode the words from the page. And you can have that kind of plain old literacy without being able to read a newspaper or a serious book or article. Cultural literacy is a part of what I would call real literacy, or true literacy, mature literacy. That is, the ability to understand serious materials, that you need to be a citizen, or even to rise in the economy.

MacNEIL: Is it your belief that all high school graduates in this country used to be culturally literate?

Mr. HIRSCH: Well, certainly we know that there used to be more culturally literate than there are now, because we have solid evidence from the national assessment of educational progress that fewer students can now read at an advanced level than could 15 years ago. We know that the scores on the verbal portion of the scholastic aptitude tests have gone down in the last 15 years. It's clear that national literacy is declining. And not just among the lower class students, but also middle class students, and among those, the very brightest.

MacNEIL: Who needs to be culturally literate?

Mr. HIRSCH: Well, I think any citizen does in the advanced technological era. We all need to be culturally literate, because we all need to be literate.

MacNEIL: If you don't know who Galileo is, for instance, what difference does that make?

Mr. HIRSCH: It only makes a difference if you're reading a serious article or a book that refers to Galileo

without explaining who Galileo is. You see, another way of describing cultural literacy is to say it's that knowledge that people take for granted when they write for a magazine, or a newspaper. And Galileo, I believe, still is somebody whom you would encounter without having it explained to you who he is.

MacNEIL: How do you change the schools to achieve the levels of cultural literacy you think necessary?

Mr. HIRSCH: Well, first of all, you have to call attention to the problem. I think it's been felt that reading -- it's actually only within the last 20 years have reading researchers found out that reading is not just a skill, but requires significant amounts of background information about the world -- what's on the page involves information that's taken for granted, but not stated. And if you don't have that unstated information, you can't read, you can't comprehend what you're reading. Now, once that's pointed out, I think the schools will begin to take care of these problems. I think that the nature of the problem hasn't been clear to people for the last couple of decades. That's why so much emphasis has been placed on skills instead of on content. It hasn't been understood that content is important.

MacNEIL: Let me ask you one final question about content. What isn't clear to me in your argument is how much content -- for instance, Don Quixote is on your list. Now, what need a person know about that to be culturally literate -- to know that it's a character in a novel? Or to know something about him? To have read the book?

Mr. HIRSCH: No. I think there are too many educated people around who have not read Don Quixote to say you have to have read the book. But those same people know a couple of things about Don Quixote, that he tilted at windmills, for example. That he was by somebody named Cervantes. And most of us don't know that Cervantes' first name was Miguel. But -- so actually, the way we've

put Cervantes' name down is as Cervantes, because that's the way most people know it. But even though it may seem that that information is superficial, it's all important, because it orients you to what you're reading, and not only what you're reading, but to a program like this one that assumes, I think, a great deal of information on the part of its viewers, as any serious newspaper does, any serious magazine article does.

MACNEIL: Okay, let's move on. With us to share their views are Maya Angelou, writer and professor at Wake Forest University, joining us from Raleigh, North Carolina; Patrick Welsh, high school English teacher and author of the book, *Tales out of School*; and Dr. Robert Cole, psychiatrist and professor at Harvard University, joining us from Public Station WGBH in Boston. First you, Maya Angelou in Raleigh, do you agree with Professor Hirsch that what is not being taught is a very grave gap and that it really matters?

MAYA ANGELOU, Poet: Yes, I do agree. I agree with that question, and I agree that it does really matter. I find myself ambivalent about Mr. Hirsch's book, about as ambivalent, it seems to me, as Mr. Hirsch himself has been in the book, and in interviews which he subsequently gave on the content of the book. I, too, am alarmed at the lack of cultural literacy in our young people. And listening to the young people a few minutes ago wonder if Hoover simply was somebody who invented a vacuum cleaner or had to do with a dam, is really alarming. And I do -- let me say that I think it is--

MACNEIL: Let me interrupt you -- why is it alarming?

Ms. ANGELOU: Well, I agree that the cohesiveness of the society can be seen in its communally shared information. I think that we -- the center -- does not hold, things fall apart if we are unable to share through conversation what we know about ourselves with each other. And we are absolutely unable to find out what somebody else is about

-- which is -- let me get directly to my point about Mr. Hirsch's book, and an interview which he gave to the *Chronicle*, I think, of Higher Education, August 5 -- in which he almost as an aside, said, "Along with the general education, he would include information about Crazy Horse and Harriet Tubman if people wanted it." Now, that alarms me, too. Because it seems to me all information, all knowledge is spendable currency, depending upon the market. All the information about this American experiment, this experience, is not only important, it is imperative that our children have at least a vague understanding -- all our children, our black and white and Asian and Native American children should know something about the black experience, the non-black experience, the Jewish experience, the Native American experience. And so I don't know who would make the decision. I read the list, and it's really quite an impressive list of people that Mr. Hirsch plans to call in, and who maybe have already agreed--

MACNEIL: Why don't we come back a little later to the question of who would decide, and let me just get some initial reactions here. Patrick Welsh, you deal every day with teaching high school children, and with the difficulties and joys of that when they're joys. What do you think of his approach?

PATRICK WELSH, high school teacher: I want to defend -- not those high school kids, but their teachers. I talked to several teachers at my own school, the history teachers, "Do you teach the dates of the Civil War? Do you still teach any dates?" And every one of them said they do. And the problem is that many kids simply -- they see them, and then the dates or the names, or whatever, are irrelevant. It's not that the teachers -- some teachers are not doing their job. But I think the main problem is unless something is presented almost as television in some kind of entertaining way, things

simply fall out of the heads of many of these kids.

MacNEIL: Like the teenager who remembered once he was reminded who the president was.

Mr. WELSH: Once his memory was jogged, he certainly had that in school, and I'm sure every other kid there had heard that. I agree very much with Professor Hirsch, but I do feel ambivalent. I don't think we can discuss our schools today unless we discuss the effects, certainly, of television, and certainly the effects of poverty on the schools. I think if we look to Oriental students today, we have Korean students in my school who come in having no cultural background at all, and suddenly they're shooting up to the top of the class, not only in mathematics, but also in English, in the humanities. And I think what we see there are values in the home, are a love of learning that comes from an ancient culture that many Americans do not have, and that is being in a sense sabotaged in our own country not only by television, but I think one of the things we haven't talked about is the VCRs and the taping of movies. I have many students who -- they'll go home, they'll leave school in the morning and set their VCRs to tape the soaps and come home and after maybe watching television for two or three hours, the regular programs, will start watching the soaps that have been on in the afternoon, and will fall asleep at midnight. These kids don't have time not only to read Prof. Hirsch's list, but to read the actual works of this generation.

MacNEIL: Robert Cole is in Boston. What do you think of the Hirsch approach?

Dr. ROBERT COLES, Harvard University: Well, I think that no one would disagree with the good professor. We'd love to have all people able to know all the facts and all the assumptions that he's given us in his book. But the real issue to me -- and I'm sure for Prof. Hirsch also -- is not only cultural literacy, but moral literacy. Ralph

Waldo Emerson, a hundred and fifty years ago, reminded all of us that character is higher than intellect. Prof. Hirsch has just told us that things were better 20, 30 years ago, and I'm sure he had his basis for saying that. But let me remind him that 50 years ago, when presumably things were even better than they were 20 years ago in our classrooms, we had lynchings all over the South, we had all sorts of racism and vicious assaults on people because of their religious and racial background endemic in this country. I regret to remind the professor, and remind all of us watching this program that here in Cambridge we had a president at Harvard University who established firm quotas to keep Jews and Catholics at a minimum. Presumably he was a very culturally literate man. We had at Harvard University and in other very prominent universities where presumably there's no problem with cultural literacy, 50, 75 years ago, we had intellectuals keeping blacks out even from living in the dormitories of our leading universities. In Germany in 1933, when Hitler took over, all (unintelligible) distinguished, culturally literate intellectuals rallied to his side, including Heidegger, and others who presumably had no problem with any of the lists that Prof. Hirsch has given us. So the question is not only factuality and the control of the mind over a body of knowledge, but what we do with that knowledge morally. And in this country, we were quite able a hundred years ago to live with a cultural elite, a kind of Tory smugness that was very well developed intellectually and yet morally way off skew.

MacNEIL: Do you see in what Prof. Hirsch is suggesting a return to cultural literacy with the moral blindnesses that you're referring to? Do they necessarily follow?

Dr. COLES: I think we have got to warn ourselves, all of us intellectuals, remind ourselves what was said a long time ago, that sometimes the first can be last, and the

last can be first. And there is a danger for a lot of us that we emphasize intellectuality and forget the moral contours of what to do with that knowledge. Knowledge for what? For what moral and social purposes?

MacNEIL: Okay, Prof. Hirsch, what's your answer to that?

Prof. HIRSCH: Well, of course, I agree with Robert Coles. And I'm rather astonished that he would see a logical disjunction between -- really, for example that allusion the first shall be last and the last shall be first. I'd be very surprised if that weren't on the list. And if it isn't, I'll put it there. It should be. And what it alludes to, and in fact, I should say that's the main purpose of that list is to create greater social justice in our country. Because the fact is that because of lack of information, children from lower class homes fall behind in third grade, can't make up the deficit in fourth grade, fall increasingly behind in fifth grade, and the knowledge deficit, score deficit widens. People who had this deficit in third grade, they're the ones who drop out, they're the ones who are the poor in the society. And I believe it's perfectly possible to have cultural literacy and a moral society. Certainly, it's more likely that we will have social justice in this country if everybody is literate. And what we know is that we cannot make everybody literate in this country unless they have that knowledge which is necessary.

MacNEIL: Dr. Coles?

Dr. COLES: Prof. Hirsch, in Germany in 1933, we had one of the best educated nations on the face of this earth, with a wonderful system of gymnasia and all the desiderata that you've given in your book being vigorously enforced and yet we had a nation turned to madness and to cruelty.

MacNEIL: Now, are you saying therefore, Dr. Coles, that Prof. Hirsch should not pursue his notion of cultural literacy, and that you shouldn't impose a body of

commonly agreed knowledge upon high school students?

Dr. COLES: I am all in favor of pursuing that. I'm simply saying issuing a caveat to myself and to all of us to watch out for intellectuals. They can sometimes be very smug and all too sure of themselves, and forget that at times, with all that knowledge, they're capable of enormous evil. And we've seen this. We've -- look, we had in the 1930s a culturally literate congress that couldn't pass an anti-lynching law.

MacNEIL: I think Maya Angelou wanted to get in.

Ms. ANGELOU: Yes, just -- Mr. Hirsch continues to use the phrase -- I don't want to be a nit picker, but just for him to clarify it for me. You continue to use the phrase, "lower class," the "lower class student." Do you mean the economically lower class?

Prof. HIRSCH: Yes.

Ms. ANGELOU: And if so, then shouldn't we be back to Mr. Coles' question about the poverty in the schools?

Prof. HIRSCH: Yes.

Ms. ANGELOU: I'm sorry, the teacher's question about poverty in the schools. Is that what you meant?

Prof. HIRSCH: Yes. I meant essentially it has nothing to do with race, because --

Ms. ANGELOU: No, I wasn't asking that. I just meant lower class.

Prof. HIRSCH: Right, because in fact, children who comes from-- it's really a question of whether they come from highly literate homes. For example, you can come from a poor home that's highly literate, and you will still have a lot of this information. And so I guess the better phrase would be disadvantaged. But I would like to reply to Robert Coles, because I think there isn't any disagreement between us, and I think we do have to beware of smugness. I don't think that this information -- the French are terrifically literate, but I don't think they're admirable in all respects. I certainly don't

equate literacy with moral excellence.

MacNEIL: All right, let's come back to the high school teacher here for a moment.

Ms. ANGELOU: Please let me say something.

MacNEIL: He said to you the problem may be the schools, but it's also values in the homes, it's television, it's VCRs, it is distractions. How are you going to get around those?

Prof. HIRSCH: I have a very simple answer. I think that is we should work as hard as we can to get rid of those problems, to improve those difficulties. That doesn't mean we shouldn't repair the mistakes we made in the schools. Historically, the schools have made mistakes. Historically, the schools have turned illiterate kids' populations into literate people. And I think we can do a lot better job, particularly kindergarten through 8th grade -- which is where most of this really is.

Mr. WELSH: I agree. My son is starting first grade in a couple of days. And I hope he comes back with stories about George Washington and Icarus and Douglas, as you suggest, instead of see spot run. But I think, especially with the urban poor in my area, most of whom are black, we're going to have to work with those kids before school. Most of them come in so far behind because many of them have semiliterate 14 and 15-year-old mothers, there's no reading material in the home, they don't get the kind of stimulation that comes just from being born in the middle class, whether it's black or white. And unless, I think, we reach some of those kids earlier, we're going to lose them. And I think Dr. James Comer of Yale has one of the best programs in the country, teaching the mothers of these kids how to stimulate them early, getting good child care, and getting them ready for kindergarten. I think kids coming into kindergarten now, if you speak to kindergarten teachers, the gap between the poor and the rich is just getting enormous.

The rich kids with their coming in reading with their Montessori training, and having gone to day care centers since Day One. Other kids being almost totally abandoned--

MacNEIL: And books in the home, and--

Mr. WELSH: And books in the home, and being read to and so forth. And I think -- I hope we in the schools adopt all of Prof. Hirsch's recommendations, but I think we're also going to have to look at its social problems. The problems of the black poor in our high schools today are disastrous, the same in colleges at the University of Virginia where Prof. Hirsch teaches. And there are very few black kids there. There are more young black men in prisons than in colleges today. We must address this enormous social issue. And on the list of what is culturally literate and not, it's not going to be enough.

Ms. ANGELOU: That's true. May I just say one more thing. I would like to find out from Dr. Hirsch, particularly, what does he mean when you suggest that his group will be able to give or not give what he calls "the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on textbooks." Who -- under whose authority?

MacNEIL: That comes back to who decides.

Ms. ANGELOU: Exactly.

MacNEIL: All of these people in some way or another decided that in general, some kind of substantial agreed body would be useful, if it could be introduced in the schools, but who decides what that--

Prof. HIRSCH: Well, I think we have to get together representative groups of people. The list, actually -- the purpose of putting that list in the back of the book was to start that discussion going. And we do need to have a group of people that are credible in the society at large, accepted by large number of groups -- it's a political question. The important point, though, is that the political question involves very much material that

has recently entered literate culture. Nobody argues about Lincoln and his log cabin, or George Washington and the cherry tree. So there is an area of fuzziness where--  
MacNEIL: Things like your list includes Ferdinand Marcos, but it doesn't happen to include the Sandinistas.

Prof. HIRSCH: That's right.

Ms. ANGELOU: Nor does it include blues -- which is one of the great instruments (can't hear) black people into the world.

Prof. HIRSCH: But you must say that the list -- the so-called THE list, it just happens to be that provisional one, and most of the objections you've already raised don't exist in the other list, that is the list as it now stands.

MacNEIL: Mr. Welsh wanted to make a point.

Mr. WELSH: Every year I teach Maya Angelou's book, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Middle class kids, black and white, love it. But the kids that are poor and that cannot read well, even though they're acquainted with the background, Ms. Angelou, they cannot read your book. They have a great deal of difficulty with it. And I have to read it out loud to them, and then they love it. But I think that shows us something more than just this cultural list or some kind of background. These kids do have the background, but they cannot read and make sense of your wonderful book.

MacNEIL: I'm afraid we'll have to leave it there. And thank you all for joining us. Obviously we've been going a long time. Prof. Hirsch, thank you. Maya Angelou in Raleigh, thank you. Dr. Coles at Boston, thank you, and Patrick Welsh.