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## Guest Editorial: The Elderly Reader of the Future-- Need We Be Concerned?

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# GUEST EDITORIAL THE ELDERLY READER OF THE FUTURE—NEED WE BE CONCERNED?

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Joseph A. Califano (1978), former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, noted the following dramatic changes anticipated in the nation's population during the next few years.

There has been a gain of ten years in life expectancy at birth since 1940. Males born today can expect to live to 69 years on the average, and females 77 years. Three quarters of the infants born today will live to age 65; once there, they will live on the average, for another 16 years, to age 81.

The post war "baby boom" will turn into a senior "boom" in the early 21st century. Today 11 percent of 24 million people are 65 or older, but in the year 2030 a dramatic increase will be evident with 18 percent or 55 million in this age group.

The composition of the older population will also show marked changes in the future. Thirty percent of those 65 or older had reached 75 in 1940 by the year 2000, 45 percent will have reached this age.

Even though people are living longer they are retiring earlier and will do so in greater numbers in the future. Nearly one-half of all men 65 or older remained working thirty years ago, while today only one man in five and one woman in twelve are working at this age.

The ratio between employed persons to retired citizens will decrease:

- in 1940 there were nine employed for each retired individual
- in 1978 it is six to one and
- in 2030 it will be three to one.

It seems evident that based on these figures we are facing a future world with a larger population of older people. In addition, it is also apparent that this older generation will experience an increasing number of years in retirement. Whether reading is a meaningful part of these

years for our students in the 21st century is in great measure being determined by the practices being followed in elementary classroom reading programs today.

This early influence on a lifetime of reading interests and habits cannot be overemphasized. Recent studies with the older reader (Haase 1979; Robinson 1979) have noted the lasting effect beginning experiences with reading have had on attitudes towards reading throughout a person's lifetime. As one older gentleman noted in a humorous but also very revealing statement concerning his reading activities, "I don't read very many books, because I always feel I need to do a book report on them!" Perhaps an overstatement, but what are we doing each day in our reading classes to prevent the development of an attitude such as this particular one in our students?

Our interviews with older readers have brought to light some interesting insights into their reading attitudes and habits. Contrary to what many believe, retirement does not bring with it significant changes in previous reading practices. Those reading customs and routines which have been established throughout younger life, for the most part, continue into the retirement years. The hope that with additional available time there will be added interest to read more extensively than what had been done previously does not seem to be true for many older readers.

It was also revealing to note that among those older people who indicated reading had been a significant part of their lives there almost always was reference made to a classroom teacher's influence on developing this love for reading early in life. Descriptive phrases such as, "made reading fun," "always open to questions," "respected my opinions," and "widened my reading interests," were typical of the memories these elderly readers had held for a lifetime of their elementary reading teachers. For these older readers, the term "life long reading" was not simply an abstract goal found in a curriculum guide but rather had become a significant aspect of their daily lives.

As teachers of reading it perhaps might be worthwhile for each of us to examine our daily reading activities in light of what we are doing to prepare readers of the future. Will our current students remember us in their old age as being the ones who developed and nurtured a love for reading? No finer legacy could be given to future generations.

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