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PROVIDING FOR THE OLDER READER IN THE COLLEGE READING PROGRAM

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For years, middle-aged and older learners have engaged in educational pursuits at all level of achievement. It is only recently, however, that educators have begun to address the problems presented by such learners. In the field of reading, attention is paid to the young adult enrolled in college reading programs and/or in reading clinics. Little is known about the performance of older readers (Robinson and Maring, 1976; Kingston, 1973), even though more is known about the value of recreational reading programs for institutionalized aged adults and Senior Citizen Center participants (Lovelace, 1977; Wilson, 1977).

This current lack of knowledge is understandable because of society's focus on the education of the young. In addition, society values youth more than age and leads its populace to believe that age creates burdens. Recent studies by Neugarten (1977) show that today's middle-aged person—the "sandwich generation" is responsible for the growth and development of the young and for the financial and emotional assistance of aging parents and other relatives. People of this generation, in competition with each other for survival, feel burdened by the demands of the older adults while hopeful for the progress of the young. Educators, many of whom are middle aged, bear these responsibilities. Also, they are "sandwiched" by the belief that all learners, throughout their lives, are in need of educational experiences that contribute to their intellectual and emotional growth. They find themselves ill-equipped, however, to provide for older than average students in the educational system.

This paper will discuss what reading clinicians and researchers have discovered about the older reader in college reading programs. Specifically, it will discuss the common stereotypes of the older adult, the performance of the older reader, and some suggestions for planning for the older reader.

Common Stereotypes

1. *The older reader has low intelligence or else s/he would have become a proficient reader earlier in life.* Many persons who are currently older Americans were born and reared fifty to seventy-five years ago. Then education was a luxury. Other older adults relate tales of uncomfortable educational experiences which led them away from school at a young age. Still others parrot the "Dick and Jane" series and suggest comprehension was often lacking. (Haase, 1976; Robinson, 1976).

Inherent in the prejudice is the notion that cognitive functioning decreases with age. In fact, cognitive functioning does *not* decline as age increases. According to Cattell (1965) and Horn and Cattell (1967), it probably becomes more crystalized, i.e. less fluid, after young adulthood. Riegel (1968) and Riegel and Reigel (1972), and Palmore (1975) have shown that cognitive functioning increases with age, if it is high initially. The only time it appears to decline is prior to death. Given such evidence, it appears older adults can "crack the reading code" at any point in their lives, if the components of reading are presented in such a way that the individual can grasp.

2. *Older readers do not have the life experiences they should have*. This is a bias of educators who find the experiences of the older reader do not live up to the expectations of the teacher involved. Older adults have lived through the crises of childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and middle age, and through historical times, such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean conflict. To deny such richness of experience casts aspersions on the person doing the denying.

3. *Older readers, especially if they are retired, are doddering and senile*. Senility is a wastebasket term for a range of symptoms from paranoia to depression. What it should refer to is the emotional problems of aged persons. An overwhelming majority of older Americans are not emotionally disturbed (even though society may suggest they be that way). They are alert, viable, dynamic and busy. Simone de Beauvoir (1972) once said, "What is this old face doing on such a young mind?"

4. *Why do older readers need to learn to read and/or improve their reading ability; they're going to die anyway?* Daniel, Templen and Schearon, (1977), show the 60+ age group goes back to school to contribute more to society, become more cultured, to earn more money, learn things of interest, gain general education, get a better job, improve social life, meet interesting people, and improve reading and study skills. The older readers want to learn to read and/or improve their reading ability because they are alive, they are involved, and they wish to continue to be active. The *sine qua non* of successful living is to be wanted and useful. Learning to read may help a grandparent read to her/his grandchildren. Improving reading ability might help older persons to start a business in their home. Both learnings may bring joy and satisfaction as older readers rediscover such classics as Zane Gray, the Tolkien Trilogy, and the daily newspaper (Haase, 1976; Robinson, 1976).

5. *You cannot teach older readers much because they are rigid*. Rigidity is usually a function of personality rather than age (Chown, 1972). Most teachers can attest to young people who are rigid in many areas, such as inability to accept differences among themselves. Supposedly, the more educated a person is, the less rigid is her/his thinking. Yet many educated persons, young and old, are rigid in specific areas of thought.

6. *"Isn't s/he cute?"* Cuteness denotes helplessness. It labels the person as an object which pleases by its actions, and therefore, denies the person's humanness. When older persons are treated as objects and made

powerless – by being treated as infants – they soon realize that no voluntary response they make will produce a result they want. This makes them helpless, a state which can lead to depression and unexpected death (Seligman, 1975). Older readers are not “cute.” They are adults exercising control over their lives by learning to read or by enhancing their reading ability.

Bringing this bias to the teaching/learning situation creates an atmosphere for failure. If the teachers of older readers recognize their bias toward age and attempt to rid themselves of their prejudices, then they can begin to visualize the older reader as a reader in need of their help.

Performance of the Older Reader

1. *Older readers are motivated to engage in the reading process for many reasons.* The older adult who enrolls in reading classes is there by choice and commitment. S/he may wish to learn to read so s/he can comprehend bus schedules, ingredients in canned food, ads in the newspaper, and the senior citizen newsletter. Others may want to improve their ability to read more in less time, enjoy the books on the best seller list, and read to their grandchildren.

2. *Older readers are as creative as their younger counterparts.* Creativity is not the sole province of the young. It appears to depend on will power, working strength, endurance, and enthusiasm. All of these qualities are embodied to some degree in aged as well as young readers.

3. *Older readers are cautious, very interested in the accuracy of their responses, and self-determining.* These characteristics of performance are grouped together because they are greatly interrelated. Older readers are cautious, as life has taught them not to run headlong into the unknown. Living has also taught them to be as careful and as correct as possible. Their jobs, businesses, and family relationships have depended on just the right mix of decisions. These decision-making acts of living have also made them self-determining. They will do what they need to do or want to do as cautiously and as thoroughly as possible (Botwinick, 1973).

These characteristics may give concern to teachers, since older adults are not so quick to respond as younger adults. What may be happening is that older adults may be “checking out” the learning task to see if they think it will evoke the appropriate response. If they decide the task will help them reach their goal, then the quality of their performance will increase. Reading programs which provide structure and correctness of response appear to have success with older readers.

4. *Older readers do better without interference.* A relatively quiet setting seems best for teaching older readers. Older adults appear more affected by distraction than their younger counterparts. Schaie (1968) has shown that the greater the number of distractions, the greater the anxiety, which results in less learning.

5. *Older readers are very diverse in interests and abilities.* Many experts in gerontology believe that youth is more homogeneous than age (Butler, 1975). Practitioners have found selecting materials for reading programs

for aged adults difficult because of their diverse interests and abilities (Lovellace, 1977; Wilson, 1977).

6. *Elderly readers (Those over 70) appear not to utilize mental set well.* Sometimes they have difficulty remembering items over a short period of time. These problems appear to be a function of physical aging, since the aging processes slow people down. Teachers can aid elderly readers with difficulties in mental set by helping them to organize their work. In order to enhance memory over a short period of time, teachers can give the older reader more time to learn the material, and then *not* test for knowledge by asking for specifics in specific order.

Provisions for the Older Reader

In order to allow for older adults in the college reading program, provisions must be made for their uniqueness. The following are offered for consideration.

1. Examine and discard instructor stereotypes of older readers.
2. Realize adults can be helped if only they wish to be helped.
3. Provide an atmosphere of pride and commitment so that the older reader does not feel helpless but somewhat in control of the situation.
4. Slow down the pacing of the content.
5. Organize the material of older readers only if they need help.
6. Provide relevant, meaningful, and/or practical tasks.
7. Reduce interference by providing quiet and appropriate lighting conditions.
8. Utilize as many senses of the older reader as possible.
9. Provide supportive emotional statements.
10. Locate reading programs in accessible places.
11. Offer reading programs for a particular population, i.e. for non-readers, improvement, discussion, problem solving, selection of children's books.
12. Love older readers as you would younger ones, for all are human.

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