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ABSTRACT

Americans aged 60 years and older now represent the largest age cohort of functional illiterates. Educational systems have not adequately addressed the needs of this group. Many older Americans, for whom English is a second language, need instruction in both English and basic literacy skills. Many older adults living at or near poverty levels have no high school diploma and experience great difficulty in finding employment. Adult basic education could provide work-related educational programs for these people. Because health is a key factor affecting older adult participation in education, educational programs in nursing homes and home-bound programs are needed to reach more elderly persons. This lack of education appears to affect the mental health of some older adults; thus, education for this group could improve their self-esteem. Older adults with little education view their lack of education as a problem, yet few are attracted to adult basic education classes. Although researchers have begun to identify the illiterate elderly in relation to their involvement in educational literacy activities, future research is needed to clarify and solve the problems of the illiterate elderly. (NRB)

THE ILLITERATE ELDERLY

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Paper presented at the White House Conference on Aging, Washington, DC, November 30 - December 3, 1981 and the Annual Meeting of the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. (AEA), Anaheim, CA, October 29 - November 2, 1981.

THE ILLITERATE ELDERLY

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Introduction

The recent 1979 Amendments to the Adult Education Act noted the importance of targeting to special need groups of disadvantaged adults. One of these identified groups, the elderly, represented a new awareness of changing demographic representations, historical shifting of expectations regarding educational attainment levels, and the resultant inequity across multiple generations. As stated in these proposed guidelines:

> "Elderly persons have been included as a result of the recent findings by the Commission on Civil Rights. In its Age Discrimination Study submitted to the President and the Congress, the Commission found that only 10 percent of the group represented adult basic education program participation, while this age bracket accounts for 35 percent of the eligible participants. Those over 65 make up only 4 percent of the participant population, although it has been estimated the illiteracy rates are relatively higher for this age group than for persons 55 to 65." (p. 37870)

Among adults 16 years of age and over who have less than a high school education and are not currently enrolled in school, two out of three are 45 and over; one in four is 65 or older. Of those with less than a high school education, more than three quarters of those 65 and over have not completed grade school. Also the elderly with less than a high school

education disproportionately represent higher public assistance rates (these figures reflect both lesser levels of education which impact upon work force status as well as age-related disabilities). (NACAE, 1974).

Older adults age 60 years and above are the largest age category representation of functional illiteracy across the age span. In a national survey conducted by the APL project (Northcutt. 1975), a random sample of a cross-section of the U.S. population was examined regarding their skills and knowledges to cope successfully in today's society. In this study, 35% of adults 60-65 years of age lacked skills and knowledge to successfully cope in present society, 40% of this age category were minimally functional, and only 24% of this age category had sufficient knowledge and skills to cope in society (Northcutt, 1975).

The older population and their quality of life have been a concern of our country, spawning the development of various social services, medical support assistance and institutionalized care systems. However literacy goals and the concommitant educational outreach for the older years have not been a programmatic concern. Implicit beliefs assumed that traditional educational systems should focus on the young, taking responsibility for creating healthy and productive future citizens. Adult basic education programs for disadvantaged adults have attracted and reached the younger adult and middle-aged adult. Again, their sense of mission and outreach was not concern for the elderly. Educational systems have not addressed the needs of the older illiterate learner. With the increasing longevity of our population as well as the increasing median age of our "graying" Western society, the health, happiness, and productivity of our elders should be of concern.

This paper will present an overview of the current older population in the United States as it impacts upon potential involvement in educational activities, the characteristics and participation of "illiterate" elderly in educational activities, and key findings from a re-analysis of the APL national research regarding age differences in functional literacy.

Older Adults and Key Characteristics

America has been a microcosm of continual changing society expectations regarding formal education. Current day versus previous generational cohorts exhibit dramatic differences. For example, the increasing legislated mandatory education and the changing values of our society regarding the benefits of higher education have been reflected in the constant rise in the median number of years of schooling completed. Between 1940 and 1976, the median educational attainment of persons 25 years old and over rose steadily from 8.6 to 12.4 years. For elderly persons, who received most of their education during and before the Depression of the 1930's, the median number of school years remained at slightly over 8 years for the decades between 1940 and 1960. Since 1960, the median for the elderly has risen from 8.3 to 10.3 years, and this figure can be expected to rise to 12 years around the year 1990. Although the overall median for the elderly population was 10.3 in 1976, this figure ranged from 11 years for the 60-64 age group to about 6 years for persons 75 and over (Fowles, 1978; NACAE, 1974).

The two charts, Figures 1 & 2, both note the downward sloping of percent of school completed with increasing age categories and also the present day rates of decreasing participation levels in adult basic education with increasing age categories. As noted by other research (Cross, Valley et al., 1974; Johnstone & Riverla, 1965), there has been

FIGURE 1

Percentage of School Completed

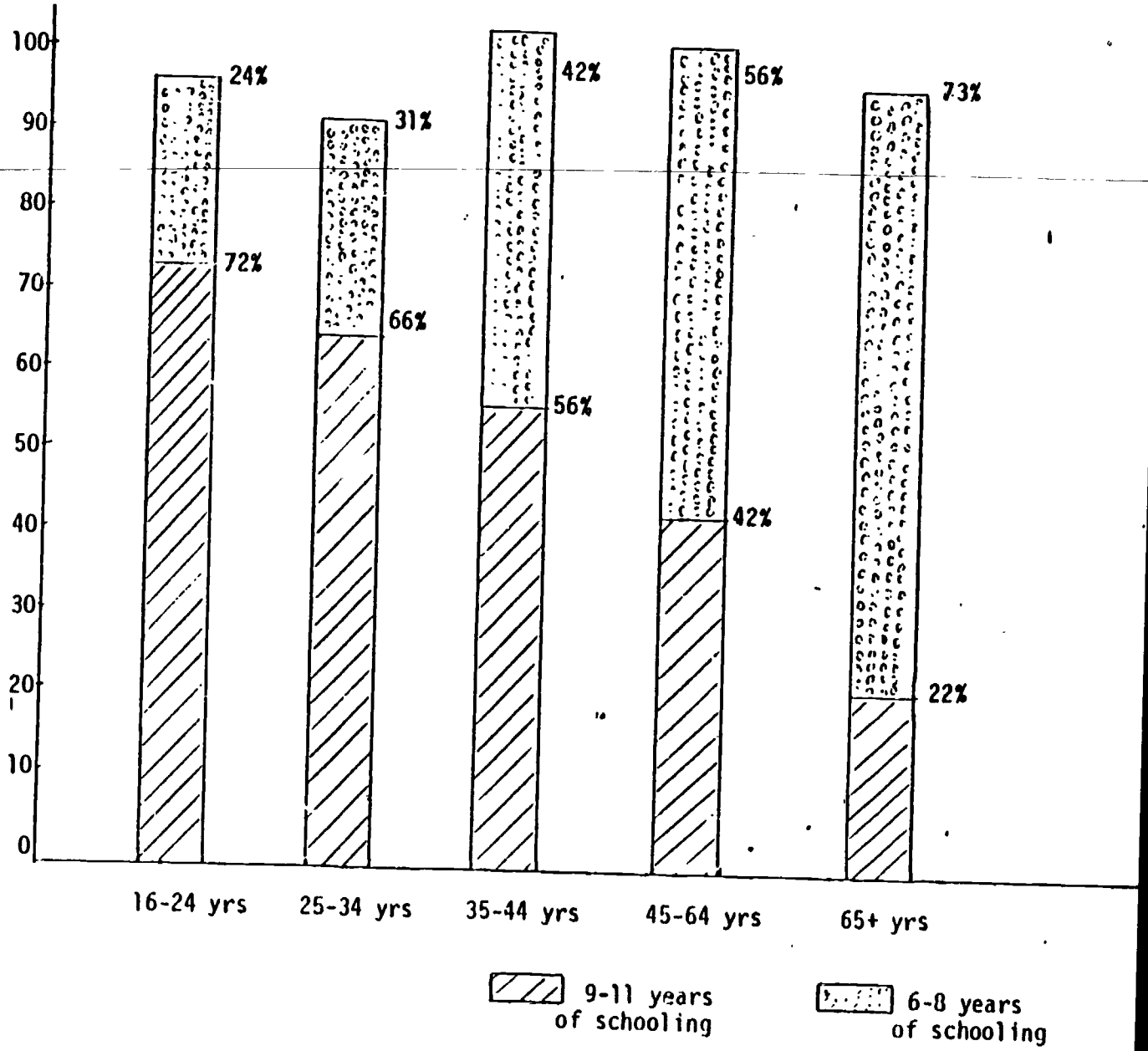
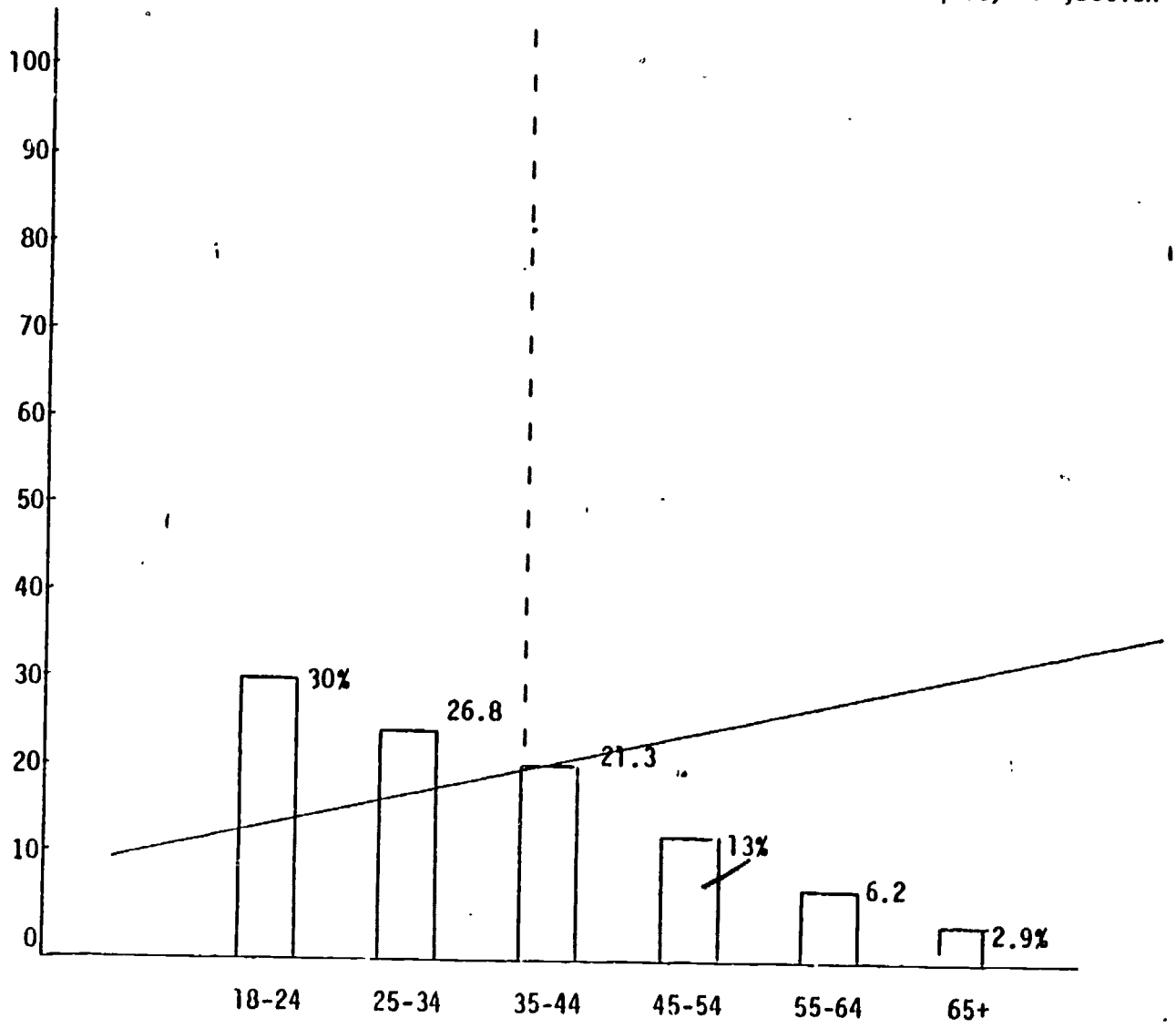


FIGURE 2

Particiation Rate By Age in Adult Basic Educational and Equity Projection



shown to be a direct inverse correlation between the relative age of the individual and the attained years of formal school involvement. Secondly, within adult basic education, in relation to oreviously cited research on adult continuing education, the level of participation in formal learning activities is also inversely correlated to incremental age groups.

Are these discrepancies of significance to both present day older adults as well as to administrators and instructors in adult basic education? What are the present and future needs and challenges of older adults in relation to adult literacy education?

The older adult in American society is both part of a group of individuals who are typically defined by chronological years, but also represents a set of social/historical characteristics which are continually influenced by the generational changes in society.

Currently older adults have higher rates of illiteracy, more predominant representation of English as a second language orientation, higher rate of failing health, and a higher proportional representation of semi- and skilled life occupations. However, these characterics are not a "steady state" representation for the group as an aggregate. For example, there is a decreasing number of elderly persons with English as their second language capability. The United States was a meling pot for the world, accepting lesser numbers of immigrants with varied languages and cultures. According to U.S. census statistic, the number of persons 60+ years old born abroad increased steadily from about 1.5 million at the turn of the century to 4.2 million in 1960, a result of the aging of the large number of pre-World War I immigrants. Between 1960 and 1970 this number declined from 4.2 million to 3.7 million and is projected to continue the decline

into the future. A recent survey by the Bureau of the Census (Fowles, 1978) reported that 5% or 1.9 million persons 65 years old and over spoke a language other than English. The usual speaking language for half of these persons was either Spanish (30%) or Italian (20%).

Current day older adults do have a significant need for adult basic education which provides them instruction in English and other basic literacy skills. Older adults with non-native English speaking backgrounds are currently living in both a communicating and culturally different society from their language and cultural heritage. The former ethnic culture-bound communities are disappearing. The older adult now interacts with families--children and grandchildren--who are both geographically separated from them as well as often removed from the psychosocial orientation of their traditional culture into the language and values of mainstream English-speaking, American society. In the future, other than special migrant representations, the older American will be native English speaking. This current state of many older adults represents an immediate and interesting challenge to adult basic education.

Another major factor which has significantly impacted upon the life and future stability of older adults is the level of income and financial support. There has been a decline in the older adult representation of poverty level population from 5.9 million in 1969 to 4.3 million in 1976. These 4.3 million elderly poor represented one-seventh of all non-institutionalized persons 60+ years old. In 1979, one-seventh of the population or 3.6 million older persons 65 years and above were defined as poor by official definition ($4,364 for a household of an older couple or $3,472 for an older individual living alone). However, current elderly who are below poverty level of income also are incorporated into a larger and growing group of "near poor" level elderly. This subgroup is experiencing slower rates in

decline in poverty or no decline at all, particularly those older subgroups of females, minorities and those who live alone. This subgroup of near-poor also represent many older adults who do not qualify for social security benefits. (Social security benefits have been the key factor in the decline of numbers of elderly classified poor since 1970.) (Every Ninth American, 1981). Does adult basic education have educational programs which can assist these older adults to more effectively cope with their limited financial standing? This current situation is another challenge to all human service delivery professionals.

Many older adults desire to continue employment for both financial and psychological productivity. However, maintaining or locating employment is difficult when over one-half of workers of sixty-five years and over are without a high school diploma (Spengler, 1976). Further, Eli Ginzberg noted that the biggest problem of the older worker to continue employment was a lack of competence associated with inadequate education. This phenomenon may be changing with advancing level of education attainment and rapidly increasing levels of part-time employment (Every Ninth American, 1981). However, as jobs continue to move into a more technologically-based area, as agriculture-related and semi-skilled positions continue to decline, and as youth unemployment continues to rise, there may be a dramatic clash between youth and aged part-time and full-time employees who are focusing on similar limited-skills positions in our society. Again, there is a challenge to both adult basic and vocational educators to seriously examine the development of work-related educational programs for older adults.

Health has been a key factor in older adult participation in education. There has been an assumption that adults must be mobile and sufficiently

independent to participate in learning activities. Obviously there is no simple answer to the question of how many elderly persons suffer from physical limitation or health impairments that inhibit their ability to maintain an independent existence. A number of measures have been developed, each of which resulted in somewhat different conclusions. One common measure is utilized in the Health Interview Survey, an annual survey of about 40,000 households sponsored by the U.S. Public Health Service. In this survey, respondents are asked about the presence of chronic conditions and the effect of such conditions on "major" and other forms of activities. The incidence of limitations in activity due to chronic conditions rises sharply with age. In 1978 survey, among elderly persons (65+), nearly half (45%) were limited to some extent in their activities compaired to only 14% for persons of all ages. About 17% of elderly persons were unable to perform their major activity, another 22% were limited in the amount or kind of major activity and 7% were not limited in their major activity but were limited in other activities such as church, clubs, shoppings, hobbies, civic projects, sports, and games. About six of every ten persons who were 85 years or older were limited in their activities due to chronic conditions, and three of every ten were unable to perform their major activity. (Statistical Notes, 1981). Adult educators are aware of age-related deficits in physiological capacity of learners and its impact on restructuring learning activities. However, this general overview of health limitations in relation to involvement and mobility suggest creative outreach to older persons through education programs both housed in nutrition sites and nursing homes as well as home-bound programs.

The lack of education also appears to affect the mental health or psychological orientation of older adults. The Harris Survey (1975) reported that older people with less than a high school education view lack of education as being a serious problem for themselves. Education appears to influence older persons' images of their mental capacities much more than income influences those images. Further, the Russell Sage Foundation Survey in a study of the quality of American life indicated that next to financial reasons, lack of education is seen as the most frequently mentioned barrier to a sense of fulfillment in life (Campbell, Converse & Rodgers, 1976). These findings suggest a greater challenge to all educators, a challenge of an increasing perceived self value and worth from learning experiences.

It has been projected that by the year 2000, the older adult will represent a more educated person. However, our society is currently facing a need to meet the challenge of educating older adults with basic skills and information. We also face the future challenge of educating a narrowing yet significant population of society's future illiterate in the older adult years. Adult basic education has not grappled with these concerns.

Influencers and Educational Participation Patterns in Illiterate Elderly

Older adults have typically not sought out formal education opportunities since their completion of grade school or early years of high school. In retrospect, the early years of the 1900's placed little expectation and had limited access to education beyond the basic guides. Support for family and basic economic survival were the key goals of life in the early 1900s. These adults were focused upon being productive workers,

parents, and citizens. Educational credentials were not considered to be of importance as were current abilities and the "Protestant ethic" in providing contributive work efforts. Thus, most older adults have not participated nor had significant desire for formal education for perhaps a fifty-year period of time. When we consider the current participation of illiterate elderly in adult basic education, we should assume there must be a unique and extremely high motivational need which would influence their future participation in formal educational learning experiences.

USOE reports that adults of 65 years and above represent only 3.45% of the total 1977 adult basic education enrollment (USOE, 1977). States with the highest percentage of population of 65 and above in ABE programs include New York, Florida, Hawaii, and Michigan. These enrollment figures are also very deceptive because they provide no ar indication of rate of participation in relation to level of educational program (e.g., basic skills, GED preparation, or ESL instruction), the amount and length of participation (whether it was one hour or continuous attendance over a period of months) or the nature of the instructional focus (basic literacy skills, or life-coping skills).

From limited data by DeCrow (1975), Heisel (1980), and Hiemstra (1980), the following basic assumptions regarding participation can be made:

1) Participation is directly correlated to the level of prior educational attainment.

2) Participation is related to the location and ease of access of the educational program.

3) Participation is directly correlated to the current health status of the elderly participants.

4) Participation is correlated to the physical mobility of the elderly participants.

5) Participation is correlated to relevance of information in relation to participant goals.

6) Participation is correlated to the individual's desire and goal for the learning process.

7) Participation is directly related to the rapport of the instructor and the social environment of the classroom.

But given these assumptions, it is obvious that programs of adult basic education, though available to all age groupings, has not been an attractive activity for older adults. In considering the decision-making modalities that an older adult must consider to enter the adult basic education classroom there are two theories which lend substance to the attraction and force towards involvement. Londoner, Hiemstra, March and Goodrow have researched Parson's theoretical construct of instrumental and expressive orientation of educational programs in the aged. It would appear that there is a relationship between level of previous educational attainment and willingness to participate in instrumental activities. Lack of basic literacy skill has not deterred many older adults from living their lives as productive, successful adults. The utilitarian value of adult basic education raises issues with their current level of perceived need. Although there was a large segment of adults who did participate in adult basic education activities for basic skills development, often the content, instructional environment and learning outcomes were highly oriented to life coping concerns, present life relevance, and socialization orientation.

The second major factor which impinges upon involvement is the personal attitude of the participant regarding value of formal learning experiences. As reported by Harris (1975), older people with less than a high school education see lack of education as being a serious problem for themselves.

Yet the perception of need and desire for education and the lack of deliberate action towards formal involvement in education typifies the older population. Why this discrepancy? Howard McClusky suggests a model of power-load-margin which lends understanding to our consideration regarding participation in educational activities. As noted by McClusky, "the pre-eminent and universal education need of the aging is the need for the kind of education that will assist them in increasing margins of power for the attainment and maintenance of well-being and continuing growth towards self-fulfillment" (McClusky, nd;Main, 1980).

McClusky theorized that educational involvement was primarily a result of Margin as a function of $\frac{\text{power}}{\text{load}}$. A margin allows a person to invest in a life expansion project and experiences including learning experiences. Power consists of the resources that a person can command in coping with the load. It consists of two sets of interacting variables....1) external -- resources such as physical health, social contacts, etc., and 2) internal -- acquired skills and life experiences such as resiliency, coping skills, etc. Load consists of the demands made on a person by self and society. Load also consists of two groups of interacting variables: 1) external -- the tasks involved in the usual requirements of living: family, work, civic responsibilities, and 2) the internal -- the life expectancies set by the individual himself: self-tolerance, goals, ideals, values, etc. The McClusky model speaks to the unique life circumstances of the illiterate elderly in relation to the formal learning environment. Specifically, illiterate elderly face significant deficits which impinge upon their "power." As noted earlier in the paper, resources of health, cognitive skills developed through educational experiences, and economic resources are often diminished during the later years. As suggested by Kunlen, the later

years are years of constriction rather than expansion. Particularly for illiterate elderly, there is a strong likelihood that their lower economic and social status of life has had a greater deficit impact in their older years.

Illiterate elderly also have a unique sense of "load." Their perceived tasks requirements are probably greater, due to lack of financial resources to provide services and also due to their perseverance in struggling through two World Wars and a Depression. They may tend to view themselves as still contributing individuals--yet their areas of contribution may be more intangible -- such as continued relationships to family, friends, community or offering of assistance in an area of personal expertise.

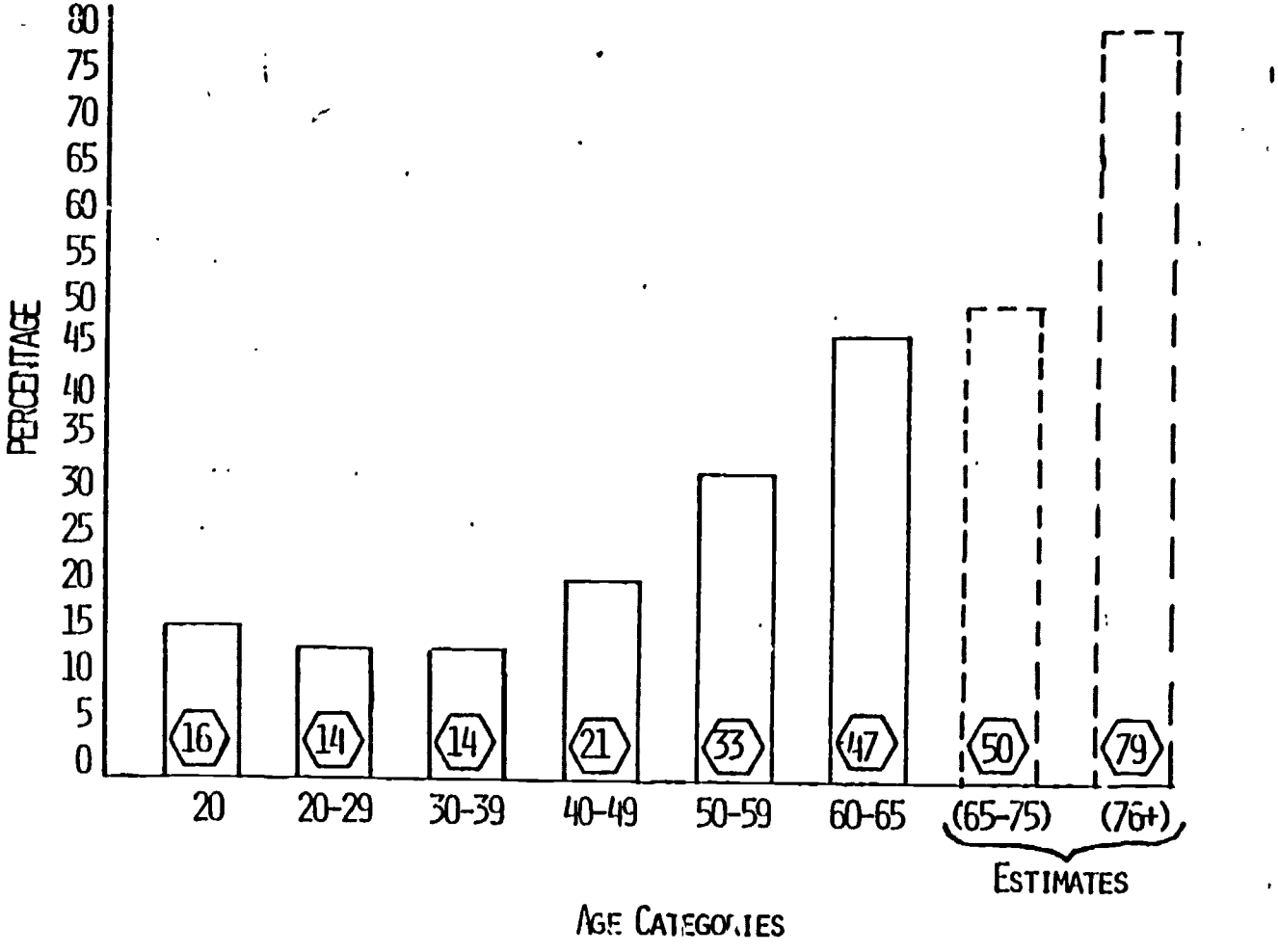
For illiterate elderly, the seeking out of educational programs has perhaps not been a previously valued activity, nor has the prior lack of basic knowledge and skills presented overwhelming difficulty with daily life survival. Illiterate elderly must have a situation and person-specific to personally pursue and enter the adult basic education classroom. Further, the classroom must be cognizant and adaptable to the specific needs of both relevant learning and appropriate instructional strategies.

What has, in fact, been the participation patterns for illiterate elderly in adult basic education programs? No nation-wide research has been conducted with regard to participation; however, a 310 project, "The Recruitment and Retention of Older Adults", at the University of Texas at Austin, did investigate by both survey and selected site interviews, key factors of current participation of older learners (Kasworm and Stedman, 1980). As noted by the following graphs (Figures 3, 4, 5) Texas is experiencing a dramatic growth in adults age 60 years and above; however, these individuals

FIGURE 3

FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY IN TEXAS *

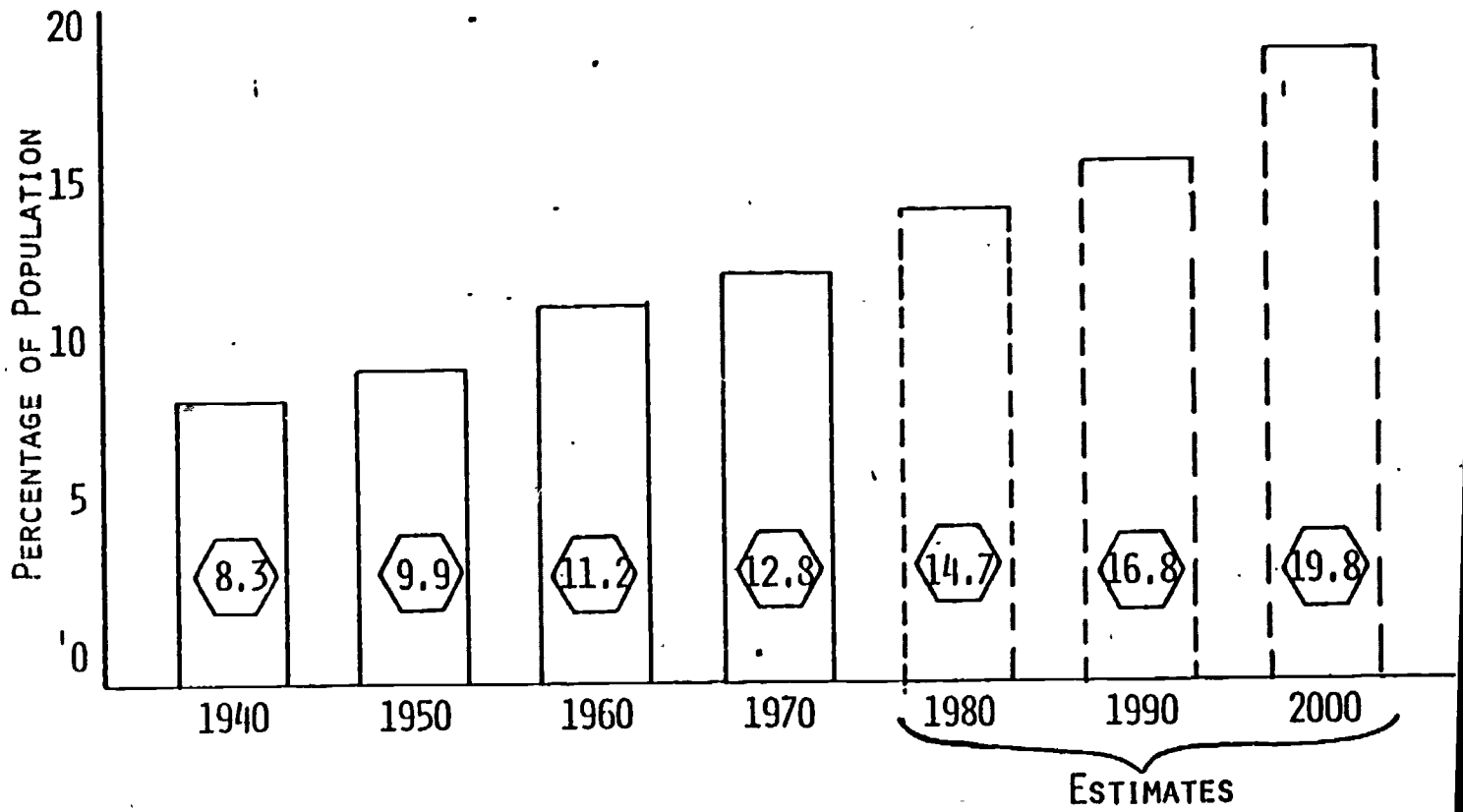
BY AGE CATEGORIES



*SOURCE: ADULT FUNCTIONAL COMPETENCY IN TEXAS, ADULT PERFORMANCE LEVEL PROJECT,

FIGURE 4

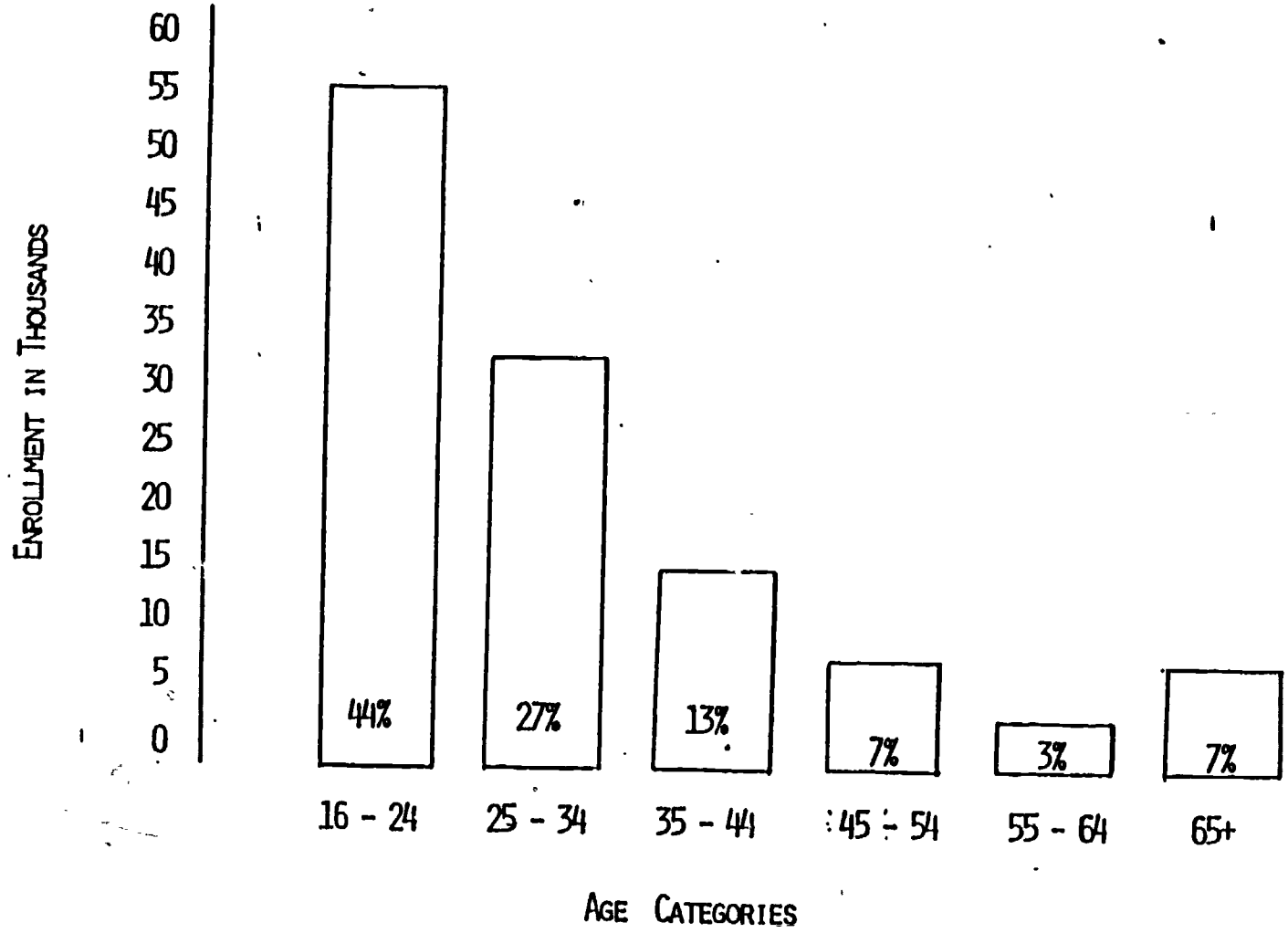
GROWTH OF ELDERLY POPULATION*
(AGE 60 YEARS AND ABOVE)
IN TEXAS



* SOURCE: BIENNIAL REPORT FOR 1976-1978, GOVERNOR'S COMMITTEE ON AGING, AUSTIN, TEXAS

FIGURE 5

SUMMARY OF ENROLLMENT IN ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN TEXAS BY AGE FY 1978*



*SOURCE: ANNUAL PROGRAM REPORT: FY 1978, DIVISION OF ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROGRAMS, TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY, AUSTIN, TEXAS

represent lower functional literacy levels and lower current participation levels.

In a Survey of Texas Adult Education Cooperatives (an administrative unit for a defined geographical area), approximately half of the Co-ops enrolled less than 10 adults age 65 and older in each major program area (ABE, ESL, GED, H.S. Diploma, and Life Skills). (Summary enrollment figures are shown on Table 1. Note that the highest average enrollment was in the life skills area.)

In analyzing recruitment/enrollment patterns, a significant percentage of Coops with a higher participation (20% of higher) of older students (17 Co-ops) as opposed to Co-ops (38 in number) with under 20% of participation, focused their efforts where senior citizens congregate -- senior centers, nutrition sites, community centers. (Note Table 2).

Patterns of attendance, preferred class size and self-report absences were also examined. Not surprisingly, senior adults attended class less often and stayed for shorter periods of time than younger adults. In the survey, most senior adults (63.1%) reported that they attended class only one or two days per week; adults age 45 to 64 are more apt (56.1%) to attend three or more days per week. Similarly, among adults who reported attending for less than an hour, 4 out of 5 were seniors; the reverse was true for the time period 4 hours or more. To put it a different way, 76.9% of the 45 to 64 age group reported they stayed at least two hours each time they attended. For seniors the percentage was a much lower 44.5%. These percentages reflect in part the format of existing programs. For example, some classes in nursing homes are set up to run one hour, one day per week. The percentages, however, apparently also reflect student preferences. For example when asked how long a class should last, 57.1%

TABLE 1

SUMMARY ENROLLMENT FIGURES FOR TEXAS ADULT EDUCATION CO-OPS

BY PROGRAM AREA AND AGE GROUPS FOR FY 1979

Program Area	Age Group 45-64		Age Group 65+	
	Average Enrollment	But, 50% of the Co-Ops enrolled less than	Average Enrollment	But, 50% of the Co-ops enrolled less than
A.B.E.	98	46	42	10
E.S.L.	64	30	17	11
G.E.D.	82	41	19	6
H.S. Diploma	16	11	9	9
Life Skills	35	11	73	9

TABLE 2

Locations of Classes for Texas Adult Education Co-Ops

with More Than 20% (High) and Less Than 20% (Low)

Enrollment Among Older Adults

Class Location	% for High Co-ops	% for Low Co-Ops
Senior Centers	57.1	45.9
Nursing Homes	57.1	27.0
Nutrition Sites	57.1	24.3
Adult Learning Centers	42.9	59.5
Public School Facility	42.9	43.2
State Facilities	28.6	27.1
Public Library	14.3	16.2
Work Site	14.3	2.7

of the seniors selected the category "30 to 60 minutes." Most younger members (67.7%) selected the category "2½ hours or more." (Kasworm and Stedman, 1980).

Most senior adults (70.6%) attended where there was structured class time; most of the 45 to 64 age group (86.6%) attend where there was a "learning center" concept. Most seniors either rode a bus (50%) -- usually a special seniors van -- or drove their own cars (14.3%). Those who attended classes in residential facilities or at sites very near their homes were able to walk to class (35.7%). Seniors preferred to attend class in the mornings (77.8%) with most (72.8%) specifying the best time to be "10AM to noon."

As compared to the 45 to 64 age group, senior adults preferred larger classes. Most seniors said they preferred class sizes of "8 to 10" or "more than 10" (88.2%). The 45 to 64 age group members did not appear to have a preference as to class size. Their responses were evenly spread across all possible categories of responses. Seniors showed a preference for attending classes in which other members are their own age -- 29.4% for seniors as against 7.9% for the 45 to 64 age group noting this preference.

Contrary to popular beliefs, senior students reported to not miss class because of illness or fatigue in any higher proportion than did younger adults. Both groups reported that illness kept them from attending either "very little" or "not at all" (71.4% for seniors as against 72.2% for the 45-64 age group). Slightly more senior members were absent because of fatigue (14.2% as against 5.6%) and slightly higher numbers of younger group members than seniors were absent because of family responsibilities and demands (17.2% as against 10%). Absence because of conflict with job demands seemed to be the only real point of difference between the

two groups -- with 1 in 5 of the 45 to 64 age group reporting that conflict with job kept them from attending "some" or "quite a bit" of the time.

What topics or content were of interest for curriculum design for the older adults. During the research interviews, students were read a list of 19 topics. As each individual topic was named, students were asked to indicate whether they would be interested in attending a class on that topic.

As can be seen from Table 3, the topic interests were quite similar for both age groups. The seniors expressed greater interest in sessions on how to get more food for less money, nutrition, home health care, and use of leisure time.

An initial examination of effective recruitment strategies was also examined in field research interviews including both students and teachers/ administrators. For adults, age 65 and above, direct personal contact by a representative of the program was noted as very important. Among this age group, more than half of the students (95.7%) said they heard about the program from a teacher or staff member. The comparable figure for the age group 45 to 64 was 5% response. Younger adults (45-64 years) tended to find out about the program more often from social service agencies (25%), family members or relatives (22.5%), or other students (20%). (Table 4). In the interviews with teachers, about half (54.9%) of the teachers surveyed reported that they became directly involved in recruiting older students. For teachers who operated mainly in senior sites, the percentage was considerably higher (90.9%). In fact, in senior congregate sites, the actual contact and encouragement (recruitment) by the teacher was directly correlated with student participation.

TABLE 3

A Comparison of Topical Interests of

Younger and Senior Adults

Topic Area	% Adults Age 45-64 who are interested	Adults age 65+ who are interested
More Food for Less Money	81.1	100.0
Manage Money	76.3	57.1
Knowing about the Government	75.0	80.0
Safety, First Aid, and Emergencies	74.4	77.8
How to Write a Will	73.7	50.0
How to Buy Wisely	67.6	66.7
Available Jobs in the Community	63.6	50.0
Job Training in the Community	63.6	50.0
Knowing about your Community	62.2	66.7
Conserving Energy	62.2	53.3
Dealing with Changes in Your Life	59.5	66.7
How to do Income Tax	59.0	23.5
How to Find a Job	57.6	50.0
Nutrition	55.3	75.0
Get Along Better with Teenagers	55.3	50.0
Home Health Care	52.6	83.3
Getting Along Better with Spouse	43.3	30.0
Getting Ready to Retire	41.7	16.7
Use of Leisure Time	35.9	62.5

TABLE 4

How Students Found Out About
The Program They Attend

Source of Information	% for Adults Age 45-64 Years	% for Adults Age 65+
Recruited by Teacher or Staff	5.0	57.9
Referred by a Social Service Agency	25.0	0.0
Recruited by Family Member	22.5	5.3
Referred by Another Student	20.0	10.5
Newspaper	7.5	10.5
T.V.	0.0	10.5
Phone Book	7.5	0.0
Church Announcement	0.0	5.3

Examination of APL Functional Literacy for Age Differences

There have not been research activities focused upon the illiterate elderly in relation to specific content and skill acquisition and competency levels. However, there has been one study which can provide an overview with regard to one perspective of older adults in relation to literacy skills. The Adult Performance Level Project (APL) represents the first major national research effort to address the concept of functional literacy in relation to the undereducated adult. The APL project had as its main goal to specify competencies which are functional to adult economic and educational success. The APL theory of functional competency was developed from an extensive review of behavioral and social research on the undereducated and underemployed adults, from surveys on interviews of state and federal agencies and foundations examining and identifying characteristics which distinguish the successful from the unsuccessful adult, from regional conferences which examined adults' needs in relation to life survival, and semi-structured interviews with under-educated and under-employed persons. From these activities, a taxonomy of adult needs was designed, entitled "general knowledge area." Having identified general knowledge areas critical to adult performance related to acquisition of literacy, the data was reanalyzed to define primary skills required for the major functional roles of adult life. Functional competencies were defined as the integration of skills and knowledges rather than cluster groupings of isolated knowledge and skills areas. APL functional competencies became a two-dimension concept in which an identified set of skills -- reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, computation, problem-solving, and interpersonal relations -- are applied to five knowledge areas -- consumer economics, occupation knowledge, health, community resources, government and law.

Competencies were specified from the prior research data collections utilized in defining the concept of functional literacy. Performance indicators were written for each competency which reflected both the APL functional competency framework, as well as "requirements taken from adult life,...small simulations of what is demanded of the adult by his or her society" (p. 4, Northcutt, 1975).

After field testing and revision of the performance indicators, a national assessment survey was conducted to determine the levels of performance. This survey was constructed of the performance indicators formatted into a series of interview schedules. With the assistance of a subcontractor (Opinion Research Corporation, Princeton, New Jersey), five independent samples were drawn, each with a size of not less than 1,500 for a total of 7,500 adults. Each respondent was interviewed with the length of interview lasting from 20 to a maximum of 45 minutes.

The collected data from this national assessment was analyzed to determine meaningful and well-defined competency levels. The performance of the sample population was examined on an objective-by-objective basis; overall competency was defined in an aggregate index of competency profiles, which were associated with different levels of adult success as measured by income, job status, and education. Three levels were identified for this aggregate index, and were called APL 1 (those adults who are, by and large, "functionally competent" or adults who function with difficulty), APL 2 (adults who functioned in society on a minimal level), and APL 3 (adults who are proficient in their mastery of competency objectives and function successfully in society).

Are there unique differences between age groupings regarding adult literacy and specifically in relation to illiterate older adults? The

national APL survey findings were analyzed by the author to identify potential differences. However, from prior findings regarding bias differences between cross-sectional versus longitudinal designs, this author notes caution regarding the usage of cross-sectional research to define age differentials. Thus, this examination of potential differences according to age cohorts should not presume to have a direct correlative nature to the age variable.

In this analysis of the national APL survey, the data was re-analyzed through cluster groupings or respondents according to three age cohorts: 18-39 years, 40-54 years, and 55-65 years. In an effort to determine the accurate representation of this specific sample in relation to other previous national samples, the levels of educational attainment were correlated to age gradients. In this APL sample, as with other previous national samples, age inversely correlates to school completion rates. However, this particular sample displayed a tendency to have drawn more individuals with higher educational attainment levels than previous national samples (though this representation was not statistically significant.) (Note Table 5). In Chi-Square statistical examination by age group of the APL Functional Competency Subscores, no statistically significant differences were found between age groupings. However, the raw percentages of group differences presented several interesting findings. In Table 6, it can be observed that in all APL knowledge categories, the 55-65 age group demonstrated less functional knowledge competency than the two younger groups. Further, the examination of the APL skill area subscores in Table 7 also noted the same age group differences to functional competence. One could infer older adults in relation to younger groupings do not have the same level

TABLE 5

PERCENTAGE OF AGE GROUP REPRESENTATION

BY LEVELS OF SCHOOL COMPLETION IN NATIONAL APL SURVEY

	SCHOOL COMPLETION CATEGORIES		
AGE GROUPING	NONE - 6 GRADE	7 - 12 GRADE	SOME COLLEGE - GRADUATE WORK
18-39 yrs.	1.5%	66.4%	32.0%
40-54 yrs.	6.7%	71.4%	21.9%
55-65 yrs	12.4%	71.0%	16.6%

TABLE 6

Examination of Age Differences in Relation to APL Knowledge Subscores

(Percentage Figures)

Age Group	Occupational Knowledge Subscore	Consumer Economic Subscore	Government & Law Subscore	Health Subscore	Community Resource Subscore
18-39					
APL 1	12.2	25.0	21.0	17.3	16.3
APL 2	34.7	31.2	27.4	29.5	25.5
APL 3	53.2	43.8	51.5	53.2	58.2
40-54					
APL 1	23.9	29.9	28.2	21.0	24.0
APL 2	26.7	34.4	26.5	31.7	25.1
APL 3	49.4	35.7	45.3	47.3	51.0
55-65					
APL 1	33.4	42.7	37.2	35.3	40.6
APL 2	31.7	36.4	21.9	30.7	29.2
APL 3	34.9	20.8	41.0	33.9	30.3

Note: APL 1 : adults who are, by and large, functionally incompetent
APL 2 : adults who function in society on a minimal level
APL 3 : adults who are proficient in their mastery of competency objectives and function successfully in society

TABLE 7

Examination of Age Differences in Relation to APL Skill Subscores
(Percentage Figures)

Age Group	APL Reading Subscore	APL Problem Solving Subscore	APL Computation Subscore	APL Writing Subscore
18-39				
APL 1	16.6	24.2	28.1	9.0
APL 2	30.9	25.1	25.0	24.3
APL 3	52.4	50.1	46.9	66.1
40-54				
APL 1	24.2	28.3	36.4	19.4
APL 2	31.9	21.1	24.5	23.4
APL 3	43.9	50.6	39.1	57.2
55-65				
APL 1	34.0	40.0	42.4	35.7
APL 2	37.0	22.1	33.8	31.2
APL 3	29.0	37.9	23.8	33.2

Note: APL 1: adults who are, by and large, functionally incompetent
APL 2: adults who function in society on a minimal level
APL 3: adults who are proficient in their mastery of competency objectives and function successfully in society

of functional knowledge and skills for effectively coping withing our society. Also, these findings may suggest potential historical or social change bias of these scores in relation to age groups.

There has been significant controversy surrounding the APL construct. However, I believe this data presents potential areas for future investigation regarding illiterate older adults. Specifically, 40% or more of the oldest age group were functionally incompetent in relation to consumer economics, community resources, problem-solving skills and computation skills. Approximately one-third of the 55-65 age group were functionally illiterate across all knowledge and skill categories on the APL test. Another 20 to 30 percent of the oldest age category were minimally functionally competent. At a key time of the adult lifespan, these findings of life coping abilities are quite disturbing. Key transitions of many adult areas of life occur around this age (e.g. moving to a fixed income, status, declining health, loss of spouse, lessening social interactions and greater involvement in complex governmental social and medical programs). These significant changes suggest a greater need for basic information and skills to effectively adapt to life change. The APL findings suggest many older adults may lack these basic skills and knowledge. Further, no human service programs and adult basic education programs have identified, much less attempted to remediate these educative needs.

This paper has provided an overview of both theory and recent preliminary research which addresses the identification of illiterate elderly in relation to both present and future involvement in educationsl literacy activities. It is apparent from these prior investigations, there are many questions which have been raised, many challenges to be faced, and few tools of understanding,

insight, and knowledge to help clarify and solve these concerns. Future activity in the field and research arena must be started. We grow older every day. As Pogo stated, "If you are not part of the solution, you become part of the problem."

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