

## The Juvenile Probation Students Project.

This article describes how the Objective Diagnostic Prescriptive Program worked with young people that the State had placed on probation rather than jail. Most of them had dropped out or had been expelled from school. All of them were deficient in academic skills. Their reading level ranged from unable to read to fourth grade. Strong contracted with the State Juvenile Department to teach them how to read or improve their reading skills.

## The Juvenile Probation Students Project

Did you ever get a phone call that started you on a new venture? It does happen. I had developed an objective diagnostic prescriptive education model for training or retraining teachers and for a general education program. The model had been implemented and tested at the university and public school levels and with students with reading disabilities in an inner city school. The results indicated the program worked well, so this would give me an opportunity to see if it would work with kids who had serious reading and discipline problems.

The director of Cities and Schools called to see if I was interested in developing and implementing a reading program for the juvenile probation department. In Houston they had a large number of youths who were on probation and were unable to attend school. Many had been kicked out, generally for discipline problems. I indicated that I was interested and met with the director of the juvenile probation department to find out exactly what they wanted. It turned out that most of the youths, ranging in age from 12 to 18 years old, had very limited reading and math ability. The department's primary goal was to improve the individuals' reading ability. I asked about availability of resources and the reply was that they had very limited physical facilities and materials. Further exploration revealed they would only pay for six weeks of instruction for each individual. In addition the pay was based on the achievement of the individual. This meant that I would have to secure teachers and facilities in which classes could be held. Complicating the matter was that the individuals were scattered over a wide geographical area and the classes would have to be in the evenings. Since most of the individuals had limited transportation the classes would have to be held in several locations. In addition, the teachers that I wanted would only be free in the evenings. It was further decided that about 60 individuals per six weeks period could enter the program. After analyzing the information I figured that six centers could be established with each center servicing approximately 10 individuals.

I contacted several teachers that I had trained and who had worked with me to see if they were interested. Then through my contacts I found schools and businesses that would furnish us space to meet. Now that I knew that I could have the teachers and meeting spaces I decided that it would be a good opportunity to test the instructional model that had been developed in the Teacher Development Program. (See appendix) I decided to accept the task for two years

The teachers selected knew the model and some had used it in the Lincoln School Project with me. Sites for the classes were secured in schools and in business offices and conference rooms. Most of the sites selected were not ideal, but they gave us a place to meet. Classes were scheduled in the evening and met once a week for three hours.

Under the agreement or regulations of the juvenile probation department, the probationers were required to meet with us for the first meeting. After that it was up to the program to convince them to continue. In our first meeting with the probationers we did an intensive diagnostic analysis of their reading and math skills. I then met with each individual and went over the findings. The individuals' reading ability ranged from 2nd grade level to 5th grade level. The probationers ranged in age from 13 to 18.

At the conference I asked the individual if they were satisfied with their reading ability. Every one of them said, "NO". Then I asked them if they would like to improve their ability? Every one said, "Yes". So I explained what the program was and what their obligation would be. I also indicated that attending the program was their decision and they were free to drop out any time they felt it wasn't worth their time and effort. In the two years that the program was operational we only had 2 students to drop out and only 1 that we expelled because of discipline problems.

Unfortunately, all of my data was lost. During a remodeling project at my office at the university someone discarded a box that had the data for this project along with some other materials. It is possible that the Juvenile Probation Department in Houston, Texas might have a copy, but since the final report was done in 1987 I doubt they would have retained it. I have tried to be as accurate as possible from the notes and memory that I have.

As stated earlier the program was funded and authorized on the achievement of probationers' ability to improve their reading skills. The fact the program continued for two years indicated it was successful in improving the reading skills of individuals participating in the program. All of the participants improved their ability to read. The range of growth was from 1 to 5 grade levels. Remember each probationer, except one, only had six weeks of instructional service. The one exception illustrates some important facts about the program. The instructor of this student came to me and asked if the student could attend another session as he had completed his six weeks. She said that he was making excellent progress and had asked her to let him attend the next session. I looked up the personal and academic records of the student. I found out that he had been reading at a 2nd grade level, was 16 years of age and had been expelled from 2 different schools for discipline problems. When I discussed his behavior with his instructor she told me that she had never had any problems with him, in fact she said that he was a model student. I then had a conference with the young man and asked him why he wanted to attend another session. He said, "I am learning to read and I want to learn more." Then he said, "Dr. Strong, when I entered the program I was reading like a second grader and now I am reading at almost a fifth grade level, you all have been honest with me and you are really interested in helping me learn." He then added, "I can see that for the first time in my life I can and am learning." Then I asked him why he had so many discipline problems in school and why he had been expelled from two of them?

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He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Dr. Strong, how would you like to go into a class where you knew that you couldn't understand the material or do the work and everyone in the

class knew you couldn't. The teacher would call on me and I would have to say I don't know. On every test I would get an "F". This would go on day after day with no hope of it getting better. The only way out was to get kicked out." After the conference I went to the director of the juvenile department to see if there would be any problem with allowing the young man to attend another session. He informed me that the regulations only allowed funding for an individual for six weeks. Since part of our funding was based upon the number of students I could see the director's situation. So I then asked him if he had any objections if we allowed the young man to continue and not put him on our roster or charge for the service. The instructor and I had discussed and had agreed on this arrangement earlier. He said that he saw no reason why we couldn't do it. At the end of the second six weeks I checked the young man's progress. The instructor showed me his final reading test results. The young man was reading at almost the 7th grade level. While this young man was an outstanding example of results of the program, the post tests indicated that the average students' growth in reading during the six weeks improved by 2 to 4 grade levels. Another unanticipated result of the program was the lack of discipline and attendance problems. It indicated that many classroom behavioral and attendance problems would be prevented if the program allowed every student to feel that they were learning and making progress.

Conclusions: This program reaffirmed my belief that every kid or individual can and wants to learn and will if given the right instructional program. The Strong's Instructional model and techniques developed in the Teacher Development program are effective for all types of individuals and situations. Discipline and attendance problems will decrease and learning will increase when a student can see that he can do the work and that he is making progress. Money and facilities are nice but the quality of the instructor and type of instructional program are far more important. Any program to be successful it must have specific objectives, teachers with diagnostic skills and broad knowledge of educational resources. It is critical that the instructor have the freedom to make decisions about what a student needs and to be able to implement what strategies to use. There must be an evaluation of the program and the primary focus is on each student's progress and achievement. The instructor must keep a record of their interactions with a student and the student's progress.