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Superior Performance Competencies Achieved Through Destination Imagination Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Today's workforce not only requires specific content-area knowledge and skills achieved through formal education but also, and most critically, superior performance competencies including distinguishable behaviors. While formal education prioritizes easily detectable and measurable content-specific knowledge and skills, superior performance competencies such as cognitive, affective, and motivational skills remain secondary unless students engage in extracurricular activities in real-world settings. This qualitative study investigated the phenomenon of achieving an array of superior performance competencies through learning by doing, at one of the 2023 *Destination Imagination* events. This study marked the first fieldwork in which the principal researcher directly observed the event in its natural setting. Data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted concurrently during the event by means of observations, ordinary conversations, and an informal interview. The inductive data analysis included analytic memos, and midway hypothesis coding which confirmed the significance of immersing in such activities and resulted in two major findings: 1) participating in such meaningful real-world activities cultivates distinctive behaviors that drive exceptional performance, positioning participants to stand out among their peers; and 2) this involvement also equips students with the capabilities to excel upon entering the workforce, ensuring superior employee performance in their roles.

Keywords: Destination Imagination Educational Experiences, Destination Imagination Global Finals, Learning by Doing, Superior Employee Performance, Real World Activities, Workforce Skills.

INTRODUCTION

Ample studies indicate that formal education hardly prepares students for *superior performance* described as “one standard deviation above average performance...roughly the level achieved by the top 1 person out of 10 in a given working situation” (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, p. 13) unless students make an effort to improve their superior competency characteristics by means of learning-by-doing, involved in experiences such as extracurricular activities (ECA) in real world settings which promote character building/strengthening, life learning skills, interpersonal skills and cognitive abilities. Although these skills are listed as the most critical skills by numerous companies, “business schools have been criticized for not fully developing critical thinking and analytical skills” (Daspit & D’Souza, 2012, p. 666) which also applies to other school programs. In general, formal education is designed to prepare students for *effective performance* described as “minimally acceptable level of work” (Spencer & Spencer, p. 13). However, a competitive and continually disrupted labor market demands superior performance competencies, not only when hiring but also following the hiring process, in expected roles and responsibilities.

The significance of this study derived from the gaps in formal education and the impact of extracurricular studies in real-life circumstances regarding positioning participants to stand out among their peers; providing them with capabilities to excel in life, and upon entering the workforce and as they perform their roles. In addition, there was limited research on *Destination Imagination (DI) Educational Experiences* directly related to superior performance competencies. Moreover, this study marked the first fieldwork in which the principal researcher directly observed the event in its natural setting.

This particular program was purposefully selected 1) due to the DI’s organizational mission, vision, and the numerous messages it conveyed to K-12 and higher education students and their parents: “the Destination Imagination global community is united by a core belief that when students have the freedom to grow and collaborate without boundaries, their confidence explodes and the world opens up to them in new ways.” (DI, 2023, para. 1) and 2) due to how DI is making a difference in the lives of students.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon (Patton, 2015) of superior performance competencies by means of a DI experience, in this case the 2023 DI Global Finals event. It is important to note that DI Educational Experiences are made up of both *Team Challenges* where teams find solutions to challenges and *the Tournaments* where solutions are showcased. The core research question was: What are the superior performance competencies achieved through a DI experience?

To be able to collect reliable data, it was critical to first understand the organizational context and the experience of the participants attending the event. For this reason, the principal researcher was invited by a DI Team Manager from Nebraska, United States to attend the 2023 affiliate DI challenges. With this first fieldwork, the researcher employed pre-identified questions to be able to effectively observe and reflect on the event which prepared the foundation for the second fieldwork which took place at the 2023 DI Global Finals event in Kansas City, the United States.

Textual data were collected at the 2023 DI Global Finals and included observations, ordinary conversations and an informal interview, and were collected during this second fieldwork. Data collection, analysis and interpretation were completed concurrently (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) during the fieldwork. Due to the professional background and expertise of the principal researcher, the field notes were in the form of analytic memos. Hypothesis coding was applied midway. As a follow up, official documents and organization videos were reviewed to reinforce the principal researcher's interpretations. Additionally, for *member checking* (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), the interpretations were shared with the DI Team Manager in Nebraska and the DI Director of Education, resulting in confirmation of the findings. Two findings derived from the data analysis and interpretation and included 1) participating in such meaningful real-world activities cultivates distinctive behaviors that drive superior performance, positioning participants to stand out among their peers; and 2) this involvement also equips students with the capabilities to excel upon entering the workforce, ensuring superior performance in their roles.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The workforce is continually forced to adopt and adapt to new technological advances (Flanding, Grabman, & Cox, 2019) necessitating new knowledge, skills and literacies not only from employees but also from job seekers. For job seekers, given the disruptions and competition, adding more transversal or cognitive skills to be able to work across jobs and work contexts (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021a) becomes an added bonus to core personality characteristics which promote distinguishable behavior. While upskilling in companies becomes essential in improving technical skills and new literacies, the foundation of such adaptability lies in the strength of one's core personality.

Skills and Competencies

This research makes a distinction between skills and competencies which are often used interchangeably by many. Skills are described as "the ability to perform a certain physical or mental task" (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, p. 11) and make up one of the competency characteristics. Competencies, however, are the "underlying characteristics of people...a fairly deep and enduring part of a person's personality and can predict behavior in a wide variety of situations and job tasks" (Spencer & Spencer, p. 9).

In addition to *skills*, the other four competency characteristics include 1) *motive*, described as "the things a person consistently thinks about or wants that cause action," 2) *traits*, described as "physical characteristics and consistent responses to situations or information," 3) *self-concept*, described as "a person's attitude, values and self-image," and 4) *knowledge*, described as "information in specific content area" (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, pp. 9-10).

Knowledge and skills learned through formal education are considered part of a surface competency and are not only measurable but are also easily detectable on job applications and at interviews. However, competency characteristics which are the most complex and are challenging to understand are the parts which make up the core personality of a person and include traits, self-concept, and motive. These characteristics are hidden and cannot easily be detected. Because the hidden parts predict personality characteristics (McClelland, 1973), at interviews, they can be deciphered by experts. One way of detecting these characteristics is by

means of Behavioral Event Interviewing (BEI) or other meticulous interviewing strategies set forth by grounded research. The aim of the BEI process is to obtain clues from the interviewee in order to detect their core personality characteristics. The process involves asking an interviewee “to describe three peak successes and three major failures in short story fashion” (McClelland, p. 5). However, together with know-how interviewing skills, using the BEI technique requires mastery by the hiring companies, organizations.

Superior Performance

A career training manual entitled *21st Century Career Transition Workshop* developed by Resource Consultants, Inc. (now Serco Inc.) (2003) lists three types of skills: 1) Self-management skills, 2) functional or transferable skills, and 3) technical skills. Today, these skills continue to serve as the foundational skills related to the workforce. According to the workshop manual, the functional skills (also known as transferable, or transversal, or cognitive skills) are described as “general skills” meaning getting the daily job performance done and thus, can be transferred from one job to a different job. These skills are also considered transversal or cognitive skills and include skills such as analytical, problem-solving, digital, leadership and presentation skills (OECD, 2021a). Technical skills on the other hand are described as “career specific skills” which represent content specific knowledge, “those things you know (a particular knowledge) and can do (specific technical ability)” (Resource Consultants, Inc., pp. 16-18).

For decades, one skill set, personal management skills defined as “personal characteristics that help a person perform a job and/or relate to people and the environment” (Resource Consultants, Inc., 2003) has always made a big difference in the hiring process. This core personality competency (Spencer & Spencer, 1993) is made up of motive, trait and self-concept and is the key for average or superior performance. Today, the career planning/management professionals and human resource professionals utilize similar terms when referring to aforementioned skills. In many circles, core personality competencies are also known as personal management skills (Resource Consultants, Inc.) or self-management skills.

Superior performance “is defined statistically as one standard deviation above average performance...roughly the level achieved by the top 1 person out of 10 in a given working situation” (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, p. 13). People with distinguishable behaviors are superior performers. They stand out in whatever they do; their motives are exceptional; they have consistent responses to situations; they are confident, adaptable, resilient, and have excellent interpersonal skills. Their performance is beyond *effective performance*, described as “minimally acceptable level of work” (Spencer & Spencer, p. 13).

Many organizations and companies may not directly utilize the term superior performance competencies, however, the skills and competencies they list as the most critical skills or skills sought after by employers are similar to the superior performance competency characteristics (motive, trait, self-concept). For an example, OECD (2021b) lists *three core competencies*: 1) delivery-resulted competencies leading to achieving results and include analytical thinking, achievement focus, drafting skills, flexible thinking, managing resources, teamwork and team leadership; 2) strategic planning competencies leading to planning for the future and include client focus, diplomatic sensitivity, influencing, negotiating, organisational knowledge); and 3)

interpersonal competencies leading to building relationships and include developing talent, organisational alignment, strategic networking, strategic thinking.

Another OECD report (OECDa), *OECD Skills Outlook* presented similar fundamental skills demanded by employers: “communication, teamwork and organisational skills are among the transversal skills most frequently demanded by employers...Cognitive skills, such as analytical, problem-solving, digital, leadership and presentation skills are also highly transversal across jobs” (para. 10). Even business magazines continue to share similar essential work skills sought after by the labor market. In short, these competencies are made up of cognitive abilities and core personality competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, teamwork, interpersonal/intrapersonal skills, adaptability, acting in an ethical manner, trustworthiness, cross cultural competencies and such. Similarly, having surveyed 18,000 people in 15 countries, McKinsey & Company presents 56 *distinct elements of talent* (56 DELTAs) across 13 skill groups and four categories labelled as cognitive, interpersonal, self-leadership and digital for “future-proof citizens’ ability to work” (Dondi, Klier, Panier, & Schubert, 2021, para 1). Yet again, back in 2011, the Institute for the Future (IFF) listed similar key work skills needed in the next 10 years, categorized as future work skills 2020: Sense making, social intelligence, transdisciplinary, novel and adaptive thinking, computational thinking, new media literacy, design mindset, cognitive load management, cross cultural competency, virtual collaboration. While the labor market continues to demand the aforementioned critical competencies, without a distinguishable personality trait, which makes up the core of the super performance competencies, it becomes extremely difficult to acquire these competencies. No matter what the disruptions, together with cognitive capacities; a distinguished behavior will continue to stand the test of time.

The Workforce and Student Weaknesses

The workforce continues to make predictions and lists the most critical skills. When IFF (2011) predicted the *2020 future work skills*, their report listed the key six drivers which would change the landscape of companies. These key drivers were identified as extreme longevity, the rise of smart machines and systems, computational world, new media ecology, super structured organizations, globally connected world. The report also indicated that: To be successful in the next decade, individuals will need to demonstrate foresight in navigating a rapidly shifting landscape of organizational forms and skill requirements. They will increasingly be called upon to continually reassess the skills they need, and quickly put together the right resources to develop and update these. Workers in the future will need to be adaptable lifelong learners. p. 13

Research indicates that higher education does not come across as nimble to equip students with super performance competencies. There seems to be a huge gap between what employers require and how colleges prepare students and how students view the workforce. According to a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (2019) “51% of respondents say education systems have done little or nothing to help address the skills shortage issue...education systems have done little to nothing to help address the skills shortage” (p. 6). The updated data presented by *The Leadership IQ* (n.d.) reported that almost half of the newly hired candidates fail in a period of two years and [only] a low number of hires become super performers: “And contrary to popular belief, technical skills are not the primary reason why

new hires fail.... poor interpersonal skills dominate the list, flaws which many of their managers admit were overlooked during the job interview process” (para. 1).

While knowledge is measurable and can be assessed, it does not predict job performance. It only provides what the applicant can do, not what the applicant will do (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Traditional pedagogies increase students’ “factual knowledge, and their competency in solving routine exercises but have no significant effect on their reasoning skills” (Bietenbeck, 2014, p. 143). For an example, skills such as rapid decision making is a daily occurrence in business and without it, serious wrongdoing may occur.

The president of Northeastern University, Joseph E. Aoun (2017), noted that in the age of robots and artificial intelligence new competencies needed to be added to the existing ones in order to develop a *robot-proof model* for higher education. While these competencies may be tied into the changing times, it is the super performance competencies which enable these new competencies to be acquired. Aoun lists the new literacies including “data literacy, technological literacy, and human literacy” (p. xix) and continues to suggest cognitive capacities, described as “high-order mental skills-mindsets and ways of thinking about the world...cultural agility, how to operate deftly in varied global environments and see situations through different, even conflicting cultural lenses” (p. xix). Fourthly, Aoun adds critical thinking, which “instills the habit of disciplined, rational analysis and judgment” (p. xix).

Although predictions are made as companies are faced with disruptions, the 1979 edition of the classical job manual, *What Color is Your Parachute* (Bolles, 1979), or the 2023 edition both indicate that not much has changed regarding fundamental competencies which stand out when hiring an applicant or keeping the employee. For a job applicant, when experiencing a rejection shock (Bolles), the applicant does not have much to lose other than, perhaps his/her pride or time, and possibly, coming to the realization that there is more to a job application. However, for businesses, ample examples show the cost of a bad hire which can result in dire situations. According to Kislik (2008): “In situations like these, the costs usually include reduced productivity or increased opportunity costs, employee disengagement and possible turnover, and increased interdepartmental conflict” (para. 7). Lessons learned from such failures send a clear message to the job applicants as well as to higher education. Technical skills are fundamentals but what truly gets applicants hired is their superior performance competencies.

Reviewing the National Research Council (US) Committee (2011), the *Assessment of the 21st Century Skills*, the skills are again similar to super performance competencies: Cognitive skills (non-routine problem solving, critical thinking, systems thinking), interpersonal skills (complex communication, social skills, teamwork, cultural sensitivity, dealing with diversity), and intrapersonal skills (self-management, time management, self-development, self-regulation, adaptability, executive functioning). While these competencies are consistently emphasized by employers, and research consistently underscores their importance, the stark reality upon college graduation is that many students find themselves ill-equipped in these areas when entering the job market. In a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (2019), it was reported that “83% of respondents have had trouble recruiting suitable candidates in the past 12 months” (p. 3). In another study of nine HR professionals,

Meeks (2017) found that “participants most often pointed out communications as the most important soft skill and the foundation for other skills. From the perspective of human resources directors and managers, soft skills were found to be lacking in some college graduates” (p. 2).

Although companies have trouble recruiting college students due to their lack of soft skills, there exists ample research on college students rating themselves higher. According to Twenge, Campbell, and Gentile (2019) based on a nationally representative sample collected during 1966–2009 (N = 6.5 million): “Compared to previous generations, more American college students now rate themselves as above average on attributes such as academic ability, drive to achieve, leadership ability, public speaking ability, self-confidence, and writing ability” (p. 409). Stewart, Wall and Marciniec (2016) also noted that college students rate themselves highly in soft skills (non-technical competencies associated with one’s personality, attitude, and ability to interact effectively with others), however, many employers think differently “employers hire college students expecting some levels of expertise in applied soft skills but then often complain that the new hires lack these soft skills or have overstated their level of competency” (pp. 279-280). In addition, Raymond, McNabb and Matthaei (2010) found that “lack of work experience, unrealistic expectations, and poor written communication skills are perceived by employers as weaknesses of many businesses school graduates” (p. 202).

Such findings indicate that it is critical to pay attention to extracurricular activities or educational programs which aim to build and strengthen characters, developing cognitive skills which makes a significant difference in the individuals’ lives. These programs have a huge impact on students’ present and future endeavors, particularly when competing with peers to secure and stay in meaningful jobs.

Real World Experience

Numerous educational programs offer various extracurricular activities with different goals to help students excel in areas to complement their formal education such as advancing students’ literacy skills, presenting environments to improve students’ cognitive skills, supporting character development, helping with life skills by transforming behaviors and enabling students to take charge of their lives through creative experiences.

The goal of many of these programs is to immerse students in real-life settings and provide students with rich experiences. One of these foundational experiences is adaptive expertise, “the ability to apply meaningfully learned knowledge and skills flexibly and creatively in different situations” (de Corte, 2010, p. 45), and shows a superior performance competency characteristic. Adaptability, willingness to change “is part of resilience. It represents the capacity to adjust responses to changing external drivers and internal processes and thereby allow for development along the current trajectory (stability domain)” (Folke, Carpenter, Walker, Scheffer, Chapin, & Rockström, 2010, p. 20).

Moreover, experiences outside the classroom can be extremely effective, resulting in improving students’ cognitive skills. These experiences can help students “think and solve problems and develop their communication skills, which are all critical components of an education.... grasp the importance of dependability and initiative” (Raymond, McNabb and Matthaei, 2010, p. 202).

Although Raymond, McNabb and Matthaei found that together with formal education, such real-world experiences and internships can provide “business school graduates with a competitive advantage in the workplace” (p. 202), this reality can be generalized to all program graduates.

Another program which aims to equip students with a myriad of competencies is service learning. A large study on students engaged in service-learning projects concluded that service-learning projects boosted students’ confidence related to oral communication in general: “... oral communication is a crucial skill within organizations, it seems that service-learning may provide meaningful practical value for both individuals and their companies” (McNatt, 2020, p. 139). The study found that students used “creativity, planning, organizing, group interaction and problem-solving to complete some wonderful projects” (p. 141). As a result, “students benefitted through increased oral communication self-efficacy; and female students also benefitted through increased confidence and competence in interpersonal communication” (p. 141). These findings resulted in students becoming “better prepared for the job market, and received a great feeling from having done something meaningful for others” (p. 141).

Yet another program is experiential learning, described as *learning by doing* (Dewey, 1915). The term was described by “the AACSB Task Force as ‘applied experiential learning,’ combining the learning from the “real-world” situation with the necessary condition of the application of concepts, ideas and theories to the interactive setting” (Gentry, 1990, p. 9). One non-profit educational organization, and the topic of this study, Destination Imagination, is one of the top 100 education innovations (Law, 2022) and is dedicated to learning by doing by means of setting the participants up for success: “In going through this process, kids learn vital life and career skills—creative thinking, critical thinking, public speaking, and collaborative problem-solving—that help them feel empowered and set them up for success in their future” (DI, 2023, para. 4.). Founded in 1999, the 501(c)(3) non-profit organization has more than 1.5 million alumni and a global network of 38,000 volunteers. According to the *2019 DI Annual Report* (Destination Imagination, 2019a) there were chapters in 46 states, 34 countries with 15,455 teams, 25 staff members, 35,000 volunteers and over 81,000 participants. The program serves 150k students annually both in the US covering 42 states as well as 8 provinces in Canada and 28 countries worldwide. The organization promotes skills in collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking skills through programs which support Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM).

The affiliate DI Team Challenges are considered culminating events as teams are provided with team challenges and required to find solutions to their challenges. The events are guided by *adult team managers, appraisers, or event judges, and mentors*. Rather than directly teach the teams, the team managers guide the teams to think by asking critical questions. These teams showcase their solutions to their challenges during the events called tournaments. The concept behind the tournaments is to prepare students before the tournaments lasting eight weeks to as long as six months as an after-school activity. According to a 2023 DI Webinar, the 2023-2024 program offers seven team challenge categories for students to experience including a technical challenge, *Pinball Heroes*; an engineering challenge, *Going to Distance*; a scientific challenge, *Blast from the Past*; a Fine Arts challenge, *In Motion*; an improvisational challenge, *So Extra*; a service-learning challenge, *Unchartered*; and early learning challenge, *Splash*; and instant challenge. Showcasing solutions serve as effective platforms for imparting these

competencies such as imagination, improvisation, crisis management, collaboration and interpersonal skills, engagement in "small talk" and communities of practice (cop), innovation, and service learning (DI, 2023).

All of these competencies achieved through learning by doing are also listed as critical work competencies by organizations/companies such as the National Research Council (US) Committee (Assessment of the 21st Century Skills), OECD (core competencies), McKinsey & Company (56 DELTAs) (Dondi, Klier, Panier, & Schubert, 2021), and IFTF (Future Work Skills). As participants experience their team challenges, find solutions and get ready to showcase these challenges at tournaments, they develop their core personality traits by means of confidence, critical and creative thinking, team building, perseverance, problem solving, risk taking, project management. By involving in such creative activities, participants expand other capacities because "creative activity appears to be an affectively charged event, one in which complex cognitive processes are shaped by, cooccur with, and shape emotional experience" (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005, p. 367). One study regarding such experiences, looked into fifteen college students as they "participated in a recreational activity created to teach the concept of *Distributed Ledger*; the students did not have prior knowledge on the subject. The students participated in a focus group discussion after the activity" (Yoh, Kim, Chung, & Chung, 2021, p. 46). Findings revealed that eight percent of the participants found the activity to be "helpful" or "extremely helpful" to understand the concept of Blockchain. Some of the distinctive themes from the participants' comments were that the activity was experiential, fun, interactive and instructive. Therefore, it was concluded that STEAM should be used to enhance STEM education" (Yoh, Kim, Chung, & Chung, p.46). Furthermore, arts can make three distinctive contributions to intellectual development: "the personal experience that the arts create, the meaning that the arts generate, and the development of thoughts that the arts foster. In other words, the unique experiences and meaningful connections that people make with arts will help develop critical forms of thinking (p. 46).

Park, Byun, Sim, Han and Back (2016) studied teachers' perceptions, and practices with STEAM education in Korea via surveys: "Results showed that the majority of Korean teachers, especially experienced teachers and male teachers, had a positive view on the role of STEAM education" (p. 1739). They argued that prior studies suggested that the majority of teachers believe that STEAM education is needed and that STEAM education will have a positive impact on students' motivation as well as learning (p. 1743). The additional research on DI Educational Experiences was mostly on children and middle school children, and alumni as seen below in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Pre-Existing Research on Destination Imagination

Research	Findings
Beisel, K. (2021) Project-based learning: Helping students thrive socially and emotionally. <i>Childhood Education, 97</i> (5), 6-13.	Creativity, collaboration, and communication are key skills that will prepare students for the future. Through engagement in real-world problem solving, students can hone such skills while learning that their voice and actions matter.

Calkin, J. & Karlsen, M. (2014). Destination Imagination: Creativity in a world of complacency. <i>Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk</i> , 5(1), Article 22.	An independent evaluation of the program's effectiveness in relation to creative problem solving, creative and critical thinking, teamwork, and leadership.
Kovalesky. S. (2020). <i>Exploring Destination Imagination alumni perceptions of 21st century skills and workforce readiness</i> . [Doctoral Dissertation, Walden University]. Proquest Dissertations and Theses.	Gathered alumni perspectives on how their experiences influence their entry into the workforce.
Greenberg, E. B. (2016). Destination Imagination: An examination of highly creative children's experiences on their journey through imagination (Order No. 10188739) [Doctoral Dissertation, William James College]. Retrieved from https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/destination-imagination-examination-highly/docview/1906329262/se-2	Results revealed that through the promotion of friendship, coping skills, and perseverance, DI appears to have significantly positive impact on the domains of mental health and well-being for middle school students.
Missett, T. C., Callahan, C. M., & Hertberg-Davis, H. (2013). Evaluating the impacts of Destination ImagiNation on the creative problem-solving skills of middle school students. <i>The International Journal of Creativity & Problem Solving</i> , 23(2), 97-111.	Examined creative problem solving, divergent thinking, critical thinking, and teamwork with middle school students in 2009-2010.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon (Patton, 2015) of super performance competencies by means of a DI experience, in this case the 2023 DI Global Finals event. The core research question was: What are the superior performance competencies achieved through a DI experience?

To collect reliable data, it was critical to first understand the DI context, including the DI Global Finals event itself; how team challenges were formed prior to the event; and how team solutions to the challenges were showcased during tournaments; the participants themselves; and the DI culture. In addition, because the Global Finals was a large event, it was difficult to follow each and every team presentation, thus complete a quality fieldwork (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Therefore, when the principal researcher was invited to first attend the 2023 affiliate DI tournament in Nebraska, the United States, the researcher decided use this fieldwork to be better prepared for the 2023 DI Global Finals event where data would be collected, analyzed, interpreted simultaneously. During the affiliate DI tournament in Nebraska, the principal researcher used pre-identified questions for his observations and reflections. Observing the affiliate tournament and reflecting on the pre-identified questions not only provided a framework for the second fieldwork, the 2023 DI Global Finals event, but also prepared the researcher to collect reliable data. Data were collected, analyzed and interpreted concurrently during the three-day 2023 DI Global Finals event.

The inductive data collection, analysis and interpretation during the second fieldwork indicated that the competencies, achieved by means of a team solving a challenge and showcasing the solution to the challenge, included improving one's core personality traits, motives and

cognitive abilities leading to superior employee performance and confirmed the significance of such activities leading to two major findings: 1) participating in such meaningful real-world activities cultivates distinctive behaviors that drive exceptional performance, positioning participants to stand out among their peers; and 2) this involvement also equips students with the capabilities to excel upon entering the workforce, ensuring superior performance in their roles.

DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION

This study explored superior performance competencies achieved through a DI experience where teams of students (K-16) showcased their solutions to the challenges they had worked on. The data primary collection involved directly observing the event and the participants in their natural setting rather than gathering data by means of surveys or other instrumentation which does not require field work.

To answer the core research question, the principal researcher first attended the 2023 DI affiliate event in Nebraska, the United States to familiarize himself with DI. Then, the principal researcher attended the 2023 DI Global Finals event in Kansas, the United States to collect, analyze, and interpret data during fieldwork. During the first event in Nebraska, the fieldwork included observations on pre-identified questions for reflections. It was critical for the researchers to identify a set of general questions to reflect on while observing the participants. In addition, these questions would support the hypothesis coding during the second event of data collection and analysis. Based on Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) some of the pre-identified questions included: What are the participants doing? How exactly do they do this? How do participants talk about, characterize and understand what's going on? What do I see going on here? What did I learn from my observation and notes? What is the significance of these notes? What is the significance of this event? (p. 177)

Observing the affiliate event, and reflecting on the pre-identified questions not only provided a framework for the second fieldwork, the DI Global Finals event, but also prepared the researcher to collect and analyze reliable data. According to a previous DI Global Finals event (DI, 2019), the project-based team challenge categories included: Technical, Scientific, Fine Arts, Improvisational, Engineering, and Service Learning and attracted approximately 1100 teams for 17 different countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Cayman Islands, China, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Korea, Mexico, Poland, Turkey, Ukraine, United States, Panama, Qatar, and Indonesia. Canada was represented by six provinces, and British Columbia C by 11 teams.

Given the professional background of the principal researcher, the field notes were in the form of analytic memos. Similar to a researcher journal, the objective of *analytic memos* is “the researcher reflexivity on the data corpus” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 44) and serve to “uncover some information through informed hunches, intuition, and serendipitous occurrences that, in turn [led] to a richer and more powerful explanation” (Janesick, 2011, p. 148). Additionally, *hypothesis coding* “application of a researcher-generated, predetermined list of codes” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 171) was applied midway which confirmed the significance of the program in promoting superior performance competencies.

Subsequently, the principal researcher reviewed many DI official documents and videos following the global DI event to confirm many of these insights to reinforce the interpretations. Furthermore, because the technique *member checking* (Candela, 2019; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) is critical as it establishes the much-required trustworthiness in qualitative research, the interpretations and findings were confirmed by the DI Director of Education and the DI Team Manager.

FINDINGS

The following three sections show data collection which include observations, ordinary conversations and an informal interview.

The analysis and interpretation of these data yielded two findings: 1) participating such meaningful real-world activities cultivates distinctive behaviors that drive superior performance, positioning participants to stand out among their peers; and 2) this involvement also equips students with the capabilities to excel upon entering the workforce, ensuring superior performance in their roles.

Observations

The observations written as analytic memos and hypothesis coding led to an array of super performance competencies as listed below.

- Communicating effectively. Being able to communicate at any level-be it formal or informal. Being able to listen to each other attentively.
- Networking. Initiating conversations. Building relationships.
- Taking care of each other.
- Collaborating and cooperating. Being able to cooperate with different social norms, cultural values, group identity.
- Building off from the ideas of teammates and giving credit.
- Continuous critical thinking.
- Creativity, innovation, imagination.
- Time management.
- Negotiating skills.
- Conversational communication, through sharing knowledge and expertise, through social cooperation, social interaction, and social independence; intercultural communication.
- Recognizing that problems are complex. When confronted with problems in teams, being able to recognize that problems were complex and were able to develop effective and innovate solutions.
- Using role-playing as a powerful source of problem-solving tool which required above average conversational communication.
- Respect for and acceptance of other cultures. Understanding the meaning of identities. Celebrating different identities and cultures. Willing to communicate with participants who had weaker language levels. Helping each other when needed. Intercultural communication competence.
- Displaying leadership traits.
- Achievement oriented.

- Abiding by the rules and regulations of the organization.
- Taking initiative. Not waiting around to be asked.
- Adaptability. Being able to shift from one mindset to another.
- Welcoming and celebrating success.
- Risk management. Teams or individuals did not hesitate to take risks.
- Resilience. Never giving up during times of losing to other teams. Being able to laugh.
- Learning and growth. Participants saw every opportunity as a learning and growing opportunity. They also learned from their failures.
- Showing gratitude and appreciation at all times.
- Crisis Management. During a small crisis, being able to get together, reach a decision and take care of the crisis.
- Motivation. Being intrinsically as well as extrinsically motivated. Possessing joy, energy, pride of ownership.
- Listening. Being able to listen carefully and attentively.
- Asking questions, seeking information.
- Being able to think quickly. Providing creative solutions.
- Having pride in ownership of an idea or process or a product.
- Team building. Being able to work with different skills and different personalities toward a common goal. Being able to give directions and receive directions. Motivate each other.
- Being able to lead or manage by means of assigned tasks in teams.
- Sharing information at all times.
- Flexibility as well as adaptability. The ability to adapt and make decisions quickly in response to an unexpected situation.
- Building and gaining trust.
- Storytelling as a powerful tool to communicate and work in teams.

Ordinary Conversations

Anecdotal evidence through ordinary conversations demonstrated similar competencies as listed below.

- “Everything that is on the horizon is for the kids.”
- “DI teaches children how to talk to people they have not met before.”
- “Communication during badge swapping means joining one another’s group to talk and often the team is from another country.”
- “This is service learning and [shows] the importance to the society as well as social issues.”
- “Our children need to know project management skills if they want to succeed.”
- “Language arts challenges the audacity of the mind.”
- “A Texas business provided funds so the team could come which indicates our community engagement.”
- “It’s a relief to see how these kids are taking care of each other.”
- “These events prepare us for future jobs. Our schools do not provide us with such opportunities.”

An Informal Interview

The DI Director of Education was also informally interviewed at the DI Global Finals tournament and indicated that this event provided a perspective on world cultures, developed character traits for future leaders and promoted lifelong learning: “DI prepares the child to change the world and create the workforce of the future...They learn by doing through problem solving leading to solutions...We focus on the process not just the product.”

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on the two findings of this study, it is critical for students to go beyond formal education learnings and immerse themselves in real-world activities, particularly the global ones to position themselves to stand out.

These findings suggest that students who engage in such activities are likely to be better prepared for entering the workforce, possibly possessing a set of skills and behaviors that might enhance their adaptability to become more successful their future employment roles. In fact, participants appear to develop distinctive behaviors that enable them to stand out among their peers. Such distinctive behaviors could potentially have long-term benefits in career progression and personal development, fostering a generation of individuals with superior performance competencies.

Because real-world activities provide students with hands-on activities such as those offered by DI Educational Experiences, it is essential for educational institutions and policymakers to think beyond formal education learnings and emphasize and invest more in extracurricular activities that offer real-world, practical experiences, recognizing them as valuable platforms for cultivating superior employment performance competencies.

For organizations looking to recruit, recognizing participation in such programs as DI might be an indicator of a potential employee with superior performance competencies, possibly influencing recruitment strategies to focus on individuals with such experiences. These findings also provide a guidance for the hiring parties to pay attention to the significance of such experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

At a minimum the researchers recommend the following research:

1. Replicate this study at different DI tournaments.
2. Explore donor decisions regarding DI Educational Experiences.
3. Look into the efficacy of showcasing DI team challenges and parental involvement.
4. Understand K-12 teacher and university instructor perceptions regarding DI events.
5. Describe DI participation and academic achievement.
6. Determine if there is a significant positive relationship between skits and employment success.
7. Compare different affiliate events regarding effective team solutions to challenges.

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