

As a teacher of 25 years, I have worked with many students. I have never met a student who did not possess a special talent. In fact, I tell my scholars, “Each of you has a very special talent. It is my job to help you find it.” This works very well in my own classroom. In the real world, however, it is more complicated. How will anyone else know what a child’s special talent is, without that child having the opportunity to shine? Destination Imagination provides children an opportunity to shine while developing life long skills.

Having been an appraiser for Destination Imagination for many years, I always sit and marvel at the creativity and cooperation I see while judging the teams. Typically, the best teams come from high performing schools. Their parents journey to DI tournaments—local, state, and regional—and support their children every step of the way. But one must wonder—where are the poor children? Where are the children from the lower performing schools?

Those children have parents who are often working two or three jobs. The children themselves are taking care of younger siblings. After-school activities typically center around working at their own homes, not engaging in sports, enrichment, or clubs. These are the children who have not participated in Destination Imagination.

When the Dana Hills High School team brainstormed ideas about their Project Outreach Challenge, they had an "ah-ha" moment. They decided to address poverty at home. They decided to coach and sponsor two DI teams. I was immediately touched and eager to serve as a community partner.

I was hopeful that we would get enough students to participate on two teams. When we asked teachers for nominations, many teachers had not even heard of Destination Imagination, because they had worked only at Kinoshita. It was the teachers who had come from higher performing schools who knew what DI had to offer their students. Twenty-six families showed up for the parent meeting. The high school students set up an Instant Challenge for the kids, and from the moment they started building, these kids were “hooked.” We never anticipated the huge response.

At the first student practice 26 kids showed up. They kept showing up—two and three times a week. We all thought that we would be able to select the final 14 kids—since we only had room for two teams of 7 each—via attendance. It soon became clear that the attendance was near perfect for every kid. Even the week before the performance, every kid still wanted to come to the Regional Competition—and they made posters for the event. The high school students did a fantastic job of making each kid feel as if he were an integral team member, whether or not selected to perform. They had to provide snacks for the kids, and teach them every little thing—research skills, how to behave, how to listen, how to be more assertive, eye contact, etc. As a teacher and observer, I found myself touched every single practice because the children blossomed before my eyes.

On the day of the Regional Competition, it was raining cats and dogs. Arranging rides was difficult since most of the parents only speak Spanish. Some of the kids were dropped off on the wrong side of campus and people were running all over the place finding each other. I was an appraiser on the other side of campus. The student coaches had one Hispanic parent helping to

watch the kids. Somehow they all made it, and they were ready. Just as the rain stopped, it was time for the main challenge and I watched with pride as the high school students coached the kids outside the performance room. Inside, the principal, assistant principal, and three of us teachers held our breath as the main challenge began. Would the improv go well? Would they speak loudly enough? We were pleasantly surprised. Their performances exceeded our expectations. As one teacher said, “Wow! They have grown so much. I was overwhelmed seeing our children right there along with all those other teams, looking into people’s eyes, speaking loudly, and having fun!”

The rest of the day went very well. The high school kids reported that our students had some difficulty reading and understanding the ins and outs of the Instant Challenge. They noted that next year they would have to work more on this.

One of the highlights was watching our Kinoshita students go through the Inflatable Obstacle Course for hours and hours, racing their high school coaches. Sometimes they were taking to other DI kids. For most, it was their first visit to a high school.

At the awards ceremony, they sat right with their high school coaches. When their fourth and fifth place finishes were announced, some of the children cried. They wanted to do better. But they were there—in the midst of the more affluent cheering kids, learning how to compete, how to challenge their imaginations, and how to try again. Their world has been widened due to DI. Since the Regional Competition, they have continued to meet once a week. They are determined to perform next year. When Michael, one of the high school coaches, got into Harvard, one of the kids said:

“Michael has done DI for years. Michael is going to Harvard. I know if I keep doing DI, I can go to college too.”

I have heard that when one struggles with poverty and makes it out, it is the relationships that serve as the vehicle out of poverty. From the bottom of my heart, I am thankful for these high school students. I am thankful that they have chosen to bring DI to my school where every kid struggles with poverty. I am thankful for their teaching and modeling. I am thankful because this is how it works—some elementary students meet some high school students and learn how to do DI. These elementary students realize that they and the coaches are similar—they BOTH do DI. These elementary students then think—“Ah, we have some of the same special talents that Michael and Connor and Gillian and Ryan have! We can go to college too!”

The world of the Kinoshita kids is now “larger” because the Dana Hills kids have reached out to them. I hope that this project continues—because I can imagine the Kinoshita kids continuing to do DI. One day they will be in high school too, and perhaps they too will come back and teach. By participating in DI, the Kinoshita kids learned that they do in fact have many special talents. Because of DI, others saw these children shine. Now, the possibilities for these children are endless.

Thank you, Michael, Gillian, Ryan and Connor!
~ Elisa Slee, First Grade Teacher at Kinoshita Elementary