

---

## ANNOTATION

Jarrell, Diane Spurlock. “Successful Intervention and Resultant School Success for Economically Disadvantaged, Academically Able Middle School Children of Color.” EdD dissertation, Teachers College – Columbia University, 1994. 434 pp.

The author of this dissertation concerns herself with the problem of inequity of access to quality educational programs for gifted children of color and poor children and laments our inability, as a society, “to reconcile the seemingly contradictory goals of equity and excellence in education” (10). After examining a number of the purported reasons contributing to the problem of inequity, she opines that “the continuing lack of progress in the identification of and educational intervention for gifted minority children can be attributed to the following two major causes: (a) the lack of empirical research and (b) the failure to draw upon the established epistemology of related fields such as general education, cultural anthropology, urban sociology, and urban education” (12).

She presents a wide-ranging analysis, in the second chapter of the dissertation (18-62), of “empirical studies relating to gifted minority students” and notes the difficulties encountered when attempting to distinguish empirically between “alternative identification procedures” for such students that have merit and those that do not. She supplements this review of literature by examining, in the dissertation’s third chapter (63-72), “pertinent literature on ethnography and its application to educational research” since she believes, as noted previously, “that the lack of empirical research on gifted, minority students has created a stagnant body of literature that fails to inform either researchers or practitioners in the field. Our search for answers is fruitless when we have yet to determine that we are asking the right questions.” She contends “that ethnography offers an appropriate methodology for one seeking to develop grounded theory that would facilitate the generation of new hypotheses to be studied in relationship to gifted, minority students from low socioeconomic backgrounds” (73-74).

The focus of her research – the findings of which are presented in the long fifth chapter of the study (94-331) – is on an in-depth study of one community of learners in New York City who attend “a school designed specifically for poor, academically gifted, inner-city children of color.” The purpose of the “research was three-fold: (a) to develop an in-depth understanding of the setting, the educational intervention, and the people who comprise the learning community of De La Salle Academy in New York City, one of the few schools whose primary mission is to serve low income, gifted children of color; (b) to determine how student responses to that setting and educational intervention differ between students who thrive and students who do not thrive in that environment; and (c) to generate hypotheses that might serve as grounded theory for future research” (16-17).

“Rather than *studying* people, ethnography means *learning* from people” (80). Consequently, the author “spent well over 150 interview hours with the principal, met individually on a weekly basis with a minimum of five teachers for three years, and engaged in less formal conversations with all the adults in the De La Salle Academy learning community throughout the duration of the study” (81). “Throughout the first and second years of the study,” she met “with small groups of students on a weekly basis ... Some of these groups were comprised of randomly selected students of both genders. Other groups were comprised of students specifically selected because they were representative of students in particular social groups” (82). “Data analysis was used from the inception of the study throughout the writing of the dissertation. The three-step analysis process that was used to review, code, and classify the data gathered through interviews, participant observation field notes, and site documents was used in circular fashion to continuously guide the direction and focus of the data yet to be collected” (88). As limitations of the study, the author notes that “there were three areas that are an intricate part of the school that are not part of this study: school finances, advisory board business, and the curriculum” (92).

Relative to the findings of this ethnographic study as presented in the dissertation’s fifth chapter (94-331), the school’s defining elements are identified as: (a) the identification process for admission (the testing protocol, a simulated school day, and a personal interview with time for parental participation in the process); and (b) the structural components of “the De La Salle Academy culture.”

“Within the first half an hour of the first session of orientation after admission,” the principal of De La Salle Academy “tells the students that he will make ‘a couple of promises, a couple of guarantees.’ Those promises are stated unequivocally: (a) the two or three years spent at De La Salle Academy will have a profound, life-changing effect on the students’ lives; (b) the students’ De La Salle Academy school experience will be unlike any previous school experience in their lives; and (c) important, life-long friendships will be formed at De La Salle Academy. For the first of many times during their stay at De La Salle Academy, the students hear the message that De La Salle Academy will be a transforming experience for them” (126).

“It is these three promises that form the conceptual duality of the De La Salle Academy learning community: the concept of rising to the occasion when faced with challenging academic work and the concept of being part of a learning community whose members protect and care for one another” (126).

Relative to the discussion and interpretation of the findings of the study in the dissertation’s sixth chapter (332-344), two points are identified as of primary focus: (a) the demonstration of fit “between the body of data for this study and two existing theoretical constructs that have explanatory power in the understanding of social phenomena that occur in the De La Salle Academy school culture” and (b) the generation of “hypotheses that are useful in helping to formulate future research questions on the studied population” (332).

The two existing theoretical constructs identified were: (a) the burden of “acting white” and (b) “resiliency theory.” “The De La Salle learning community has created a school culture that effectively combats the students’ often held belief that academic achievement is the providence of white culture. By creating a school climate that is oppositional to both the culture of the streets

and popular teenage culture, De La Salle Academy protects and nurtures intellectual talent” (335).

“The most significant finding during this three-year study was that De La Salle Academy was the source of school-acquired resilience for a large number of its students who were at psychological risk because of the extreme adversity with which they cope on a daily basis” (339).

Concerning the directions for future research proposed at the conclusion of the dissertation, two areas are suggested. “First, are the findings of this particular study idiosyncratic to such a degree as to nullify their significance in another context; and second, is the success of the De La Salle Academy model bound by the leadership style and charismatic personality of the principal?” (344).