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NEWBERG, NORMAN A. (2006). THE GIFT OF EDUCATION: HOW A TUITION GUARANTEE PROGRAM CHANGED THE LIVES OF INNER CITY YOUTH. ALBANY: STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS.

Janell Smith

In his most recent book *The Gift of Education*, Norman Newberg, Senior Fellow at the Graduate School of Education at University of Pennsylvania and Executive Director of the Say Yes to Education program (SYTE), captures the triumphs and obstacles faced by African-American youth living in West Philadelphia who were guaranteed a fully funded college education. Newberg vividly describes how George Weiss, a philanthropist and University of Pennsylvania associate trustee, along with his wife Diane Weiss made the altruistic decision to sponsor SYTE, a comprehensive academic and social skills program that provided college scholarships. The theme of teaching for social justice is explored through the discussion of using education as a tool to break the cycle of poverty and counteract systemic racism persistent in inner-city communities across the nation. Educational opportunities offered by the SYTE program could not compete with internal community pressures students faced not to “sell out”, the tension between the lure of quick illegal income compared to going to school, and the battle to follow one’s dreams against all odds.

The Weisses empathized with the educational disparities that plagued inner-city communities where students struggled to learn within inadequate conditions. They joined the initiative founded by Newberg in 1987 because it provided students with a variety of resources to enrich their lives which included academic support, field trips, counseling, and student outreach. The Weisses did not simply want to be sponsors, they wanted to actively engage with the selected students and assist with the evolution of the program. Newberg recounts the meeting where George Weiss asked “In that Say Yes Program, would we be able to have direct contact with the kids? I don’t want to just give money. We want to know the kids. We want to get involved in their lives” (p. 10). The Weisses’ enthusiastic and consistent direct involvement with Say Yes would prove to be extremely beneficial to students as they tried to understand and utilize the gift.

The Belmont Elementary School students were chosen to be the recipients of the Say Yes program by the program founders and the existing School District of Philadelphia superintendent, Dr. Constance Clayton (1982-1994). The school was comprised of low-income African American children who greatly needed additional education support and a chance to obtain higher education. The school also had high rates of children in special education compared to regular education. Fifty-three of the students were labeled learning disabled and received special education services. On June 17, 1987 at Belmont Elementary School’s sixth grade graduation, Diane Weiss announced to 112 students that “You have won the lottery. How can you collect? I’m here to tell each and every one here that we will guarantee your college education. My family will pay for every bit of it” (p. 19). The book discloses how the Weisses’ gift became both a blessing and a burden for Belmont’s students. The at-risk sixth grade students could not begin to comprehend how they were supposed to use the “abstract” gift to graduate from college. The stories of the Belmont students and the SYTE experience is told in three parts using Marcel Mauss’ theory of gift exchanges: giving, receiving, and paying back (p. xvii). Newberg summarizes the achievements and misfortunes of the 112 Belmont students from junior high school to post secondary education to post college graduation. The Belmont 112 went onto a variety of junior high schools and high schools mostly in Philadelphia but their common bond was the Say Yes program.

The student outcomes are startling: sixty-nine students graduated from high school, five received GEDs or private or out of state high school diplomas, twenty students attained Bachelor’s degrees, fourteen students completed technical training programs, ten students attained Associate’s degrees, twenty-two female students gave birth before age nineteen, four male students were murdered, one male student committed suicide, and one male student died of natural causes. In order for readers to better understand the varied student outcomes, Newberg provides detailed accounts for twelve students sampled from the 112 Belmont students, six students who dropped out of school and six students who attempted to pursue higher education with varying degrees of success. The SYTE program offered its students opportunities “to expand their concepts of self by virtue of the education they could attain” but that rhetoric only worked for some students (p. 52).

The students’ life choices ultimately determined their fate and the ability to benefit from the SYTE program. For most students they had to choose between the immediate material luxuries offered by illegal activities and the street life or the delayed rewards of investing in their education. Students had to deal with “the values of youth-dominated society, extolling the virtues of fast money and violence” (p.73). The six student dropouts discontinued their education for multiple reasons. Students joined street gangs, became incarcerated, began selling drugs, used drugs, and gave birth to or fathered children, and some felt

embarrassed because they were being retained in grade levels year after year. A commonality among the dropout students were they lived in unstable home environments with drug addicted parents who did not value education or understand the power of the gift for their child. Interestingly, five of the six dropouts were also in special education classes. All of these students were repeatedly advised by Newberg, the Weisses, and Randall Sims, the Senior Project Coordinator for Say Yes, and were given several chances to pick up from where they left off. The author explains how the SYTE team tried to get students enrolled in alternative high schools or provided them with social services, yet; the students did not acknowledge the values of the program.

The six students who attempt to use the gift triumph because their self-awareness propels them to reach their goals. The students moved in a positive direction by being goal-oriented and focusing on the gift. A commonality among these students were they lived in more stable home environments with parents who either graduated from high school, had GEDS, took college courses, and held down jobs. Students were both self-motivated and took advantage of the endless support from SYTE. These students earned good grades in their high school classes, studied for SAT exams, worked at internships, participated in extracurricular activities, and routinely participated in SYTE activities. One of the students went onto earn a Bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Many students prided themselves on being first-generation college students yet, some felt conflicted about their accomplishments. Students who attempted to pursue higher education struggled to fit not only in college but also in their old neighborhoods. He states that "going to college and talking about careers that require higher education builds a gap in the inner city between those who will stay and those who may escape the ghetto" (p. 148).

The Gift of Education provides a thought-provoking real life account of African-American youth from West Philadelphia who grapple with an extraordinarily educational gift within the confines of an underserved community. The author effectively captures the rawness of the students' lives and the emotional rollercoaster of receiving the gift and either using it or losing it. The students were allowed to tell their own stories through interviews conducted at various points in the students' lives. It is important that Newberg freed the voices of a demographic often silenced because their stories are too hard to receive, recognize, or rationalize. The Weisses gave the gift to the Belmont 112 because they hoped their gift could instill values and morals into the youth that they too could make a difference in other people's lives.

The Gift of Education is highly recommended for all individuals studying and working within urban education including teachers, school administrators, and community leaders because it delivers a powerful story told with honesty and sincerity about the trials and tribulations of educational attainment for urban adolescents. Readers are reminded that education focused philanthropy is not a panacea for the inequities of the American public school system. Newberg states that "the voluntary philanthropy of George and Diane Weiss certainly improved the life chances of a few hundred poor children; more generally, the SYTE program demonstrates how in-depth, sustained intervention with at-risk students does make a positive difference. It also reveals the inadequacy of governmental efforts to make inner-cities places where youth can thrive" (p. 200). The students' outcomes is shown to be not only a reflection of the students' circumstances but also indicative of social conditions that translate into educational disparities. Teaching for social justice can bring increased awareness of how social conditions affect students both inside and outside the classroom as demonstrated by the tumultuous yet, touching lives of the Belmont 112.

Janell Smith is a recent graduate of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her most current research interest includes the examination of how subgroup accountability within the No Child Left Behind Act is working to address the achievement gap. She can be reached at jksmith@alumni.upenn.edu.

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