

**“Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage” by Lisabeth Schorr, Anchor Books
Doubleday, New York, New York, 1988**

Reviewed by: Tiffany Griffin, Associate, Ray.Taylor and Associates

Lisabeth Schorr's Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage is a comprehensive evaluation of social programs in the United States that have been highly effective at ameliorating the life outcomes of our nation's most at risk children. Although the book is almost two decades old, the depth of Schorr's review is still applicable to the lives of present-day youth.

Within Our Reach addresses the conditions of our nation's most disadvantaged children and reviews twenty-four programs that have been successful in helping these youth. Schorr proposes that we already have the tools to help children, but that what is lacking is *integration* of information from educators, academics, administrators, families, community members, public policy analysts, practitioners, and program evaluators. Schorr believes once existing information is synthesized, effective interventions can be implemented and replicated with success.

The book is divided into an introduction and twelve chapters which outline successful intervention programs. Schorr advocates early intervention and asserts that although social programs may be expensive, they are more cost effective than dealing with negative outcomes that arise later in life, such as unemployment and crime. Using archival research and case study methodology, Schorr manages to also weave in life stories from real children, real parents, real educators, and real administrators, to present a unique landscape of intervention that incorporates a full range of perspectives.

Schorr reviews different domains of at-risk children's lives including early pregnancies and disparities in health care. Two of the most applicable domains for educators include discussions on the education of young children and how schools can be most effective at positively impacting the lives of disadvantaged youth.

The Education of Young Children

Schorr asserts that the education of young children is not simply relevant for unmarried teenagers and welfare recipients. Because the majority of women with children under the age of five are employed, the issue of early childhood and preschool education is a far-reaching concern, with heavy implications for disadvantaged children, whose life chances may be additionally compromised by barriers such as socioeconomic burdens. Schorr reviews programs such as Head Start, and shows how children who have participated in this program develop social and academic competencies later in life that manifested in increased school success. Additionally, Schorr reviews smaller-scale programs such as the Perry Preschool Program and the Family Learning Center Program, both of which operate in Michigan communities. Schorr outlines how these two programs considered the unique needs of their communities and formed collaborative relationships between youth, teachers and schools, and parents. Similarly, both of these programs resulted in positive life outcomes for their participants. For example, in the Perry Preschool Program, at the age of 19, twice as many program participants as control children were employed, attending college, or receiving further training. Moreover, their high school graduation rate was one third higher, their arrest rates 40 percent lower, and their teen pregnancy rates 42 percent lower than youth who did not participate in the program.

Schorr ends her discussion of the education of young children with a checklist for early education. She asserts that the “Basic Principles of Launching a Vastly Expanded Network of Child Care” are that:

- The needs of families with the fewest economic and political resources must receive the highest priority

- Head Start and other developmentally oriented preschool programs must be expanded and supplemented
- New sources and methods of funding must be found
- Parents must be made partners
- Schools must become a major (although not exclusive) source of preschool care
- The quality of child care can be maintained at high levels only through the active involvement of parents, private agencies, academic institutions, and local and state governments. (pg. 214)

How Schools Can be Most Effective

Schorr points out that while schools, unlike other institutions, *are* oriented towards long-term goals, it is often schools that inadvertently serve to reinforce social inequalities. Thus, Schorr asserts that schools can either be promotive of positive outcomes or detrimental to students. One of the most interesting cases focuses on interventions that Dr. Comer made in New Haven schools. Dr. Comer changed the climate of schools by incorporating theories of child development and basic management to the school climate. Using a systems approach, the child psychiatrist created a context where teachers and principals were allowed to have high expectations, where staff were trained and respected, and where parents were collaborators in the education of students, resulting in lasting positive outcomes for the students.

Interventions Can Work

Schorr asserts that at every stage of a child's life, interventions can be implemented to improve their life chances. Successful programs should be 'intensive, comprehensive, and flexible.' Similarly, six challenges should be considered if successful programs are to be widely implemented.

These include:

1. knowing what works
2. proving we can afford it
3. attracting and training enough skilled and committed personnel
4. resisting the lure of replication through dilution
5. gentling the heavy hand of bureaucracy
6. devising a variety of replication strategies. (pg. 267)

Within Our Reach is optimistic, yet realistic. Successful interventions are complex, must meet the needs of the communities they are designed to serve, and cost money. Successful programs cannot exist without the backing of state and federal policies. Successful programs cannot be overshadowed by strict bureaucratic barriers and must be easy to use and coherent. And yet despite these criteria for effective interventions, Schorr convincingly declares that it lies within our reach to improve the early lives of our most disadvantaged children.