Overcoming Inequality in Schooling:  
A Call to Action for Community Psychology\textsuperscript{1}

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Community psychology, indeed psychology as a discipline, has been largely absent from the table of school reform. Schools are critical socializing forces in society and serve as the one institution through which the full diversity of our child population passes. At the start of the 21st century, despite successive waves of legislation, the goals of the civil rights struggle for equality in educational opportunity have yet to be achieved. Negative self-fulfilling prophecies, reflected at individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels, play a critical role in creating and perpetuating unequal opportunities to learn. Such effects as well as pathways for preventive intervention are best understood through ecological lenses. Our field must commit a greater share of resources to collaborative and systemic change for a broader learning so that all children,

\textsuperscript{1}Invited address delivered as recipient of the Distinguished Contributions to Theory and Research in Community Psychology Award from the Society for Community Research and Action (Division 27: American Psychological Association) at the American Psychological Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California, August 27, 2001: I am deeply honored by this award from the Society for Community Research and Action. I have been blessed with wonderful teachers along the way; these include my late parents, my husband, and twin sons; mentors and fellow graduate students at McGill and Yale; colleagues, undergraduate and graduate students at UC Berkeley; my informal network of community psychologists; and children, teachers, and principals in countless schools. Four seemingly simple but clearly bold ideas have guided my development: that all children can learn when they are appropriately taught (the late M. Sam Rabinovitch), that the vantage point from which we view human capacity sharply determines what we see (Seymour B. Sarason), that disparities in opportunities and outcomes must be understood within an institutional context (N. Dickon Reppucci), and that diversity in peoples and contexts can provide precious opportunities (Edison J. Trickett). As a result of these gifts, I came to this field with an enduring interest in the ways in which schools can lessen the gap between potential and performance for all of our children.

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regardless of their differences, have continuing and nonstigmatized opportunities to develop into competent adults.

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Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental . . . The freedom to learn . . . has been brought by bitter sacrifice. And whatever we may think about the curtailment of other civil rights, we should fight to the last ditch to keep open the right to learn . . . We must insist on this to give our children the fairness of a start . . .


I begin this paper with images from my journey in the study of educational opportunity—images of perceived limits and lost chances, images of pushing limits and turning around negative outcomes, and images of alternative paths and new choices. I think of my father, a Romanian immigrant to Canada, whose desire to become a doctor was delayed but thankfully not denied by a quota on Jewish admissions, and of my mother, who was denied educational opportunity because she grew up in early 20th century Vienna at a time when women were largely confined to the role of homemaker.

I remember my first clinical case, a boy with a learning disability who, despite his progress in the clinic setting, felt “stupid” in the classroom; and my visit to an inner city classroom of African American students, each sluggish, with eyes everywhere but on the blackboard, and their teacher telling me, well within their hearing, that these students were not bright. I have images of a recent visit to Uganda (with 48% of children in primary school; Sivard, 1996), where I was moved at the sight of children in freshly scrubbed clothes, washed in rivers and ironed with hot coals, who were lined up for scarce places in schools with limited materials. And on this same trip, images of South Africa (with 97% of children now in primary school; Sivard, 1996), where I saw what the policies of apartheid could not fully stop: the vestiges of underground schools. There, on Robben Island where Nelson Mandela led illegal efforts to educate fellow prisoners from elementary school through university. There, in a township community center outside Capetown where the parents, who hosted my son, were educated in midnight classes hidden from the view of governmental authorities. The right to learn is a basic human right, so precious and so hard won.

But what do we mean by the fairness of a start and how do we ensure this basic human right for all of our children in schools? In my focus on