Prologue

Data in a Time of Pandemic

As I write this book, we are steeped in a quadruple pandemic: COVID-19, systemic racism, near economic collapse, and shattering climate change. COVID-19 has exploded onto the international stage, forever transforming our educational systems. Teachers are "ramping up" to digital or hybrid learning models. Administrators have repurposed school buildings into food banks and materials distribution centers. States have canceled standardized testing for the academic year, and many universities have canceled entrance testing requirements for current applicants. As we go to press, Yale University announced that all classes will be held as pass/fail this semester, and K–12 schools across the United States have begun to follow suit. Parents with means are hiring teachers to facilitate home schooling pandemic "pods" for their children, further exacerbating longstanding gaps.

At the same time, the unemployment rate is at a historic high. Police brutality and **white supremacy** reveal themselves daily as Black Americans fight for the right to breathe, live, and thrive in a country built on systemic racism. Activists in the growing movement for racial justice are tearing down monuments to Confederate soldiers, architects of Native American genocide and Canadian residential schools, and other symbols of oppression. And the globe reverberates with the invocation that *Black Lives Matter* in a country where, according to 1619 project director and journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy" (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

All of this is laying bare the broken promises at the roots of the education system: Education for all looks increasingly like education for

the economically stable and digitally possessed, survival of the secure. Current testing practices continue to dehumanize young people and teachers while leading us further and further from educational equity. In this book, we posit that not only *can* we pursue equity right now, but we have a moral imperative to reimagine what that means. The *end* (increasing test scores and closing an achievement gap, which we will argue in this book is a racialized fiction) no longer justifies the *means* of packet-driven, teacher-centered pedagogy that preexisted but was roundly reinforced by the No Child Left Behind era. We have a chance to imagine a radically different paradigm for equity. We need a new kind of dashboard.

What's beautiful about this moment is that many of the traditional "givens" around the architecture of schooling—lesson plans, gradebooks, subject-matter exams, even classrooms—are being reframed daily, forcing us to rethink what really matters when people are dying from a global threat never before seen in most of our lifetimes. Everywhere, everyone is trying to figure out what education looks like, and our usual beacons of success—test scores, grades, seat time—have evaporated like water off a turbulent pot. While many clamor for a "return to normal," the voices of educators across the globe are converging around a demand for a *new* normal: What would it look like to let go of all of our assumptions and rebuild the system from the bottom up, from the *student* up?

The purpose of this book is to offer a next-generation model of equity and deep learning, emerging from a simple concept: street data. **Street data** is the qualitative and experiential data that emerges at eye level and on lower frequencies when we train our brains to discern it. Street data is asset based, building on the tenets of culturally responsive education by helping educators look for what's *right* in our students, schools, and communities instead of seeking out what's *wrong*. Street data embodies both an ethos and a change methodology that will transform how we analyze, diagnose, and assess everything from student learning to district improvement to policy. It offers us a new way to think about, gather, and make meaning of data. It calls for what Paolo Freire deemed a pedagogy of liberation (Freire, 1970).

Even as the system seems to fall apart around us, **street-level data** are ubiquitous, offering deep insight into student and educator experience. These data fill our hearts and keep us up at night as we witness children's resilience *and* struggle to stay engaged, socially connected, and emotionally well. These data fill our social media feeds and virtual meetings as we see relevant, just-in-time professional learning, teachers calling their students one-by-one to ask, "How are you? What do you

need?" and pedagogical thought leaders pushing us to move beyond the "packet" and engage students in deep learning. All of this manifests the creativity, care, and connection that exist and persist inside the system.

If we listen to policy wavelengths, the system is falling apart without its usual architecture. But if we listen to educators on the ground, the system is self-correcting and humanizing itself in a yearning for reinvention. Somehow, even though we are physically and socially distant, we are emerging into new webs of interdependence like never before. It is 2021. The world order is reorganizing itself, and along with it, our education systems are as well. All of this takes me back over twenty years to when I began my teaching career.

I entered the classroom in fall 1997 with a vision of teaching and learning that burst at the seams of my classroom. I took students outside of the classroom as often as I could. My U.S. history students visited Angel Island to study the history of Chinese immigration to California. My American democracy students conducted a mock Congress in which they wrote and debated bills on pressing social issues. (My friend Javier was the president down the hall with veto power. A student named Jorge wrote an LGBTQ rights bill and then came out as gay to the class with a trembling voice when his legislation was mocked—a moment I'll never forget.) My pre-law students developed a project investigating equity in education, visiting five radically different Bay Area public schools to report on the access and opportunity gaps they witnessed. The next year, this project evolved into a partnership with a nearby private school that became the subject of an Emmy-nominated PBS documentary, *Making the Grade* (1999).

Just a few years after I entered the classroom, No Child Left Behind became federal law. With this sweeping policy shift came an eroding sense of possibility—a focus on narrow metrics of success and compliance-driven forms of pedagogy. Drill and kill your students so they succeed on the tests. Adopt pacing guides to ensure teachers stay "on track." If you can't trust your teachers, script the curriculum!

By the time I became a principal in 2003, the tide had turned, and our little public school, June Jordan School for Equity (JJSE), became a counter-cultural symbol and, in many ways, a pariah in the district. (It is ironic to me that JJSE has since been profiled by leading scholars like Linda Darling-Hammond as a model of equity and deep learning.) We were developing discussion-based seminar courses and project exhibitions while school districts began to compete for the best pacing guides, packaged curricula, and "turnaround" strategies. We were shaping a performance-based assessment system while

principals across the district monitored teachers for compliance with the Blackboard Configuration, or BBC: a teacher-proof lesson structure meant to be an equity panacea. We lost what one of my first students, the brilliant Ms. Alondra Jones, who got her BA and MSW at Howard University, called the "human element of education."

Yet for the nearly twenty-five years since I first entered a classroom in southeast San Francisco, many of us have held onto an image of what is possible when we reject the rules of a rigged system designed to trap children in poverty and Black and Brown children in a deficit narrative. **We have retained a vision of what is possible when we build classrooms and schools and systems around students' brilliance, cultural wealth, and intellectual potential rather than self-serving savior narratives that have us "fixing" and "filling" academic gaps.**

My early teaching experiences left me with indelible lessons that I hope will bloom in this book:

- There are many ways of knowing and "succeeding" beyond those that dominate American and much of Western education.
- Learning does not require a school building or even a classroom.
- Equity work is first and foremost pedagogical. We must democratize knowledge and rebuild a pedagogy of student voice.
- Student agency is the goal, not test scores.
- Data live *everywhere*—on the streets, in students' homes, in the hallways, in virtual meetings, in phone calls, and in the micro-interactions among teachers and students.

What is the purpose of education anyway? Do we teach and lead to simply reproduce reality, or will we teach and lead to transform it? In the chapters that follow, we probe these questions in greater depth.

We hope to offer you a vision of an educational system that doesn't yet exist—one rooted in human experience and decolonized ways of being, knowing, and learning. We will explore questions of knowledge and epistemology, digging up the roots of the obsession with quantitative data. We will explore questions of teaching and learning, giving you concrete tools to shape an equity-centered instructional vision and a pedagogy of student voice. We will explore questions of adult culture, offering a framework for the types of daily courageous conversations that make antiracist rhetoric real. And we will unpack the principles, processes, and practices of the next-generation paradigm we call street data.

We look forward to taking this journey with you and invite you to step forward with clear eyes, a full heart, and a spirit of inquiry and curiosity.