

Street Data

**A Next-Generation Model
for Equity, Pedagogy, and
School Transformation**

Shane Safir

Jamila Dugan

With Carrie Wilson

Foreword by Christopher Emdin

CORWIN

Leading for Equity

Another World Is Possible

1

Reimagine our ways of knowing and learning.

*Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.*

—Arundhati Roy

Reclaiming the Village: Children at the Center

I am seated in a circle, nested among other circles, inside a former boarding school for Indigenous Canadian girls in Duncan, British Columbia—a small town on Vancouver Island. A white cross tops the brick-red steeple on this building, a relic of the Sisters of St. Ann and detail I barely noticed when I walked in. Within these concentric circles sit forty other educational leaders from the United States and Canada, joined by a desire to transform their school districts into spaces of equity and deep learning. I have been asked to speak to the group about listening leadership tomorrow, but for today, I am a learner.

Our guides are First Nations elders and a non-Indigenous woman named Michelle. Tousilum, our main teacher, shares that just entering this building makes his heart heavy: The cross takes him back to being ripped from his family at the age of five to attend a residential school where his music, language, and humanity were robbed from him. Like other elders here, Tousilum discloses that he was abused in the institutions he was forced to attend. He talks about the unimaginable pain his mother must have felt to have her youngest child stolen from her arms. To support his healing, Tousilum pulls out a drum and begins to sing a prayerful song in *Hul'qumi'num*, the language of

the land, calling us to stop and listen, to be still, to remember, to be grateful. I weep silently.

As an educator from Oakland, California, I feel the weight of the history Tousilum invokes—my complicity in knowing so little about Canadian residential schools; my own country's near-erasure of Native American genocide and **settler colonialism** as well as its deep denial of slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow. As the mother of biracial children whose lives straddle histories of immigration, oppression, racism, and privilege, I feel trauma *in my bones* at the thought of my child being ripped from my arms. Having taught U.S. history for many years, I am sitting with the ways I both succeeded and failed to address these histories.

After opening rituals, our teachers direct us to form a Western, colonial society. They position a middle-aged white man at the front of the pyramid. Four men sit staunchly behind him in a row, then another ten men behind them. Women under forty assemble the next row, then myself and other women under fifty. Michelle tells all the "old ladies" over fifty to go to the back room, along with those role-playing the "children," where they can barely see or hear the rest of us. We shape a rigid triangle. "How does it feel to be in this society?" she asks the group.

The older women shout from the back, "Shut out! Isolated!"

Women from my row whisper, "Invisible."

The men ahead of me murmur, "Like I have to clamor to get up front . . ."

Several participants observe, "I can only see the backs of people's heads. I can't communicate with anyone from another group."

Michelle points out that this hierarchical system—a symbolic representation of Western society—fosters not only competition but lateral violence. People are encouraged to transfer their experience of oppression across and down the power structure.

Next, we are directed by our teachers to re-form as a pre-colonial Indigenous community. We pull the chairs to the edges of the room as the elders lay a patchwork of woven blankets in the center. An elder named Linda places a candle at the center of the cloths to symbolize the fire, the heart of the community—the light that shines in each

of us and that we must all strive to bring forth in each other. The children of our village are asked to visit a nearby table and choose a “gift” before sitting in a circle around the fabrics. One chooses a canoe for paddling and navigation. Another selects a woven cedar basket for tending, harvesting, and preserving foods like smoked salmon, dried clams, and stinging nettle tea. Others choose a hand-carved rattle for healing and a drum for remembering and singing family histories. The “old ladies” are retrieved from the other room and asked to encircle the children. Next, the aunts, uncles, mothers, and fathers (I’m in that group now) surround the elder women, and finally, the spiritual warriors surround us. I am once again moved to tears, this time by the centering of children and the felt sense of connection.

Rob, or Qwiyahwultuhw in Hul’q’umi’num, lifts an abalone shell filled with burning cedar and begins to walk around the room, using an eagle feather to gently blow the fragrant smoke into the space. He moves the shell behind him to signify that we must always remember where we come from—our path, ancestors, parents, grandparents, villages—and in front of him to symbolize the future. He later tells me, “We are the future of whatever we do to the earth around us. Whatever we do today is going to affect our grandchildren” (personal communication, May 19).

Our teachers explain that in this village, every child has a distinct gift—an aptitude for old words that aren’t used very often, an intuition for the medicinal qualities of plants, an affinity for genealogy—and each child will be paired with mentors who will pass their gifts to the next generation. Some will become language keepers, others medicine keepers, other holders of the community’s history. The elder women have become the revered center of village life, those who hold community wisdom and are turned *to* rather than banished.

“Every one of you came from a village like this somewhere back in your history,” says Michelle. “How does it feel to be in this community?”

“I feel safe,” says one woman.

“Held.”

“Like I belong.”

“Like I matter.”

“I can see everyone.”

As we make meaning of our transformation from a rigid hierarchical society to a circular village, the group is overcome by emotion. There is no attempt to contain or “professionalize” it. This is what it means to confront our shared histories of racism, oppression, pain, and possibility. This is what it feels like to connect with each other’s humanity.

A Canadian superintendent of mixed ancestry talks about warring between her Indigenous side that wants to feel and express her emotion and her European/Western side that keeps things “buttoned up.” She reflects that the educational system taught her to suppress her feelings in order to get to the top of the pyramid. The white man up front tears up as he talks about being a first-generation child of Italian immigrants whose father had a second-grade education: “I too came from a village like this.” And the lone researcher in the room, from an American organization that prizes quantitative metrics, reflects, “I’ve read about ‘student-centered learning’ for a long time, but this experience completely transformed my understanding.”

I reflect on how my life intersects with the societies we formed. I am a white woman of Irish and Jewish descent, married to a Filipino immigrant. I’ve had the privilege to visit the seaside village in County Galway where my great-great grandfather was born in a stone hut that still stands, overgrown by brush. He was the only sibling of five to immigrate to America and arrive in my now-hometown of Oakland, California, in the late 1800s to raise twelve children. My Irish great-grandmother grew up in the urban village of West Oakland, and my grandfather and mother grew up in Oakland and similar urban villages. My paternal Jewish family hails largely from villages in Eastern Europe that no longer exist, wiped from the earth by pogroms and eventually a Holocaust that scattered Jews to the diaspora. The fact that I can’t picture these villages pains me, my only connection being a few words of Yiddish I learned from my grandfather.

Though I will never know what it means to inhabit this world in a Black or brown body, structural racialization and the federal government’s policy of redlining urban communities and establishing white suburban enclaves defined my upbringing. In the suburbs, nothing felt real. I experienced deep disconnection—from myself as an aspiring feminist and antiracist with a secret LGBTQ identity, from my peers who largely wanted to remain in the same community, even from my family in many ways. My early efforts to disrupt racism were met not with deaf ears but with outright resistance and rejection at times. I am certain I participated in racism and white supremacy without being

aware of it: buying into the white supremacist structure of schooling hook, line, and sinker; earning the grades and test scores to attend an elite university; subscribing to the myth of the meritocracy. My large public school smacked of the Western society: hierarchical, segregated, exclusive rather than inclusive. My brilliant younger sibling dropped out of school after his ways of learning and being were pathologized one too many times.

As a child, I yearned for a village where I would feel seen, known, and loved. It took me many years to find that—to create it really—and many more to dismantle my own internalized racism, sexism, and homophobia (in truth, an ongoing project). Raising children at the intersection of these forces and others continues to shape my understanding of educational equity. I have written this book as an offering: *May we dig up the roots of our deepest beliefs about education that have never served children at the margins.* I have written this book as a healing: *May we nourish a process of truth and reconciliation that frees us all from the grip of white supremacy and restores the inherent dignity and worth of every human being.* I have written this book as a promise: *May I recommit daily to each of you, to the ancestors, and to the long arc of struggle for justice.* I view schools as possibility spaces in which to reimagine society. I don't have "answers" for you—rather ideas and provocations and stories that I hope will ground you in the expansiveness of this moment. As things fall apart, maybe the answers to our deepest challenges lie not in test scores and curriculum guides but in the cultural wealth and wisdom of our villages—both current and ancestral.

I am transported back to the room in Duncan, BC, where I am filled with gratitude for this experience, the wisdom of our guides, and the vision of a child-centered village that manifests my hopes and dreams for education. Looking around me at the faces of leaders from across the United States and Canada, I take in a simple truth: Another world is possible.

The Street Data Paradigm

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

—Audre Lorde

What would an educational system based on this village look like, and how would we create it? It would require a radical reimagining of what