

From “[Street Data: A New Grammar for Educational Equity](#)” (Edweek, 2019) by Shane Safir

In my book, *The Listening Leader: Creating the Conditions for Equitable School Transformation* (John Wiley and Sons, 2017), I offer an equity-centered framework I call the Levels of Data. Drawing on the work of W. James Popham, I argue that we are using the wrong data to make our most important educational decisions and, as a result, further marginalizing the students we claim to want to serve.

Level 1 “satellite” data, such as test scores, attendance patterns, and graduation rates, tell an important but incomplete story of equity. While satellite data can illuminate big performance trends and point toward underserved student groups, it has a few fatal flaws.

First, it tends to be lagging, falling into educators’ hands long after it has lost its utility to inform instructional decisions. Second, it gives policymakers and system leaders unwarranted credibility to make sweeping decisions without being close to the actual locus of learning—the classroom. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, it serves to reinforce implicit biases against African-American, Latino, and other students of color by insinuating that they have less intellectual capacity rather than having disparate access to resources. Satellite data lacks context and nuance, failing to account for phenomena like stereotype threat, a theory developed by psychologist Claude Steele to describe how the performance of women, people of color, and others can often decrease with the psychic threat of being viewed as inferior.

Level 2 “map” data hovers closer to the ground, providing a GPS of learning trends and gaps in a school community. Map data could include Lexile levels gathered through running record assessments, rubric scores on a common math assessment, or student perception data gleaned from a schoolwide survey. While this data paints a slightly richer picture, it still lacks the texture required to inform and shape equitable change.

By contrast, **Level 3 “street data”** takes us down to the ground to listen to the voices and experiences of our students, staff, and families. It provides us with real-time, leading indicators on the messy work of school and instructional improvement while enabling rapid feedback loops for our decisions and practices. Street data offers a new grammar for educational equity rooted in a few guiding principles. First and foremost, it’s about humanizing the process of gathering data. Rather than positioning students and families as objects whose value can be quantified, street data teaches us to engage with people as subjects and agents in an ever-shifting landscape whose experiences are worthy of careful study and deep listening. It teaches us to be ethnographers rather than statisticians. And the process itself, if done well, builds trust and relational capital.

Equally important, street data helps us center the voices of those currently at the margins of our schools and systems. Rather than succumb to Paulo Freire’s notion of false generosity, where we assume to know what’s best for those we serve, we assume a stance of humility and learning. This simple shift in perspective disrupts the tendency toward superiority that maintains white supremacy. Lastly, street data helps us embrace a bias toward action and rapid cycles of learning-doing. When we ground our leadership moves at the street level—whether in the classroom, the staff room, or the community—we begin to acquire critical insight into what’s working and what’s not.



Level 1 Satellite Data

Large grain size.

Illuminate patterns of achievement, equity, and teacher quality and retention.

Point us in a general direction for further investigation.



Level 2 Map Data

Medium grain size.

Help us to identify reading, math, and other student skill gaps (e.g., decoding, fluency, fractions, etc.), or instructional skill gaps for teachers.

Point us in a slightly more focused direction.



Level 3 Street Data

Fine-grain and ubiquitous.

- Help us to understand student, staff, and parent experience as well specific misconceptions and mindsets.
- Help us to monitor students' internalization of important skills.

- Require focused listening and observation.
- Inform and shape our next moves.

TABLE 3.1 Types of Street Data

Artifacts <i>Anything created by human beings that yields information or insight into the culture and/or society of its creator and users</i>	Stories/Narratives <i>The oral and sometimes written transmission of stories, histories, lessons, and other knowledge to maintain a historical record and sustain cultures and identities</i>	Observations <i>The study of human behavior, including micro-interactions, micro-pedagogies, and micro-facilitation moves with a keen focus on nonverbal as well as verbal communication</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student work • Video of a performance-based assessment • Audio recording of a student-to-student discussion • Teacher-designed task • Professional-learning agenda • Instructional-coaching conversation plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy interviews • Focal student case study • Oral histories • Identity maps • Writing journals • Staff meeting comment cards • Listening-campaign quotes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equity participation tracker (tally by race, gender, ELL status, etc.) • Nonverbal observation transcript • Meeting observation notes • Instructional coaching transcript • Sketch of classroom walls