Co-Design as a Catalyst for Equity
Acknowledgments

Lead Author: Tom Malarkey

NEP Staff Contributors: Stephen Chang, Casta Guillaume, Ph.D., Heidi Gill, Sarah Goldsmith, Sara Gray, Nichelle Nichols, Kathleen Osta, Linda Ponce de León.

NEP Youth Organizer Contributors: Isabela Ávila Ríos, Micah Daniels, Dwight Hua, Riya Ranjan.

We also extend our appreciation to the many youth and adults in our NEP-BELE District Network whose leadership informed the development of this work.

“Racism and inequity are products of design. They can be redesigned.”
Caroline Hill, Michelle Molitor & Christine Ortiz (2016)
Introduction

Many educators are coming to understand the importance of student, parent/caregiver and community voice as they make decisions and create programs that serve these stakeholders. Co-design pushes us to go beyond just centering the needs and realities of those we’re designing for, and to create processes that allow us to design with. This opens up whole new possibilities for how challenges get understood and what solutions can emerge.

Addressing patterns of inequitable outcomes and experiences in any context brings us face to face with the multiple causes and pervasive effects of historical and systemic oppression. This is not the territory of simple solutions or quick fixes. The complexity of these equity challenges requires a different approach to designing strategies to interrupt and shift them.

What is Co-design?

Co-design is a broad term that refers to the intentional forging of a design partnership over time between people working together across differences in power, identity/perspective, role, etc. to create positive change. As an approach to designing with, not for, people, co-design for equity pushes us to design with those “closest to the pain and furthest from power.” Those who experience the oppressive pain of our systems hold unique perspectives on how these systems need to change. Co-design processes make liberatory forms of creative collaboration possible between those in the system and those the system is meant to serve. At its heart, co-design is not a technical endeavor with particular steps and methods, but rather a way of being in creative relationships across power.

About the BELE Network & the National Equity Project

The Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) Network is a multi-year effort bringing together educators, researchers, school support organizations, and philanthropic foundations to learn about, document, and share how to create equitable learning environments, grounded in the science of learning and development, that ensure every student has the experiences and support needed to thrive. At the core of our work is a commitment to learning about and transforming student experience, particularly the experiences of young people most often marginalized within schools. Educators in the BELE Network understand the tremendous opportunity we have to change the learning conditions that shape academic outcomes.

We gather and learn from student experience data to inform changes in classroom, school, and district policies and practices. The work of the BELE Network is grounded in a set of Essential Actions. This document embodies three essential actions in particular:

- Make Systems Human Centered
- Empower Youth
- Partner with Caregivers & Communities

Since 1995, the National Equity Project has served as a leadership and systems change organization committed to increasing the capacity of people to achieve thriving, self-determining, educated, and just communities. Our mission is to transform the experiences, outcomes, and life options for children and families who have been historically underserved by our institutions and systems.

The resources offered here draw on over 27 years of organization experience and learning in supporting schools and districts across the U.S., and in particular from our facilitation of BELE supported networks of school districts from 2019–2023.

We are grateful for the support and collaboration of the Raikes Foundation in funding the development of this resource.

1 This quote is widely attributed to U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley during her 2018 campaign. See Pressley, A. (2020) reference.
Co-design exists along a continuum of design approaches:

**Community-Consulted Design**
Community is consulted, listened to.

**Co-Design**
Design in partnership with community.

**Community-Led Design**
Community leads the design.

---

**Co-design IS:**
- A partnership. It is made possible by people deciding to work together across roles and power over time.
- Relational. The process is messy, emergent, responsive to the needs of people and situation — and beautiful.
- Authentic. It is a process that can fundamentally transform the relationship between those traditionally deciding and those they serve.

**Co-design is NOT:**
- Episodic. It is not an event (e.g. a stakeholder engagement session).
- Technical. It is not a predictable process with a clear sequence and consistent set of strategies.
- Tokenizing. It is not a way to legitimize a process by saying that “community” has had a voice or to check off a requirement.
- Reproductive. It is not a way to make similar types of decisions as have been made in the past, just with some new folks at the table.

---

**Beyond Empathy Listening**

In recent years, methods from the field of design (specifically human-centered design) have been brought into the field of equity and social justice work. The combination can be powerful and represents a considerable shift from traditional hierarchical decision-making approaches where those with power and/or “expertise” decide what’s needed and what’s best for their stakeholders. Such design processes help ground the work in the actual needs of “users,” tap into deeper sources of creativity, and cultivate a prototyping sensibility that recognizes the importance of learning from early versions and iterating solutions over time.

However, such design processes can also keep traditional power hierarchies in place — with decision-makers still doing the designing and deciding. When patterns exist about who the decision-makers are and who the “users” are (e.g. racial identity, language, gender) it’s predictable that bias and blind spots will influence the outcomes.

Co-design is not the same as centering the needs of those you’re serving. Moving beyond empathy listening to co-design opens up a powerful range of possibilities.
Co-design Considerations

Co-design can take many forms. It can play out through more formal processes, as well as informal ones. It can be utilized with large groups or with smaller ones. It can originate from within an organization and extend to community, and it can originate from community and engage those inside organizations.

Co-design will be both messy and catalytic. The idea of co-design has natural appeal for people working to address inequity. But it requires embracing the complexity and unpredictability of a non-traditional process. Co-design can feel challenging amidst the typical constraints within systems and organizations (limited time, deadlines, pressures for quick solutions, hierarchical structures and processes) so it’s key to stay grounded in purpose and potential, be willing to let go of control and attachment to particular outcomes, and trust that what emerges will have more collective buy-in and take-up and ultimately be more likely to achieve equitable improvements.

Lastly, co-design is both a practice and a stance. As a practice, there are various processes, tools and activities that can be used in co-design work. As a stance, co-design means having the mindset to embrace co-design possibilities in various situations, to think creatively about the forms it can take. At its core, co-design is about building creative relationships across difference and moving from limiting forms of power to transformative ones.

Reference our other resources:

1. Co-Design as a Catalyst for Equity
   Gain an understanding of the power and promise of co-design.

2. Developing Youth-Adult Design Partnerships
   Learn ways to implement youth-adult design partnerships.

3. Setting Conditions for Co-Design in Youth-Adult Design Partnerships
   Understand the conditions necessary for intentionally creating youth-adult design partnerships.

4. Liberatory Design Processes That Center Student Experience
   Explore design processes that support successful youth-adult design partnerships.

“Co-design is an approach to designing with, not for, people.”
Kelly Ann McKercher
Beyond Sticky Notes: Doing Co-design for Real (2020)
Essential Action 1: Make Systems Human Centered
Design schoolwide systems and structures to center students and staff by prioritizing relationships, collaboration, and learning; allocating resources to support well-being; and identifying and removing barriers to equitable learning and development.

Essential Action 2: Transform Teaching & Learning
Create learning conditions that transform students’ daily experiences by prioritizing trusting relationships; integrating students’ cognitive, academic, social, emotional, and identity development; and fostering critical consciousness and student agency.

Essential Action 3: Empower Youth
Listen to, understand, and respond to the voices and experiences of students – especially underserved students and those from marginalized communities – to ensure they have agency in their learning and development and in the creation of a more supportive and affirming system.

Essential Action 3: Partner with Caregivers and Communities
Partner authentically with students’ communities — including their caregivers and families, as well as other community partners — to transform students’ daily experiences, create a network of support for students and their families, and allow all to be healthy and whole.

Essential Action 4: Invest In Staff
Create the conditions that allow all educators to fully engage in their work, feel equipped to form meaningful relationships with students, and to be positive contributors to students’ daily experiences in school.

Essential Action 5: Measure What Matters
Establish systems to routinely gather, analyze, and respond to data on student learning and feedback students provide about their experiences, along with feedback from educators and caregivers; use these data to adjust practice, policy, and learning environments.

Essential Action 6: Create Equitable Policies
Adopt district and state policies that advance equity by centering students’ experiences, voices, and humanity.

Appendix A:
BELE Essential Actions
Creating educational environments where all young people thrive

Essential Action 1: Make Systems Human Centered
Design schoolwide systems and structures to center students and staff by prioritizing relationships, collaboration, and learning; allocating resources to support well-being; and identifying and removing barriers to equitable learning and development.

Essential Action 2: Transform Teaching & Learning
Create learning conditions that transform students’ daily experiences by prioritizing trusting relationships; integrating students’ cognitive, academic, social, emotional, and identity development; and fostering critical consciousness and student agency.

Essential Action 3: Empower Youth
Listen to, understand, and respond to the voices and experiences of students – especially underserved students and those from marginalized communities – to ensure they have agency in their learning and development and in the creation of a more supportive and affirming system.

Essential Action 3: Partner with Caregivers and Communities
Partner authentically with students’ communities — including their caregivers and families, as well as other community partners — to transform students’ daily experiences, create a network of support for students and their families, and allow all to be healthy and whole.

Essential Action 4: Invest In Staff
Create the conditions that allow all educators to fully engage in their work, feel equipped to form meaningful relationships with students, and to be positive contributors to students’ daily experiences in school.

Essential Action 5: Measure What Matters
Establish systems to routinely gather, analyze, and respond to data on student learning and feedback students provide about their experiences, along with feedback from educators and caregivers; use these data to adjust practice, policy, and learning environments.

Essential Action 6: Create Equitable Policies
Adopt district and state policies that advance equity by centering students’ experiences, voices, and humanity.

Bibliography


Pressley, A, @AyanaPressley. (June 30, 2018). “(1/11) When I say...‘The people closest to the pain, should be the closest to the power, driving & informing the policymaking...’ THIS is what I mean. (A) When I wanted to break cycles of $poverty by strengthening pathways to #graduation, preventing #dropout #MA7.” Retrieved from https://twitter.com/AyannaPressley/status/1013840816963461137/s=20