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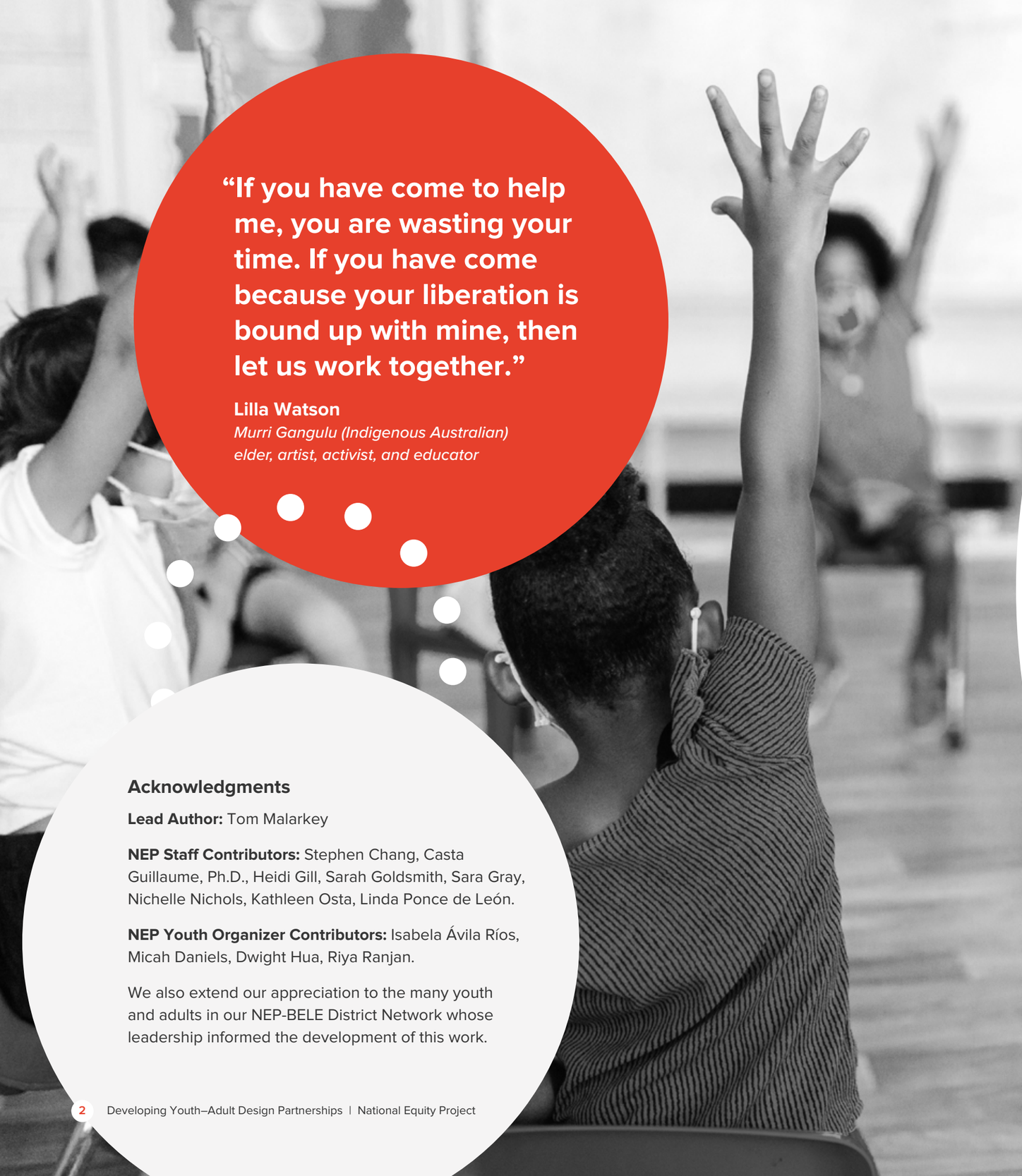
Developing Youth–Adult Design Partnerships

NATIONAL EQUITY PROJECT

Building Equitable Learning Environments Network



> **"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."**
>
> **Lilla Watson**
> *Murri Gangulu (Indigenous Australian) elder, artist, activist, and educator*

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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.

Table of Contents

About the BELE Network & the National Equity Project

Building Equitable Learning Environments Network

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**
- **Transform Teaching and Learning**
- **Empower Youth**

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.

Overview

Efforts to bring about greater equity in schools are generally driven by adults. And, very often, these adults don't share the racial, cultural, and generational identities of the historically marginalized youth for whom they are designing solutions or interventions. This means adult-driven design efforts typically lack the voice and input of the young people these efforts are meant to serve. Not surprisingly, this absence of their key perspectives and experience tends to significantly limit the potential effectiveness of these efforts.

In addition, while it is indeed the responsibility of adult educators to create equitable schooling, this generally plays out as a one-directional process: adults seeking to create more equity for youth. This can produce a "savior" stance which results in distorted assumptions that students need to be saved and limits possibilities for young people to contribute to bettering their own situations.

Authentic partnership, on the other hand, can be transformative both for students, as well as for adult educators.

This document offers some ways to envision and create what we name as youth-adult design partnerships in service of greater equity in schools. Our hope is that it provides both inspiration (to catalyze possibilities) and provocation (to spur self-reflection).

While the learning represented here comes from decades of experience supporting equity change work in educational contexts and various traditions of liberatory work, we offer it as learning-in-progress, since this particular territory of youth-adult partnership work is still emergent for the National Equity Project — and in many ways for the field more generally.

Our approach here is informed by various traditions of liberatory work:

- Traditions of youth-led participatory action research, influenced by the work of Paulo Freire and colleagues (Freire, 1970);
- Traditions of organizing and activism;
- The work of Zaretta Hammond (Hammond, 2015) and the role of "learning partnerships" between students and teachers;
- Indigenous traditions of circle-centered processes and power sharing, alongside more contemporary understandings of complex systems and the type of "host" leadership (versus typical "hero" leadership) that's needed to catalyze change (Wheatley, 2011)
- Human-centered design and design thinking, which informed the development of our Liberatory Design[1] (Anaissie et al, 2021) practice.

Transforming Power Through Partnership

Power dynamics predictably run throughout youth-adult design partnerships and must be acknowledged and addressed. Adultism[2] is real and pervasive, and creates experiences of marginalization, tokenization and disempowerment for youth. These experiences are intensified for BIPOC youth and other youth traditionally marginalized in schools. Furthermore, power dynamics are also present between adults (e.g. administrators and teachers) and between students (e.g. across identity, age, who's experiencing success in school and not).

Design partnerships, however, create a context in which these power dynamics can be transformed, resulting in radically different experiences for both youth and adults (how they see themselves and relate to each other). While power can undermine authentic partnership, intentionally shifting power can be liberating for all and can produce breakthrough insights and equitable designs that addresses the mismatch between what youth need and the ways schools and systems are organized.

Traditional design:
uni-directional design from adult to student

Youth-adult partnership:
symbiotic and mutually supportive design

Definitions

The following terminology is used throughout this document. Here are a few useful definitions:

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. For those with traditionally more power (e.g. adults in an education system), this can mean partnering especially with those who are "closest to the pain, furthest from power" (e.g. students, parents, community members) in order to catalyze greater equity and liberatory conditions in a context. Solutions to challenges must meet their needs, and cannot be developed without their perspectives, experiences and ideas.

Co-design sits within the larger field of approaches around transforming governance, authority and decision-making to center the voices and leadership of those closest to the pain and typically further from power. Many approaches to co-design exist (e.g. participatory action research, community-based participatory research, Liberatory Design). For NEP, youth-adult design partnerships are grounded in a Liberatory Design approach.

Design Partnership

A design partnership is the structure and process that enables powerful co-design through the creation of mutually trusting relationships, shared purposes, supportive structures, and liberatory processes. A design partnership for equity provides the "container" in which hierarchical power dynamics (e.g. across role, identity) that typically undermine liberatory collaboration can be transformed into mutually generative and mutually empowering relations.

Youth–Adult Design Partnership

In a youth-adult design partnership, educators and students/youth work together in authentic relationship over time to co-design approaches to generating more meaningful learning and more equitable experiences and outcomes in educational contexts.

Core Elements of a Youth–Adult Design Partnership

Refer to this section to:

- *Anticipate what will be needed in a given partnership*
- *Assess an existing partnership*
- *Examine how youth-adult design partnership work can become sustainable — e.g. not just dependent on certain students (who will graduate); supported structurally through time, resources and leadership.*

Youth-adult design partnerships go against the grain of business as usual in schools. Students are generally exhorted to follow the rules and not speak out. Meanwhile, equity-oriented educators often seek to engage student voice but may lack support from higher-ups or peers, or they may need more experience or confidence in their approach. There are many common challenges that can prevent these partnerships from flourishing. Anticipating these can help address them proactively.

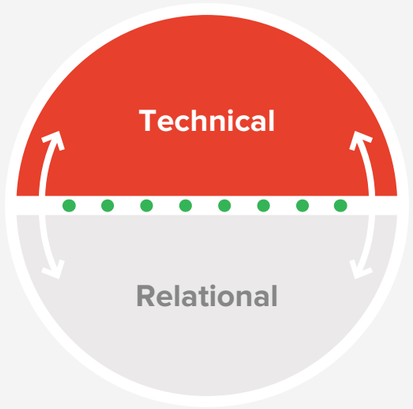
Common Challenges

- Students can feel tokenized (e.g. when adults put youth in positions without any substance or power, just to say they have youth involved).
- Efforts to engage student voice are episodic (not ongoing), and students don't see and feel themselves having actual influence over time.
- Educator adultism can marginalize student voice. Even well-meaning adults are often unaware of their adult assumptions and biases and the effects of these on youth.
- Groups can spin their wheels or lose momentum. While creating healthy and equitable conditions is key, youth also need to feel action happening as a result of their participation.
- The power of student voice may not be understood or supported by organizational leaders. When youth speak their truth, oftentimes adults are not as ready to hear it as they might have thought, resulting in defensiveness and/or fear of further youth voice.

On the other hand, strong youth-adult design partnerships have some core elements that counteract predictable challenges and create conditions for partnerships to thrive. The following elements provide specific places to pay attention to as you create and/or strengthen design partnerships. We've organized these elements into two realms: **technical** and **relational**[3].

Technical & Relational Dynamics

The technical and relational realms are deeply connected to each other. Problems in the technical realm can impact relational well-being. Likewise, developing relational health often requires attention to structures and processes.



Technical

Supportive Structures. Structures that enable the work to happen in reliable ways over time.

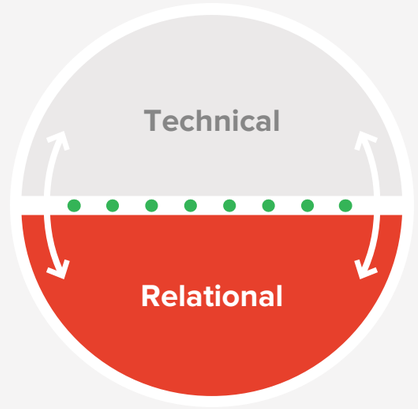
- Protected, predictable time for meetings
- Concrete supports for youth participation (e.g. compensation, accessibility)
- Leveraging existing structures (e.g. student equity council, existing PD times)
- Roles that are responsible for student participation and voice (e.g. student liaison)

Liberatory Processes. Clear processes and routines that enable the partnership to deepen.

- Well designed meeting agendas that tend to technical, relational, and adaptive needs
- Processes that build relationship, that support full identities, and transform power
- Use of Liberatory Design mindsets and modes

Learning Through Action. Getting to strategies and action enables a critical sense of efficacy.

- Try things early to learn
- As a common focus (priorities) for the work emerges, action becomes possible.
- Some strategies will be more clear, doable. Others will be more complex and will require further learning and experimentation.
- All members are in positions to take action in their respective contexts (spheres of influence).



Relational

Relational Trust. Relationship is the foundational element of a partnership; partnerships can only move at “the speed of trust” (Covey, 2008). Developing relational trust across identity and power difference must be approached intentionally.

- Relationship between individuals is key (e.g. student relationship with a trusting adult in the partnership)
- Relationship within the team/partnership needs to deepen over time.
- Relationship between structures is also important (e.g. between the team and other decision-making bodies in the system)

Shared Purpose. Shared agreement about “what we’re up to together” — **and why** —drives the partnership forward.

- This purpose is most powerful when co-defined.
- Collective purpose is fueled by the “why” each member brings to the work. This is grounded in members’ own identities,experiences, values, and priorities
- Team members recognize that “what we’re up to” will evolve as we go.

Communication and Information. Without meaningful information, people make assumptions (influenced by bias) and create inaccurate narratives about what’s happening.

- Students need information (data) about the system so they can “see” it better
- Adults need information (about student experience) so they can “see” patterns here better
- Adults need to practice more transparency about the system than they’re used to.

“[A healthy intergenerational relationship needs] a reciprocation of respect and trust. Also, a willingness to ask for help on both sides. So, as a young person, I need to be prepared to say sometimes, I don’t have a Ph.D., so I don’t know what that means. Can someone explain it to me? And then at the same time, adults need to also be willing to ask their young peers for help, because young people have things to offer too, and we have ways that we can mentor adults.”

Quinn Pursell
Adultism and Its Impact on Youth and Adult Spaces

Designing Partnerships Across Your System

Refer to this section to:

- *Imagine possible locations for design partnership work*
- *Make connections between partnership work happening in different locations*
- *Envision longer-term system culture shifts*

Youth-adult design partnerships are possible throughout a school and school system. There are endless needs for creating greater belonging and more equitable student experience, and countless types of partnerships can drive this. With effort and intention, these partnerships can become a normal part of a school or system's culture; they can become simply "how we do things here." As this happens, profound changes become possible for everyone.

We start with three general locations for education-based youth-adult design partnerships: classroom, school, and system. Meaningful change can start from anywhere within a system and ripple out in ways that are inspiring and influential; though these operate at different scales, no one is more important than the others.

While the Core Elements previously described are key for any design partnership, they also translate to elements that are important for creating conditions within a system for partnerships across different levels. For instance, schools can provide incentives for student participation in design partnerships and can create potential time and structure for adults to be involved.

Classroom level: partnerships between a teacher and the students in their classroom.

School level: partnerships focused on making change within a school or program.

System level: partnerships focused on system-wide challenges or opportunities.

Youth–Adult Design Partnerships Across an Education System

Classroom Level

Purpose(s)

Changing teaching practices, student learning experiences, and classroom culture.

Potential Impact

These partnerships are direct, local, and doable for individual educators. What a single teacher or student might learn through a partnership here can influence others in surprisingly powerful ways.

Examples

- A teacher learning from and with "focal students" through a Learning Partnership[4]
- A teacher sharing classroom survey data, e.g. CoPilot Elevate (PERTS, 2022) with all students in order to co-design changes in teaching and learning
- Students lead design efforts focused on classroom culture strategies and/or curriculum change in their class

Essential Considerations

- Teachers are often not used to learning from and with students — especially in transparent ways.
- Classroom partnerships become more possible (and influential) when they're linked to teacher/team collaboration.

School Level

Purpose(s)

Changing school policies, practices, culture, relationships.

Potential Impact

Partnerships here can influence multiple classrooms and parts of school life; can be initiated by many possible actors in the school (not just administrators); can tap into existing school structures. What is learned in a single school can influence other schools and the larger system as well as improve conditions for classroom level change.

Examples

- A team of educators and students forming to address a particular school equity challenge
- An equity-focused student group (e.g. a Black Student Union, Student Equity Council) partnering with adult educators to drive change efforts
- An adult-driven process (e.g. curriculum adoption) that builds in meaningful student participation
- Working to learn from school-wide survey data, e.g. CoPilot Cultivate (PERTS, 2022).

'School Level' continued

Essential Considerations

- Partnerships tend to involve students who are already involved in leadership work. Be intentional about how to partner with students who are less involved, experiencing less success and belonging, and/or are from historically marginalized groups.
- Classroom partnerships become more possible (and influential) when linked to teacher/team collaboration.

System Level

Purpose(s)

Changing system conditions, policies, structures, processes, resources and norms.

Potential Impact

System level partnerships have the potential for broader change.

Examples

- A "Circle Team[5]" comprised of students and adults focused on a particular challenge or design opportunity — learning through multiple cycles of "safe to fail" experimentation
- Student leaders creating a set of demands that can drive design partnership work (NEP, 2021)
- Student school board members
- A board-approved student Bill of Rights (GENup, 2022)
- Working to learn from system-wide survey data, e.g. CoPilot Cultivate (UChicago Impact & PERTS, 2022)

Essential Considerations

- It can be challenging to bring students together from multiple schools, but also quite powerful.

Different Ways to Lead Partnerships

Refer to this section to:

- *Recognize what type of leadership may be needed, given the situation in a given partnership*
- *Imagine how existing work can become a design partnership*
- *Consider how to cultivate a range of partnerships*

Partnerships can start and evolve in many ways. Some start from an adult-driven effort that incorporates student participation over time. Some start as equal partnership from the beginning. Some take shape as student-driven efforts in which adults play a support or ally role.

We offer this continuum as a simple way to characterize the range of possible "drivers" for a given partnership. We don't believe any one is "better" than the others; each can produce powerful results. However, adult-driven partnerships are generally the most common (because they most match existing power arrangements), so more intentional effort is typically required to create and support co-driven and student-driven partnerships.

"Education must begin with the solution of the student-teacher contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students."

Paulo Freire

Adult Driven:

Adults are primary organizers, but work in meaningful partnership with youth over time. This mode is appropriate when youth don't have the capacity to be full and equal partners, but their voice and perspective is critical to the effort.

Co-Driven:

Effort is driven jointly by youth and adults. Strong structures, processes (e.g. regular time, clear communications), and trusting relationship are vital to success here, and perspective is critical to the effort.

Student-Driven:

Students are primary organizers. Adults, as allies, play a supporting role in service of student leadership and can provide "bridges" to the rest of the system.

Developmental Paths for Student Voice, Leadership, and Adult Partnership

Refer to this section to:

- *Self-assess one's own development (stance, practice, mindset)*
- *Reflect on partnership dynamics and shift as needed*
- *Assess system development over time*

Since few of us (youth or adult educators) have been socialized, much less "trained" to engage deeply in cross-generational partnership work, it's important to recognize that these are skills and stances that can develop over time. However, we need to have a vision of where we're trying to go in this development, so we can better deepen our partnership practice in needed ways. The two "paths" provide ways to think about the development of both student voice/leadership and adults as design partners.

Student Voice & Leadership

Students are often ready to express their needs and desires (use their voice) and take on more leadership than adults are ready to invite. That said, there are important skills and mindsets for students to learn that support their own equity leadership development. The following table was adapted from Californians For Justice, 2022.

Not Partnering	Being Heard	Collaborating	Leading
Dismissed, Tokenized, Marginalized	Episodic	Partnering over time	Stepping forward
	Students articulate their perspective, serve as data source, provide feedback	Students involved as stakeholders, collaborate with adults, co-construct decisions	Students identify problems, generate solutions, direct collective activity
	Expression, Consultation	Participation, Partnership	Activism, Leadership

Adult Partnership

Adult educators need to consider where they need support or guidance in order to partner with students in liberatory ways in service of equity. It is important to name the need to tend to this as a growth area and provide a way for adults to develop their own capacity as liberatory partners to students.

Not Partnering	Hearing	Collaborating	Supporting
Dismissive, Paternalistic, Tokenizing	Episodic	Partnering over time	Stepping back
	Adults learn to learn from youth; decenter own adult perspective	Adults learn to partner with students; recognize the necessity of youth input	Adults learn to transform power more broadly and sustainably

Conclusion

We hope these recommendations can help you to imagine the purpose and power of youth-adult design partnerships and provide guidance as you work towards creating or deepening them.

Though the work is complex, the benefits will be immeasurable. We encourage you to just get going, to "take action to learn" (Anaissie et. al. 2021).

Adults: You can start small. Meeting 1:1 with a few youth, guided by a couple questions, will catalyze all sorts of insights and possibilities.

Youth: Find an adult who will take you seriously, and begin a conversation about why change is needed. We hope these recommendations might provide you with some support as you work to forge authentic partnerships with adults in your context. Share this document with an adult you see as an ally and invite a conversation!

Please refer to these additional resources for further supports to this work:

- Why Co-Design Is a Key Driver for Meaningful Change
- Creating the Container: Condition-setting for Co-Design
- Working with Liberatory Design in Response to Student Experience Data.

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. **Centering Student Experience Through Liberatory Design**
   Explore design processes that support successful youth-adult design partnerships.

"History from Black communities tells us that educators don't need to empower youth or give them brilliance or genius. Instead, the power and genius is already in them. Genius is the brilliance, intellect, ability, cleverness, and artistry that have been flowing through their minds and spirits across generations."

Gholdy Muhammad
Author, Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy

End Notes

1 Liberatory Design (Anaissie et al, 2021) is an approach to addressing inequities in complex systems that NEP helped create and that we use to guide design partnership work. Comprised of a set of **mindsets (ways of being) and modes (ways of doing)**, it is both a flexible process that can be used by teams, and a set of equity leadership habits that can be practiced daily. It can be used in a variety of ways and by a variety of people, including in innovation efforts, strategic planning, community-driven design, and collaborative teams. Liberatory Design provides a powerful set of supports to youth-adult design partnership work, though it is not requisite for this work. Read more about Liberatory Design for Equity as practiced by the National Equity Project.

2 Adultism is defined as the "behaviors and attitudes based on the assumptions that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without agreement" (Bell, 1995). Read more on Adultism on Wikipedia.

3 The notion of technical and relational organizational domains being "Above and Below the Green Line" comes from the the "6 Circle Model", a framework for viewing and assessing the health of any system (e.g. a team, a program, an organization) developed by Margaret Wheatley, Tim Dalmau, Steve Zuiebeck, and others (Dalmau & Wheatley, 1983). The National Equity Project adapted this model into a "7 Circle Model", integrating an additional attention to current and historical conditions of oppression and systems of dominance.

4 Zaretta Hammond (2014) defines learning partnerships as an academic and emotional partnership that teachers form with students, pillared upon three components: rapport, alliance, and cognitive insight. Read more about Learning Partnerships.

5 In the NEP-BELE District Network, we have engaged Circle Teams: teams of district staff, students, and parents committed to taking on an equity challenge based on the perspectives of students, and testing new ways to design a different experience and/or outcome. The Circle Team is called Circle to represent that students, parents, teachers, administrators come together with shared power and voice.

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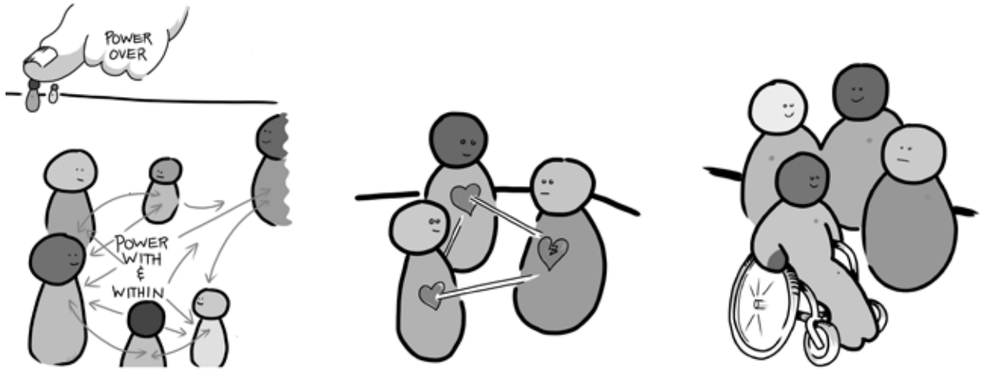
Appendix A:
Liberatory Design Mindsets

LIBERATORY DESIGN

These **Liberatory Design Mindsets** can be used to surface particular beliefs, values and stances to ground and focus a design practice. These three mindsets can be helpful to center in youth-adult design partnerships:



Work to Transform Power

Explore structures and opportunities for interactions in which power is shared, not exercised.

Transforming power systems catalyzes a sense of shared purpose, greater self-direction, and a general commitment to better work quality.

When people share power instead of having it wielded over or against them, they can be more human and authentic. They are also more capable of challenging inequities in their interactions.

Build Relational Trust

Invest in relationships with intention, especially across difference. Honor stories. Practice empathetic listening.

Relational trust is the glue in Liberatory Design work. When working across difference on difficult challenges, teams must invest in each other to develop trust, share openly, and collaborate authentically. If we are courageous in identifying and processing emotions with our team, we create opportunities for healing and preven distortion of our work.

Seek Liberatory Collaboration

Recognize differences in power and identity to design "with" instead of "for." Design for belonging.

Design work can be fraught with power and identity dynamics that can result in unintended consequences.

To fully realize the potential of Liberatory Design, it is critical to reframe the relationship between designers and the communities in which they are working to one of partnership and equity, not patronizing experiences.

Appendix B:
BELE Essential Actions

Building Equitable Learning Environments Network

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 4: 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 5: 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 6: 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 7: Create Equitable Policies

Adopt district and state policies that advance equity by centering students' experiences, voices, and humanity.

bit.ly/youth-adult-codesign

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