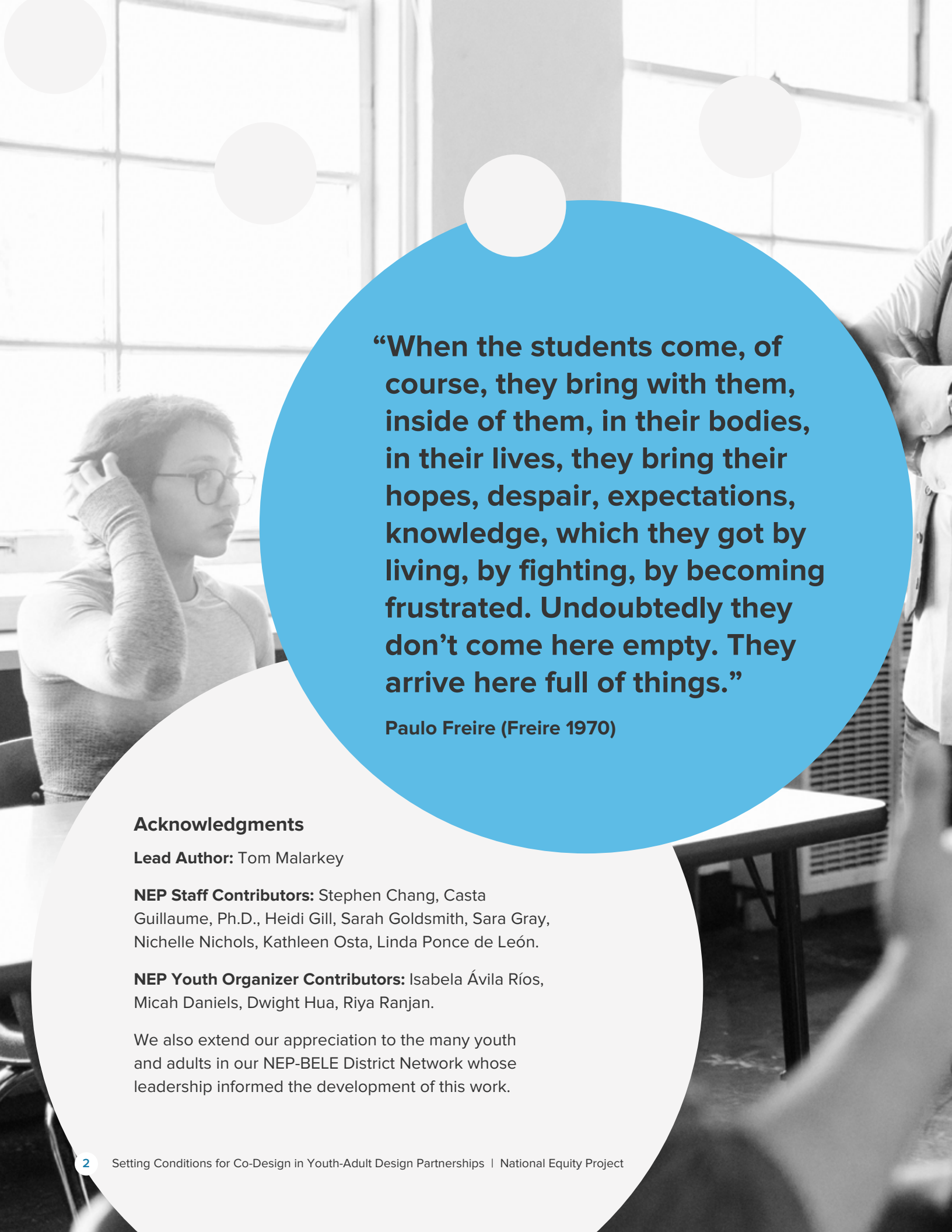# Setting Conditions for Co-Design in Youth-Adult Design Partnerships

NATIONAL EQUITY PROJECT

BELE Building Equitable Learning Environments Network

> **"When the students come, of course, they bring with them, inside of them, in their bodies, in their lives, they bring their hopes, despair, expectations, knowledge, which they got by living, by fighting, by becoming frustrated. Undoubtedly they don't come here empty. They arrive here full of things."**
>
> **Paulo Freire (Freire 1970)**

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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**

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.

Introduction

Youth-adult design partnerships offer the potential for transformative change within youth-serving systems. When young people, especially those marginalized within systems, bring their lived experience together with adults who bring their professional expertise and influence, powerful change becomes possible. Because this type of partnership often goes against the grain of business as usual in education systems, it is vital to pay attention to creating conditions that allow such work to thrive.

We offer a set of considerations and practical guidance focused on creating conditions to support meaningful, impactful design partnerships. Conditions are key aspects of a design partnership that play a critical role in its success (e.g. trust, shared purpose, certain structures) — as different from the design processes the team engages in over time (e.g. empathy listening, prototyping).

Conditions represent the quality of the "soil" that supports the growth and flourishing of a partnership over time. While conditions alone don't guarantee success, they create much better odds for it.

> **"Equity work can lack creative and participatory tools. At times, it can be so focused on advocacy that it fails to foster new relationships between people who are seemingly in conflict with each other... Design work can fail to address the root causes of inequity or notice them at all."**
>
> **Kelly Ann McKercher**
> *Beyond Sticky Notes: Doing Co-design for Real: Mindsets, Methods and Movements*

1 See **4** **Centering Student Experience Through Liberatory Design**, to learn about the processes that shape a design partnership work over time.

Power-Wise Relationship at the Center

While design partnership work can be supported by certain processes and structures and practices, it's not an approach that can be packaged or made into a predictable, technical process. The heart of this work is a stance around the centrality of relationship. From a foundation of relationship, tremendous possibilities can emerge. We see design partnerships at their core as a way of being in **creative relationships across power.** While we name key components and critical conditions, a stance of liberatory collaboration provides the foundation.

Designing with, not for requires building relational trust and recognizing and working creatively with dynamics around power, identity and difference that will naturally arise. We refer to this as a **power-wise relationship.** Power dynamics predictably run throughout youth-adult design partnerships and must be acknowledged and addressed. Adultism, defined as "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) 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).

When people build trust grounded in relationships, they are able to navigate the natural challenges that arise. Humans in systems want and need to connect with each other — across difference and power — to be in relationship in service of shared purpose in ways that our systems don't usually support.

Seek Liberatory Collaboration

> **"We see design partnerships at their core as a way of being in creative relationships across power."**
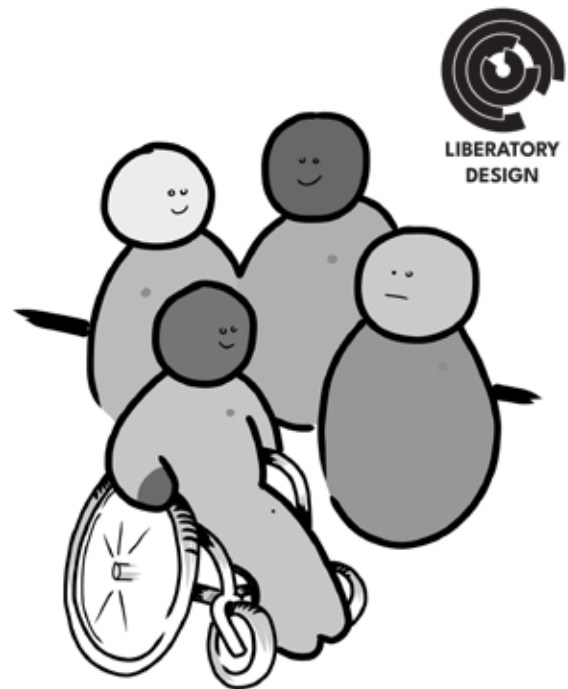
Creating the Team

The success of a design partnership is influenced greatly by the initial conditions present. This resource focuses on the earlier stages of a partnership and the conditions that can give rise to powerful and deepening partnership work.[2]

Typically a design partnership is driven by a team, though the team members do not need to be the only people involved. While there's no such thing as a perfect or "correct" team, who is on the team and how it gets formed matters greatly. A design team could be a teacher and several students who are working on designing changes in classroom culture or curriculum. Or a team could be composed of a district-wide group of students from multiple schools working in partnership with educators focused on designing changes in district policy or practice. The particular context of the partnership will influence considerations of team membership and formation.
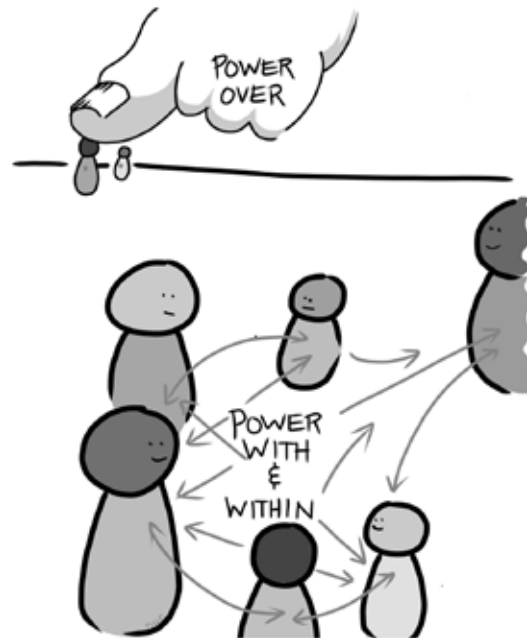
Work to Transform Power

Consider the following as you think about team formation:

- **Team size has implications.** Whether smaller or larger, the size of your team will impact everything — relational trust, group processes, participation and voice, decision-making. The larger the team, the more attention will be needed on intentional team development. The smaller (and perhaps less representative) the team, the more attention will be needed to learning from different perspectives beyond the team. Teams can be small (e.g. 3–6 people) or larger (e.g. 12–20 people) depending on context, focus and need. A team can start smaller and then grow, once there's a strong core group.

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2 See **4** **Centering Student Experience Through Liberatory Design**, to learn about the processes that shape a design partnership work over time.

- **See the system through the team.** Adult educators bring professional experience, expertise and positioning to influence change. Students bring lived experience, wisdom and perspective on the system that adults lack. Adults and students with diverse perspectives (e.g. through identity, role, relationships) enable the team to "see the system" more clearly.

- **Balance representation and readiness.** While co-design pushes us to "design with, not for," not all groups are ready to support liberatory collaboration. It's one thing to invite students to "the table." It's another thing for that table to support real belonging and authentic participation. For co-design design processes that are initiated by adults, this looks like avoiding the extremes of bringing students in too late or too early.

- **Imagine many ways to participate.** Often team selection gets mired in dynamics around power and exclusion. This can result in teams becoming too large and "representative" to function powerfully as teams. So consider the possibility of multiple layers of participation. There can be a core team (driving the work and meeting more often) that operates in conjunction with a 'second circle' of stakeholders (adults and students) who are connected to the effort and attend periodic larger meetings and/or are on call for listening, input or guidance. Consider multiple types of spaces to support different types of conversations (e.g. in racial affinity, youth/adult affinity, etc.). In addition, the team can expand as it becomes clear who else – and whose perspectives – are needed on the team.

Student Considerations	Adult Considerations
Designing for equity necessitates **the participation of students from groups who've traditionally been marginalized** and experienced less success in the system (e.g. BIPOC students, LGBTQIA students, students with special needs, English learners). A common pattern, however, is that the students from these groups who wind up being seen as good candidates for a design team are students in leadership roles and/or highly involved in school activities and/or who are doing well in school. Teams must work to engage students from marginalized groups who are not as likely to join a team like this. **Students who are "closer to the pain and further from power"** will bring insights that are key to seeing the system. Having a trusting relationship with an adult on the team makes a huge difference here.	The most critical criteria for adults on a team are those who have a high interest in learning, trying things and taking risks in service of real change — and who are open, curious. Beyond this, other factors to consider include: • **Equity awareness** (of self and of oppression) and commitment to addressing inequity. • **Identity** (e.g. if the effort is focused on inequities for BIPOC youth, it's important to have adults who bring insight from their own lived experiences as BIPOC educators in schools). • **Positional power and/or influence.** The odds of real change happening are greater when the team includes at least one adult who is closer to power in that context and is in relationship with other adults positioned to affect decision-making about the issues being addressed. • **Relationships with students.** Adults who have experience and relationship with marginalized students in that context bring both invaluable insight and the ability to support belonging on the team, especially for students who have less experience working with educators. • **Self-awareness.** An educator's unconscious adultism and/or attachment to an identity of being "down" with equity can impact how students experience them. Self-awareness and openness to feedback are key for adult partners.

Ratio of Adults:Youth

While there's no set formula here for the ratio of adults to youth, it's critical to consider how young people often experience "adult spaces" in ways that most adults have little to no awareness of. That said, various approaches can work. A team could have just a few adults and many youth. A group could decide that a 1:1 ratio feels like an important guideline.

Conditions that Support Co-Design

Once a youth-adult design partnership has sprouted, it becomes critical to cultivate the conditions for it to grow and become stronger. Imagine this partnership as a voyage out to the sea: the journey is full of both promise and uncertainty. What will make the difference is the strength of the traveler's vessel. A weak vessel may leak, or not have good sails to catch the wind, or a strong hull to withstand the waves. A strong vessel, however, can keep its crew moving forward and able to navigate whatever challenges they encounter on the voyage.

A design partnership needs a strong vessel to support the complex work of collaboration. As a team comes into being, it becomes critical to attend to the conditions that will support that team to do transformative work. Informed by the "6 Circle Model" by Dalmau et. al. (1983), we describe a set of "technical" and "relational" conditions that underlie transformative partnership work. These conditions are not rigid categories and blend with each other. The technical and relational dimensions are constantly intertwined with each other — for instance how the structure of regular meetings helps relational trust to be built. Having some language and areas of focus, however, allows us to assess the current state of the partnership and make necessary moves to strengthen conditions where needed.

Technical & Relational Dynamics

Technical

Supportive Structures. Clear structures (e.g. meeting times, roles) support strong partnerships.

Liberatory Processes. Intentional and empowering processes enable the partnership to deepen.

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

Relational

Relational Trust. Relationship is the foundation element of a partnership; partnerships can only move at "the speed of trust." Developing relational trust across identity and power difference must be approached intentionally.

Shared Purpose. Shared agreement about "what we're up to together" — and why — drives the partnership forward.

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

For each of the conditions below, we offer a set of **considerations** to be aware of and a corresponding set of **strategies** that help strengthen the conditions for partnership work to take root, flourish and grow deeper. This is not an exhaustive list, but provides some key areas to pay attention to.

Relational conditions
("below the green line")

We start here with the "below the green line" conditions, remembering that design partnership work is, at its core, more a way of being in creative relationship across power than it is a technical process.

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.
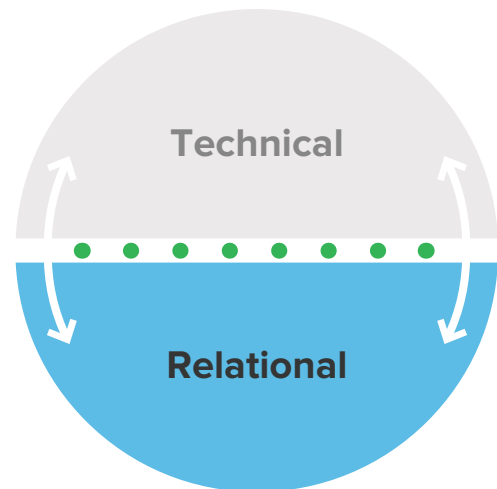
Considerations:

- **Starting conditions matter.** What is the state of relationship between different participants at the outset? E.g. adults and students; between students; between adults. The less relationship and trust in place, the more it will be important to invest in building that.

- **Patterns of trust.** What patterns exist around where there seems to be more and less trust? E.g. across race, gender.

- **School culture matters.** How might relationships and trust be affected by the quality of relationships in the context overall? Is there 'school climate' data that can provide a sense of this (e.g. from surveys like Cultivate (UChicago Impact 2023), 5 Essentials (UChicago Impact 2023), or Panorama Surveys (Panorama Education 2023)?

- **Consider team size.** The larger a team is, the more important it is to attend to building relationships and trust.

- **Relationship with other structures.** How is the team connected to other structures and leadership within the system?

Strategies:

- **Provide space to hear people's stories.** Who people are, why they came to care about the issues that brought them to the partnership. Understanding the "why" of each person enables empathy and also a sense of what someone has energy around that can be tapped within the partnership.

- **One to one conversations.** Outside of meetings, it can be important to set up 1:1 conversations where those leading the design can connect more closely with others.

- **Reciprocal shadowing:**

  – Adults: give youth a window into your world — e.g. shadowing you for a day (or even just a few hours).

  – Youth: give adults a window into your world. Think of ways to help them get gain better understanding of your experiences inside and outside your classroom.

- **Create smaller sub-teams** (of youth and adults) to take on particular aspects of the work. People build trust as they work together on something practical.

- **Map the team's relationships** with other structures and leadership in the system, especially those that are needed to support it and/or will be in a position to act upon the team's design work. Which leaders know about this work? How might the partnership's design work be aligned with existing org/system priorities? Where do relationships with leadership/structures (i.e. power) need to be strengthened?

Shared Purpose

Shared agreement about "what we're up to together" — **and why** — drives the partnership forward.

Considerations:

- **Data helps focus purpose.** The team's focus and shared purpose generally emerges from engagement with various forms of data that are revealing inequitable patterns of student experience or success (quantitative and/or qualitative).

- **Purpose can emerge.** Know that purpose can start as clear (we know we want to create _____) or as little more vague (we think _____ area in our system needs attention).

- **Purpose can come from different places.** In some cases, adults have determined the focus of the effort and are wanting to partner with students who bring perspective about that issue. In other cases, students collaboratively determine the focus with adults. And in other cases, students bring a concern or demand or recommendation to adults that feels pressing to them to address.

Strategies:

- **Learn and honor each person's "why."** Give space for each person to name what matters to them (and why) about this work so all learn more about what kind of "energy" each team member is bringing to the effort.

- **Statement of purpose.** Create a succinct expression of purpose that can be returned to, reflected on, iterated as purpose emerges or shifts — and that can be shared with others not on the team.

- **Talk about why a youth-adult design partnership is important.** Create space to discuss why youth-adult design partnership feels important to this effort — and what the possibilities (and potential pitfalls) might be.
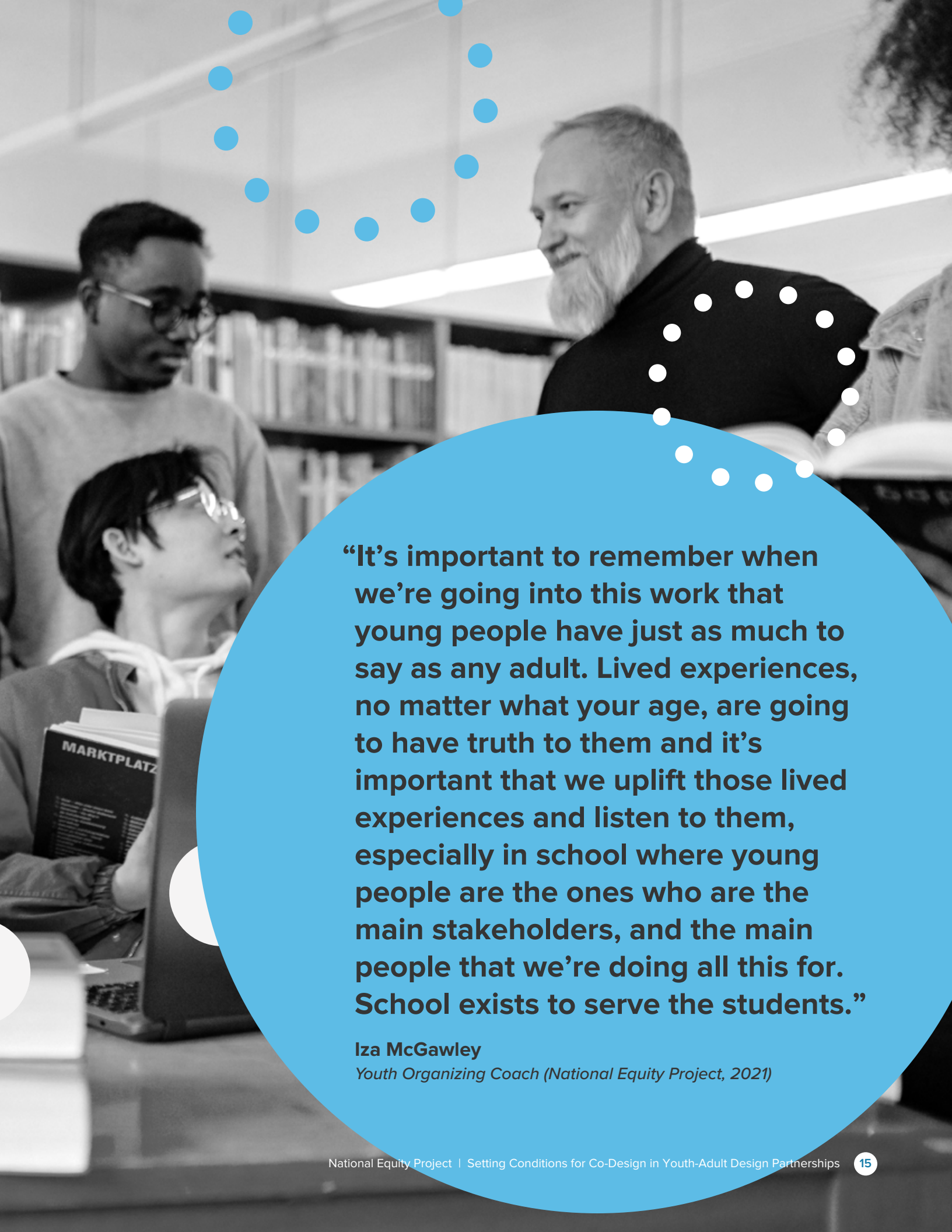
Communication & Information

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

Considerations:

- Power dynamics exist related to who has what information. Adults will generally have access to data, system processes, etc. It's critical to support students' capacity to "see the system" through such information.

- At the same time, youth hold "information" about their own (and their peers') experience of the system — that adults often do not have. Valuing this equally, and creating ways for it to be shared, is critical.

- What others in the system know and understand about the design effort will make a difference in their "readiness" to support changes or recommendations that come out of the process.

Strategies:

- **Gather Multiple forms of Data.** Work with various types of data:
  - Existing data to help youth understand the system better (e.g. achievement data; survey data — and that youth and adults together can make meaning of).
  - New forms of data & information that the team generates to help better understand the challenge (e.g. through empathy listening, through a designed survey, through observation).

- **Make Space for Emotions.** Know that "data" is not neutral or merely technical. It reveals often painful patterns of inequity. Different people (youth and adults) will experience data in different ways and will have varying emotional responses, informed by their own perspectives and experiences. Create space for people to acknowledge, share and process these emotions (e.g. through a pairshare or dyad). This will help the team understand different lived realities and will build collective capacity to productively engage the data in more generative ways.

- **Clear Information Sharing Process.** Be intentional about communications between meetings. Send summary notes so people not able to present can stay connected and updated — and so all can remember decisions and next steps amidst other commitments. Create an online "homepage" or wiki for the team's work (e.g. with key information, notes, and links).

- **Agree on Communication Methods.** Youth and adults may not regularly use the same communication methods. Adults often prioritize email communications; young people tend to use social media or text. Ask youth what communication methods they prefer and think creatively about how to keep information flowing.

"It's important to remember when we're going into this work that young people have just as much to say as any adult. Lived experiences, no matter what your age, are going to have truth to them and it's important that we uplift those lived experiences and listen to them, especially in school where young people are the ones who are the main stakeholders, and the main people that we're doing all this for. School exists to serve the students."

Iza McGawley
Youth Organizing Coach (National Equity Project, 2021)

Technical conditions
("above the green line")

While the relational domain is foundational to partnership work, the "technical" conditions help advance the work. Equity-centered processes need "enough" structure, while not being so structured that they don't allow for emergence and undermine a liberatory experience.

Supportive Structures

Partnerships ultimately become real and meaningful through the structures that support people's meaningful participation and enable work to happen in reliable (enough) ways over time.

Considerations:

- **Student Liaison Role.** Roles are key — beyond common ones like agenda setting, facilitation, and documentation. Since most students don't have experience working collaboratively and equitably with adults, it can help for there to be a "student liaison" type role — i.e. at least one adult whose responsibility is to support and advocate for young people on the team. This person can help students orient, shape supportive agendas, anticipate challenges, have students' backs, name adultism (as an ally). This should be someone who students trust and confide in. Read about "The Transformative Power of Youth Organizing Coaches" (NEP 2023) for more on this role.

- **Valuing Multiple Identities and Power.** Because people are positioned differently (related to role, identity, power, experience), attention to structures is critical for supporting full and equitable participation.

- **Use of Time.** Time is a critical condition when starting a partnership. Partnership work requires regular time to meet and to engage meaningfully. Work will not get traction without this. Because student schedules and commitments (e.g. after school activities) may not easily coincide with adult schedules, it may require discussion and creative thought.

- **Valuing Contribution.** Value people's time and participation, both because of the importance of the work and that it requires attending to competing commitments for both students and adults.

Strategies:

- **Consistent Schedule.** Schedule regular time that's frequent enough, but not burdensome. Schedule periodic longer chunks of time, ideally in a different space, to enable deeper work and relationship building. Not all work needs to happen in meetings. If engaging in asynchronous work, be intentional about equitable participation.
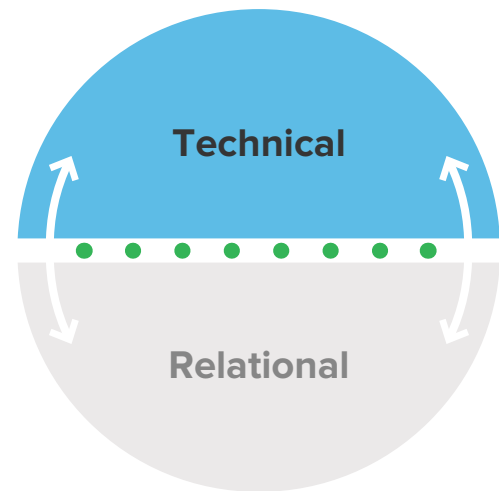
- **Compensate People.**
  - For some adults (e.g. administrators), this work will be part of their regular paid job. For other adults (e.g. teachers, classified staff, or caregivers), it may be important to create compensation or incentives.
  - For students, listen to their needs and find ways to compensate and/or incentivize their participation (e.g. course credit, recognition, gift cards).
- **Team Charter.** Create a team "charter" document that lays out purpose, roles, agreements about how the group wants to be and work together, key processes. Such a charter helps make these things explicit and transparent and guards against implicit defaulting to traditional power and influence dynamics. It can be revisited and revised throughout the process.

Liberatory Processes

Clear and humanizing processes and routines enable the partnership to deepen, creative thinking to emerge, and work to accelerate.
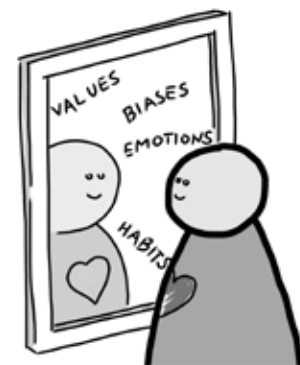
Considerations:

- **Embrace complexity.** Do not expect a linear or clear process over time. It will be messy at times, and it's key to embrace the inherent complexity of working on equity challenges across difference and power.

- **Keep it Liberatory.** At the same, know that groups can get stuck and that detrimental patterns and dynamics can evolve over time. Working towards liberation should also feel liberating, if not in every moment. How do we want our partnership to feel? How do we want a given meeting to feel?
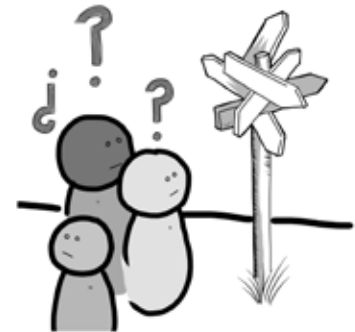
Embrace Complexity

Strategies:

- **Humanize the Space.** Be intentional about how meetings start and don't just move straight to "business." Invite people to "notice" both their situation (where are we in this process, what's been happening in our system) and themselves (how am I, are we, feeling at this point?).

- **Agreements.** Create agreements that allow people during meetings to notice and reflect on real-time dynamics playing out, processes that feel less supportive or liberatory, directions that feel less productive. Habits like this enable teams to develop deeper self-awareness and to adjust their work throughout the process.

Practice Self-Awareness

Focus on Strategic Action

Getting to strategies and action enables a critical sense of efficacy for the team, especially for students who have often experienced lack of adult action on inequity.

Considerations:

- **Take action to learn, not only to solve.** You don't have to have a perfect plan — or even any solution in mind yet. There are many ways to move to action. Don't let perfect be the enemy of good enough.

- **Focus on Spheres of Influence.** Each member of the team has a "sphere of influence" specific to their role and relationships in the system in which they can act. This will obviously look different for students and adults. Each person should exercise creative agency to take action in their sphere in ways that can inform the overall team's work.

Take Action to Learn

- **Results Orientation.** It's critical for youth in particular to feel the partnership is producing some 'results.' Young people have often been involved in dialogue with adults that doesn't lead to concrete changes or actions — and thus have understandable skepticism.

Strategies:

- **Consistent Learning Actions.** Have each member commit to a doable "learning action" between meetings. E.g. share an idea with someone and get feedback; make a small change in an existing process and see what happens; engage someone they don't usually talk to and listen for what matters to them.

- **Balance Action and Learning.** When considering various potential challenges to address, recognize that some will be more easily actionable — so act on these! Others will require further learning and understanding of the challenge, its causes, its effects and designing potential solutions.

Conclusion

To paraphrase Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, you will be making your path as you walk it (Freire & Horton, 1990). While a resource like this can help you anticipate and be aware, there are no guarantees. You'll have to discern your situation, decide on a direction and next steps, try, stumble, learn and adjust. But know that others have made similar paths — it can be done.

Remember to keep a **power-wise relationship** at the core of your process and work. This will be your compass and will help you navigate the messy complexity of this terrain. Tend to relationships and the needs that emerge in the team.

And keep it liberatory. You are trying to create a different space and experience amidst a context that likely has little of that. It can be 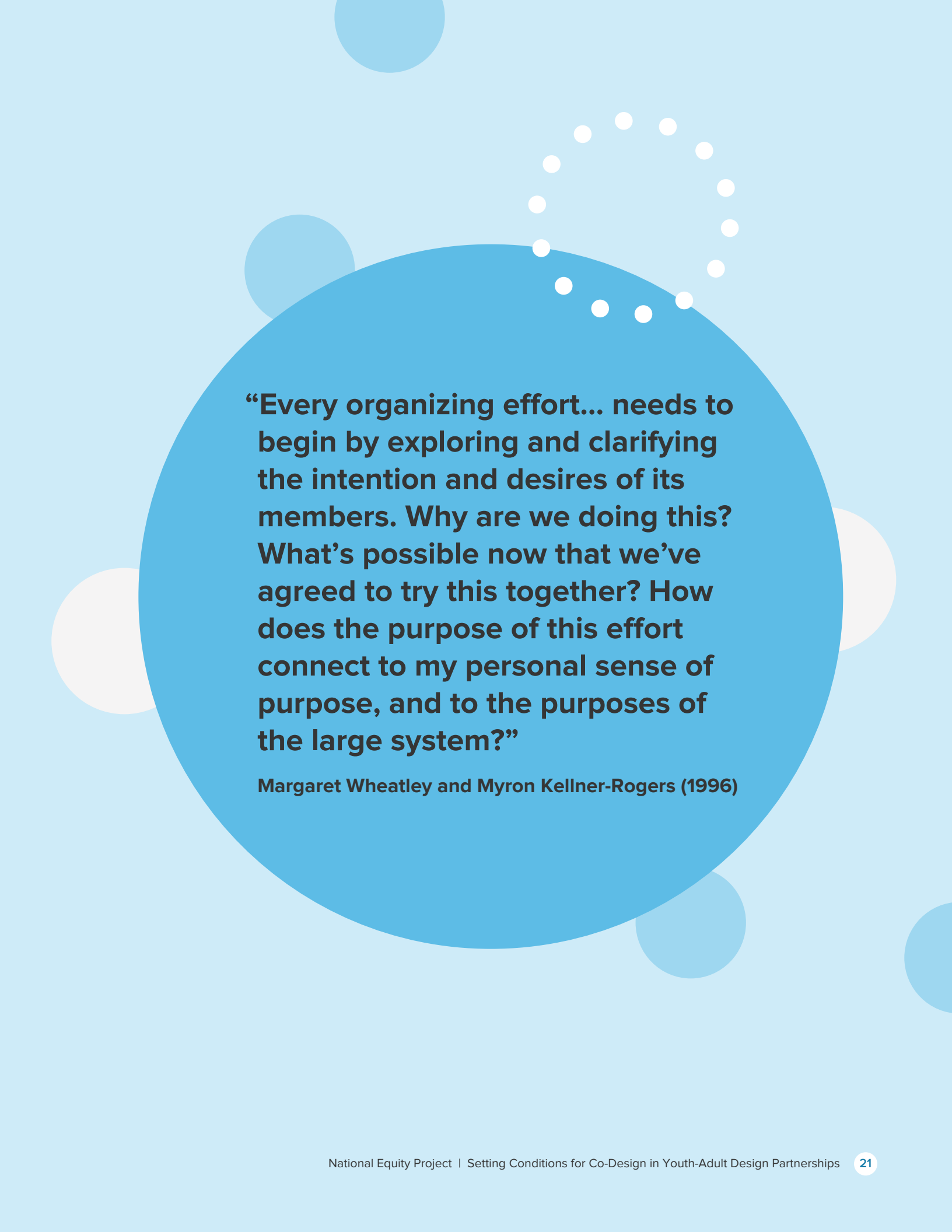hard for people to move from the dominant culture oppressive spaces (that so many of us operate in daily) into more liberatory spaces. But the more time we spend in liberatory spaces, the more agency we can feel in navigating, and changing, the more oppressive spaces.

Lastly, know that whatever path you make together today will make future paths more possible for the people in your context.

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.

"Every organizing effort... needs to begin by exploring and clarifying the intention and desires of its members. Why are we doing this? What's possible now that we've agreed to try this together? How does the purpose of this effort connect to my personal sense of purpose, and to the purposes of the large system?"

Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers (1996)

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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 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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