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# Centering Student Experience Through Liberatory Design



NATIONAL  
EQUITY  
PROJECT



Building  
Equitable  
Learning  
Environments  
Network



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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**
- **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.

## Introduction

Designing truly equitable environments requires young people at the table as co-designers. Adults must partner with young people, hear their stories and value their contributions, and follow their leadership to help determine together what to change in order to achieve greater equity. In a **youth-adult design partnership**, educators and students/youth work together in authentic relationships over time to identify priorities and co-design approaches to generating more meaningful learning, more equitable experiences, and more just outcomes in educational contexts.

This document focuses on ways groups can structure a design process once a team is in place with supportive conditions. A group can have an intention to work together,

but without a basic design process to help guide the work, it's easy to get stuck or lose momentum or operate less effectively as a team. Various types of design processes exist; here we use Liberatory Design (Anaisie et. al (2021) to provide process guidance.

See **3 Setting Conditions for Co-Design in Youth-Adult Design Partnerships** for additional considerations on creating productive conditions for co-design work.



# Focus on Student Experience

Research tells us that students are more engaged when learning aligns with their interests, needs, and perspectives. We also know that a student's daily experience in school—including how they feel and what they think—is fundamental to their lifelong well-being and development as an individual, shaping their identity, perceptions, and beliefs around what they are capable of and their role in society.

Our focus here is on design work that centers transforming student experience, in particular the experiences of BIPOC (and other historically marginalized) students in their classrooms, schools and system. The traditional dominant focus on a narrow definition of “achievement” in education reinforces deficit-oriented discourse and educator mindsets that blame underserved students, families, and communities for academic disparities. However, research demonstrates that when we listen to and measure the learning experiences of young people, we can meaningfully improve their learning outcomes.

Adults have much to learn from young people in schools and classrooms. Educators need to hear and understand students' experiences — and, then, go beyond that to co-design changes with them.

**Learning environments that center student experience are designed so that every student has:**

- An engaging, intellectually rigorous learning environment
- Physical, emotional, and psychological safety
- Meaningful and relevant work and classroom discourse
- Their cultural, spiritual, and/or ethnic values and practices acknowledged, honored, and respected
- The feeling of being seen, respected, and cared for by adults and peers
- Opportunities to set and meet goals, and to learn and recover from failure

**Learning environments that center student experience result in the following outcomes:**

- Intellectual curiosity and strong academic skills
- A sense of agency and optimism for the future
- Self-love, self-acceptance, and pride in one's multiple identities
- Understanding of one's own and others' cultural histories and contributions
- Empathy for and meaningful connections with others

*Excerpt from The BELE Framework (2020)*

These quotes from a panel of students talking about their experience in school illustrate the power of student voice:

**“You can't teach a broken heart.”**

**“I am bigger than what you think I am.”**

**“You don't have the answers. We know that. You're still figuring out your own identities. It's about providing community.”**

**“When I was first seen, it made all the difference. It made me who I am now.”**

Focusing on student experience can create a catalytic way for adults and youth to engage together and better “see” and “feel” inequity — and, in the process, build shared insights and commitments that lead to action. Working jointly in co-design processes creates relationship and trust and deepens insight over time, as different from one time listening or data analysis sessions.

# Student Experience as Data

While a narrow focus on academic achievement and outcome data (e.g. grades, test scores, graduation rates, behavior and discipline data) can surface critical patterns of inequity and point us towards potential areas of focus, student experience data helps us better understand various causes that contribute to these patterns.

Education systems tend to focus on student achievement and outcomes, generally measured in traditional ways. We use the term “data” broadly here to emphasize the many ways we can gain insight to student experience. Examples of student experience data include:

- Student experience surveys, e.g. CoPilot Elevate (PERTS 2023) and Cultivate (UChicago Impact 2023), Youth Truth National Survey (Youth Truth Student Survey 2023)
- Empathy listening, e.g. 1:1 interviews, focus groups and panels with students
- Dialogue, e.g. through discussion of issues, engaging in joint work
- Observations of student learning experiences and school culture beyond the classroom
- Student-identified priorities. e.g. recommendations, demands coming from students
- Informal conversations — simply talking with students about their experience and listening.

In addition, when students become co-designers with adults, they inherently bring their experience and perspective to the table; their participation and perspectives become a key form of data. Students are also able to gather data from other students in ways that adults may not be well-positioned to do.

Engaging different types of data helps groups see patterns of harmful or inequitable student experience. Making meaning of this data helps groups identify particular patterns or challenges to focus their design efforts on. Ideally, adults and youth collaborate to choose a design focus. In reality, though, change efforts are often driven by adult-identified priorities (e.g. strategic goals named in a plan). However a design focus emerges, paying close attention to student experience related to these priorities, and then partnering with students to co-design strategies, can be game-changing for how programs or supports get designed, for how effective they are, and for how adjustments are made over time.

# Examples of Design Partnerships Across a System

## Classroom

- A teacher sharing classroom student survey data on learning conditions (e.g. Elevate (PERTS 2022) with students in the class in order to co-design changes in teaching & learning conditions
- A teacher learning from and with “focal students” through a Learning Partnership<sup>1</sup>
- A teacher working with interested students to develop classroom culture and/or curriculum

## School-Based

- A team of educators and students forming to address a particular school equity challenge (e.g. the disproportionate impact of social-emotional health challenges on marginalized youth during the pandemic)
- 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. a curriculum adoption process) that builds in meaningful student participation and input
- Students and educators working collaboratively to learn from and act on school-wide survey data. (e.g. Cultivate, (UChicago Impact 2023))

## District/System Level

- District leaders respond to BIPOC students’ complaints about experiencing persistent microaggressions in schools by assembling a “Circle Team” of educators and student leaders from across the system to address this challenge. Students generate a set of demands (e.g. anti-bias training for adults, changes in disciplinary policies around microaggression incidents, the formation of racial affinity spaces to support BIPOC students) as a way to catalyze the process. The youth-adult team works collaboratively to engage these challenges and co-design responses over time, being sure to move quickly on doable actions and taking time to better understand and experiment to learn around challenges that are more complex.
- Policy to create positions for student school board members
- Students, in partnership with adult allies, generating a board-approved student Bill of Rights (e.g. GENUUp, 2022)
- Working to learn from system-wide survey data (e.g. Cultivate, (UChicago Impact 2023))

<sup>1</sup> Zaretta Hammond (2015) defines learning partnerships as an academic and emotional partnership that teachers form with students, pillared upon three components: rapport, alliance, and cognitive insight.

# Ways to Structure a Liberatory Design Process

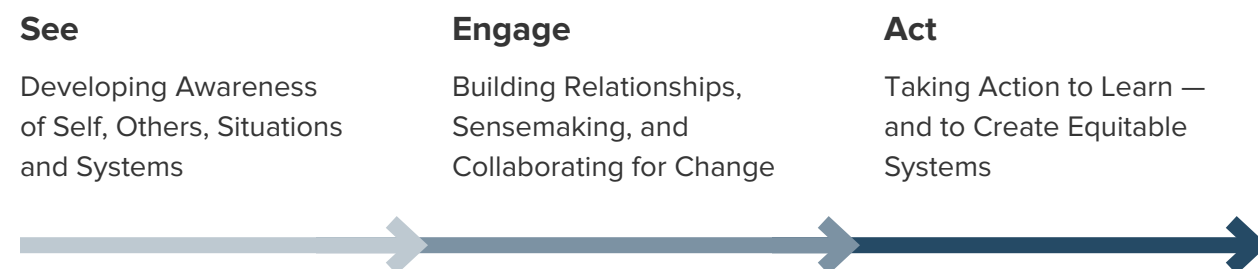
Design work to address complex equity challenges is never linear. However, it can be helpful to map onto a sequential representation of a process in order to envision a possible path or direction.

We must not get attached to such sequential representations, though, since we will then lose our sensitivity to how things actually are unfolding. In reality, based on how our process (and the larger context in which we work) emerges over time, we may loop back or leap forward. We intentionally slow down, and speed up. We get stuck and we break through. We may get confused about where we even are. We take several types of action simultaneously. In Liberatory Design, continually turning to Notice and Reflect grounds us and provides a way to navigate.

Below are two ways to frame a design process, one that's simpler (See–Engage–Act) and one that's more elaborated (Liberatory Design with its Modes and Mindsets).

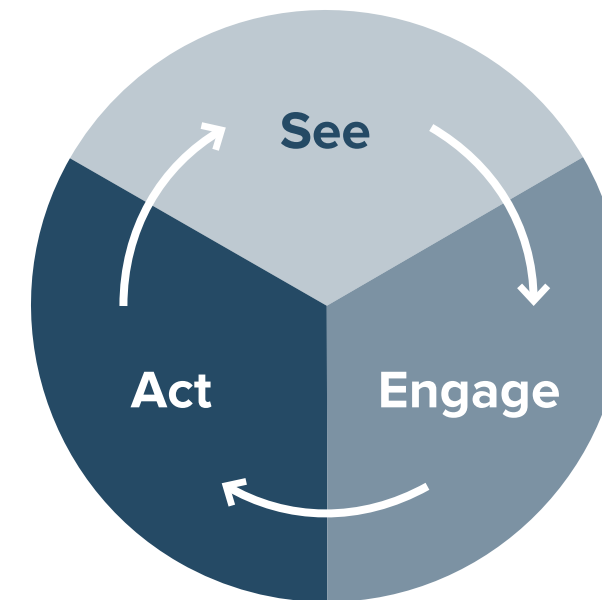
## See–Engage–Act: An Equity Leadership and Design Practice

To make changes that are meaningful and lasting, design teams must be able to understand and engage the complexity and uncertainty of their environment. Core to the National Equity Project's Leading For Equity Framework (National Equity Project 2023) is the notion of **See–Engage–Act**, an essential approach for influencing change in complex systems. See–Engage–Act as an equity leadership approach interrupts our typical tendency to see a problem, then move straight to action. With equity challenges, hasty action can exacerbate or lead to further problems. Finding ways to engage and learning more about the problem helps us determine more effective action.



While See–Engage–Act is fundamental to NEP's Leading for Equity Framework and approach, it can also be used as a simple heuristic (mental shortcut) to represent a basic design process. This simplified model is helpful in more organic processes where it doesn't feel appropriate or additive to build the group's understanding of a more detailed design process.

In a design context, See–Engage–Act can look like this:



### See

**Identify inequitable patterns of student experience**

- What does the data say?
- What are students saying?

### Engage

**Listen to and engage young people to better understand what is contributing to these patterns**

- What about my/our practice (and our system) is contributing to these patterns?
- How can I/we engage and partner with students to learn more?

### Act

**Take action, learn from what was tried, and iterate further action**

- What might I/we do?
- How will I/we learn from what we try?

The questions above center student voice and experience and provide guidance for shaping a co-design process in doable ways. Sometimes this simpler type of process description is all that's needed.

## Classroom Example: Belinda Ramos<sup>2</sup>

(6–8th Grade Math Teacher. 20 years as teacher in a K-8 school in a mostly Mexican-American community in a large city.)

### Context:

**Equity challenge.** The team had identified a broad equity challenge using traditional forms of data: “Our African American and Latino male students are experiencing disproportionately high rates of disengagement in learning in 8th grade. We see a decline in attendance and achievement for these students in 8th grade.” They hoped that using student experience survey data, at a classroom by classroom level, could provide more insight about why this was happening — and more ideas about how to address it.

**Student experience data.** Belinda and her middle school teaching team used the [Elevate survey](#) (from PERTS) with their 6th, 7th and 8th grade students. The survey asks students questions (and provides scores) around six classroom Learning Conditions: Teacher Caring, Meaningful Work, Classroom Belonging, Feedback for Growth, Student Voice, and Affirming Cultural Identity.

**Co-design.** In a previous implementation of the survey, teachers did not share the data back with students or involve students in designing strategies. This time, the team invited students to engage the response data and co-design solutions in response to the patterns they saw in the data. The teachers asked students to identify youth leaders in their group to attend collaborative design meetings with the teaching team to help improve the focal learning conditions in the classroom. In addition, they invited students to decide on how long the implementation cycle would be and when the next round of surveys would happen (4 or 5 weeks) — to see if the changes were experienced positively by students.

“What was I missing? How am I not addressing this?”

Below are two “mini-cycles” that Belinda did based on this round of survey data and student input.

	Affirming Cultural Identity	Meaningful Work
<p><b>See</b></p> <p>What does the data say?</p> <p>What do students say?</p>	<p>Belinda found that 94% of the students in her 8th grade class rated Teacher Caring positively, but just 29% rated Affirming Cultural Identity positively.</p>	<p>When Belinda looked at patterns by gender, she saw a significant gap between boys and girls in Meaningful Work (the degree to which students were experiencing Math as meaningful in her class).</p>
<p><b>Engage</b></p> <p>What about my/our practice (and our system) is contributing to this?</p> <p>How can I/we engage and partner with students to learn more?</p>	<p>Belinda: “It hit at my core. As a Latina teaching for many years in a primarily Latino community, what was I missing? How am I not addressing this? I know the importance of affirming cultural identity. When I show up in a space that recognizes me for who I am and what I bring into that space, it’s a very different — and much more positive — experience.”</p>	<p>Belinda had to ask tough questions about her own practice. “What am I doing in this space? I know I’m a female teacher, I’m a Latina, I’m a math teacher. What am I, and what are we, doing here that’s causing that?”</p>
<p><b>Act</b></p> <p>What might I/we do?</p> <p>How will I/we learn from what we try?</p>	<p>“So I immediately began thinking about how, in our community, can we recognize and uplift what we’ve been doing? In this remote learning context, I created a digital escape room in our Math class where I used a mural that was very important in our community to create a different atmosphere.”</p>	<p>“Because all of our lessons were recorded, I was able to go back into those lessons and see how many times I called on male students versus female students, how much I pushed back on ideas to build on their understanding and to really reflect on my practice and how male students might experience that.”</p>

<sup>2</sup> This is a pseudonym for a teacher in a district that NEP supported.



**“By centering students’ needs through the liberatory design process, we repositioned students as centers of knowledge. We listened to them in ways that shifted our practice, and we recognized that both teachers and students have the capacity to educate each other... Our students recognized that their voices and perspectives mattered, and they began to advocate for themselves in new ways.”**

**Jessica Lee Stovall, Lamar Timmons-Long,  
Thomas J. Rodney and Taylor Hall**  
*“Black Teachers’ Use of Liberatory Design to Promote  
Literacies of Healing” (Stovall 2023)*



# Liberatory Design

Liberatory Design (Anaisie et. al 2021) offers a more elaborated approach to structure design processes for equity. With a set of Mindsets (ways of being) and a set of Modes (ways of doing), Liberatory Design provides flexible, user-friendly support to help teams navigate the messy complexity of co-design. Liberatory Design is a process and practice to:

- Create designs that help interrupt inequity and increase opportunity for those most impacted by oppression
- Transform power by shifting the relationships between those who hold power to design and those impacted by these designs
- Generate critical learning and increased agency for those involved in the design work.

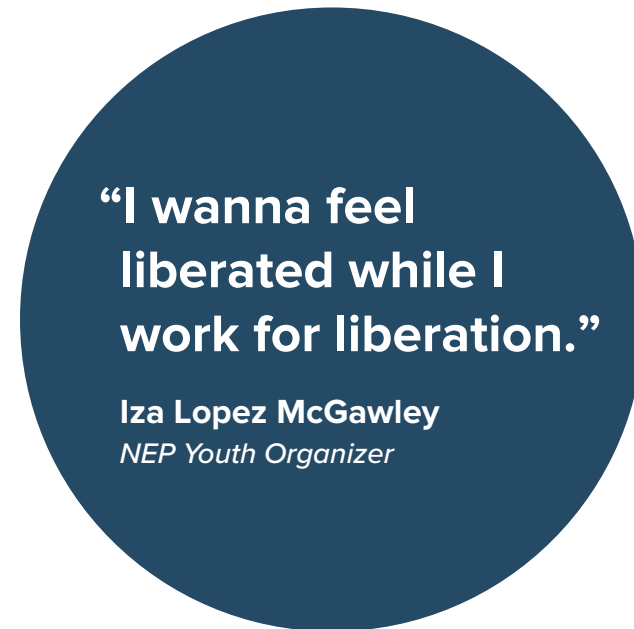
## Liberatory Design Mindsets

The [12 Liberatory Design Mindsets](#) offer a set of stances that groups can creatively use to set their intentions, build relationship and trust, deepen their dialogue, and act in ways that open up new possibilities. At their core, the Mindsets provide a way to interrupt groups' tendencies to default to traditional ways of working that reproduce inequity and interrupt dominant forms of power that play out in group processes. For youth-adult design partnerships, the Mindsets are a resource to help "level the playing field" and create more liberatory forms of collaboration. They can be used in many ways and in many contexts. (The Mindsets can also be used as a powerful complement to See–Engage–Act.)

Mindsets are used to surface particular beliefs, values and stances to ground and focus design practice. The 12 mindsets are:

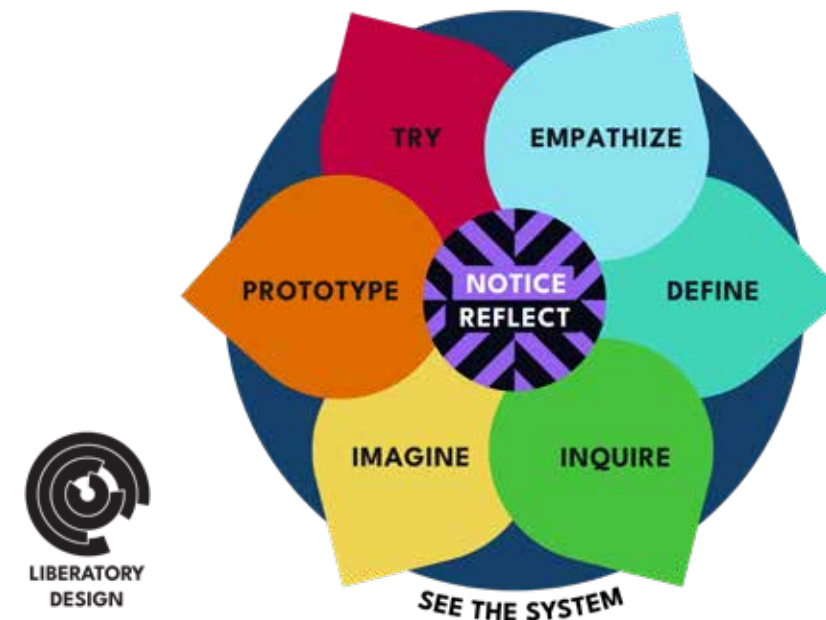
- |                                 |                                 |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| • Build relational trust        | • Recognize oppression          |
| • Focus on human values         | • Work with fear and discomfort |
| • Work to transform power       | • Take action to learn          |
| • Practice self-awareness       | • Embrace complexity            |
| • Seek liberatory collaboration | • Attend to healing             |
| • Exercise creative courage     | • Share don't sell              |

Read more about the mindsets and their descriptions in [Appendix B](#) and at [www.liberatorydesign.com](http://www.liberatorydesign.com).



## Liberatory Design Modes

The other component of Liberatory Design are the Modes. These provide a set of moves to guide a design process. People familiar with design thinking or human-centered design will recognize key features of those processes in Liberatory Design. In the kind of youth-adult design partnerships we describe here, it's critical to continually center the experience of marginalized students in our classroom, school or education system.



At the core of the Liberatory Design process are the Modes of **Notice** and **Reflect**. These modes help us to pause and interrupt the dominant cultural habits that contribute to inequity. They call us to regularly create space to notice ourselves as a team, notice our evolving situation, name problematic dynamics, set intentions, reflect on our work and process, and make adjustments as needed. The Mindsets are powerful resources to use in Notice and Reflect moments. Notice and Reflect are at the heart of Liberatory Design and integral to every step within the process.

Liberatory Design is fluid and emergent. A design process can begin with any mode and move in various directions. Here we lay out a hypothetical sequence so people newer to this kind of design process can learn a potential flow before learning to move through their process in non-linear ways.

Below are descriptions of each mode and some examples of how Youth-Adult Design Partnership work focused on student experience might look:



### Notice and Reflect

**Notice:** Practice self-awareness (identity, emotions, power) and situational awareness (context, people, history).

**Reflect:** Pause to reflect on actions, impact, emotions, relationship — and adjust intentions, direction, presence

#### Examples:

- A design team starts every meeting with Notice.
  - **Self-reflection:** How are we? How are we feeling about where we're at?
  - **Situational-reflection:** What's our situation now? Where do we need to go next?
  - What intention (and/or Mindsets) do we want to hold as we work today?
- Design team meeting processes involve frequent opportunities to reflect and regroup in what team members have been hearing from students.



### See the System

Recognize patterns of inequity, look at the system creating those — and identify a challenge to address.

#### Examples:

- A design team uses their student experience survey (e.g. UChicago Cultivate, Youth Truth) to see patterns of the experiences of marginalized youth in their system.
- A team focused on hiring teachers that are more representative of students racially and linguistically looks at retention data for teachers of color over time, recruitment materials, and current interview processes.
- A teacher team uses PERTS Elevate Student Experience Survey to see the impact of their classroom practices on students' experiences of belonging.



### Empathize

Listen to stories from those impacted by the challenge to better understand lived experiences in the system and to build relationship in the process. Observe people as they experience their regular day.

#### Examples:

- Site leaders meet with youth from various affinity groups in a high school to hear them share their experiences.
- Educators regularly do informal 1:1's with students to hear how they're experiencing school.
- Students at a middle school work with staff to co-design a listening campaign with a wide range of students about how they experience the school's discipline and behavior system.
- Teachers bring their Elevate survey responses back to their students to understand what their students are seeking more of and less of.
- Administrators shadow students during passing times and in the cafeteria to notice patterns in student-student and student-staff interactions.
- Adult educators share their own school experiences of marginalization with the students on their team.



### Define

Frame the equity challenge in sharper ways informed by See the System and Empathy work. Determine how complex the challenge is and if we need to understand it before we develop solutions. If the challenge is less complex (i.e. we have the expertise to reliably address it), we can potentially move to Imagine and Prototype.

#### Examples:

- A diverse group of youth who have experienced marginalization in their school meet to listen to each other and identify their shared, priority concerns.
- A design team looks at a set of demands from students and discusses which ones are less complex (more easily actionable) and more complex (and thus need to better understand before we design).



### Inquire

If the challenge is more complex, we need to make smaller safe-to-fail moves that help us both better understand the challenge and find a design direction.

#### Examples:

- Site leaders hold a meeting with BIPOC youth to more deeply understand the conditions contributing to the experiences of marginalization expressed by the students.
- A teacher makes small tweaks in some classroom routines to see if less engaged students respond well or not — and learns if that type of change is promising, or not.
- To explore the possibility of having students on hiring committees, student members of a design team ask peers what conditions would make that experience successful.



### Imagine

Get outside of your box and imagine “what if?!” What might success (e.g. greater equity) look like? What are possible ideas? What might we start designing?

#### Examples:

- Marginalized students share (while adults listen) what it would feel like to not experience bias and microaggressions — and how that would affect their engagement in school.
- Students, their teachers and administrators meet regularly to explore possible responses or solutions to the students’ demands.



### Prototype

Build rough versions of potential designs — to help you think and learn what the design might need to be.

#### Examples:

- Students and educators create a rough design of a possible activity that will be part of a larger session on microaggressions for the whole staff. Designing it enables them to imagine how different kinds of staff members might experience it.



### Try

Share the prototype in rough form with stakeholders in order to learn what’s promising and what’s not working so you can improve your design.

#### Example:

- Students share their draft microaggressions activity with other students for feedback, while educators do the same with several peers. They meet after to share what they learned and then work on redesigning the activity.



### Notice and Reflect

As you begin using or implementing what you design, circle back to the **various Modes** as needed (e.g. empathy listening with participants to inform further prototyping of adaptations) — guided by Notice and Reflect.



## Liberatory Design as an Emergent and Non-linear Process

The previous pages represent the Liberatory Design Modes in a linear sequence. But Liberatory Design processes don't generally proceed sequentially — instead they emerge organically from dialogue and listening to young people. It is important to remember that the process does not have to start from a set “beginning” and that it can be brought into work that's already in motion, if you use Notice and Reflect as a guide. Below are two examples.

### Example 1: Realizing the Need for Partnership Mid-Process

- **Prototype:** A school's Administrative Team has decided to re-design the school's discipline process to address racial disproportionality and perceived unfairness. They draft a new, more restorative process in the spring, to be implemented the following year.
- **Try:** The team has received feedback from some staff, but realizes they need student input. So they invite a group of mostly BIPOC students to a feedback session. While students appreciate the intention of the new policy, they point out several parts that feel particularly problematic. The team revises the policy based on this input.
- **Notice & Reflect:** Reflecting on their process so far, the team realizes there will continue to be much they don't “see” or anticipate, and that they need ongoing partnership with BIPOC students as they move into implementation. So, with several student leaders, they create a Youth-Adult Learning and Accountability team that focuses on student experiences with the new process to inform how the school responds to challenges that come up as the process gets implemented. They also create a way to compensate students for participating on this team. The Administrative Team will focus on staff experiences and capacity-building.
- **Empathize:** This new Learning and Accountability Team creates a strategy for ongoing listening to students: How can we better understand how students (particularly BIPOC students) are experiencing this new discipline process?
- **See the System:** In addition, the Learning and Accountability Team plans to monitor data around referrals and suspensions, as well as explore how to learn from parent perspectives on this more restorative process. The Administrative Team looks for patterns around how different staff are responding to the changes and what needs are arising.
- **Imagine:** Together the two teams have a longer “step-back” session after Fall semester to **Notice & Reflect** on what they're seeing and to think into the future — “Now that we are seeing some initial and partially promising results, what can we now dream is possible that we hadn't even imagined before?”

### Example 2: Working with Student Demands

A team of youth and adults is working with a set of demands from students (e.g. create gender neutral bathrooms; develop the cultural awareness and responsiveness of all teachers, not just a few). Before taking action, the group can **Define** how complex or simple each demand is to address. They might pick one to focus on that's more simple and move straight to **Prototyping** strategies. This will signal that real and visible action is happening in response to the demands. And then they might pick one that's more complex and engage in **Empathy** listening to better understand student experiences that have led to that demand, as well as doing work in the **Inquire** mode that allows them to make small moves that give them a better sense of where to go next.

These examples illustrate the organic ways such processes tend to play out in real life. Change efforts from inside a school or system don't move at a consistent pace. They get slowed down by resistance, inertia, and the complexity of work that's “against the grain.” Alternately, the work can suddenly accelerate and deepen, often when real student experiences and pain gets heard, when adults genuinely listen and engage, and when a group galvanizes around a common purpose and commitment to change the status quo. And sometimes conditions beyond the team create openings, e.g. resources become available or system leaders decide to support the work in new ways.

In reality, at the start, youth-adult design partnerships often emerge in organic ways, with one or more adult educators simply listening to the experiences of marginalized students in their context and sensing their desire to take action and work to influence change. The energy and impetus for change often starts in small ways, and generally doesn't start with some already-structured process (like Liberatory Design) in mind. Below is a story that illustrates this.

## A District Liberatory Design Story

Below is an example of how youth-adult design partnership work in one school district emerged in organic ways over time. Liberatory Design mindsets and modes are mapped onto the different “chapters” of the story to show what design elements were at play and to illustrate the non-linear nature of the process.

The story over time	Modes, Mindsets at play
In the summer, high school students participate in a virtual Youth Liberation Symposium online with students from across the country. They listen to each other, feel heard and articulate a set of priority actions (demands) for their schools and district.	<b>Mindsets:</b> Recognize Oppression <b>Modes:</b> Empathize, Define
After hearing the youth priorities in the fall, a teacher starts listening to the experiences of BIPOC students at his high school. He creates a consistent time to meet, and builds trusting relationships that support the students to name their priority demands in their high school. They identify the need for a transparent process for responding to microaggressions and hate speech.	<b>Mindsets:</b> Build Relational Trust, Recognize Oppression <b>Modes:</b> Empathize, Define
This teacher listens both to understand his students’ experiences and to build relationships that could help lead to change. Both the teacher and the students know they need each other to make change possible — and will be stronger if working together.	
The teacher and students request to meet with the principal to voice their concerns and to learn how to effect changes in the site level systems. Over several meetings, working together, they begin to draft new possible procedures.	<b>Mindsets:</b> Work to Transform Power, Seek Liberatory Collaboration <b>Modes:</b> Inquire, Imagine
Students, working with their host teacher and the principal, draft and test a new reporting process to support greater transparency and trust for students who experience microaggressions and hate speech.	<b>Mindsets:</b> Work With Fear and Discomfort <b>Modes:</b> Prototype

The story over time	Modes, Mindsets at play
The district administration then supports listening efforts at the other two high schools in the district. Site level youth-adult design teams are established at all three high schools and a middle school.	<b>Mindsets:</b> Work to Transform Power <b>Modes:</b> Empathize
Students at the initial high school now want to know more about the concerns and demands of students across the district. They want to know if there is any truth to the community’s perception that conditions are better at the other high schools. They advocate for a summit with youth from all three schools — so that together they can share experiences, look for patterns, and set priorities for work across the schools. After much advocacy, the district provides resources for this summit to occur.	<b>Mindsets:</b> Seek Liberatory Collaboration, Work to Transform Power <b>Modes:</b> See the System
At the summit, students share perceptions of their respective schools and connect around similarities across schools. They choose a focus for joint action: identifying changes needed in the district’s curriculum and teaching approach to addressing sexual harassment aligned with Erin’s Law.	<b>Mindsets:</b> Recognize Oppression <b>Modes:</b> Empathize, Define
They bring a set of demands to their youth-adult “Circle Team.” The adults listen with empathy as students share their experiences and hopes, and are authentic and vulnerable when sharing back what they heard.	<b>Mindsets:</b> Take Action to Learn <b>Modes:</b> Empathize, Define, Imagine, Prototype
Together, the group does sensemaking and imagining of possibilities together and launches a plan for taking action to try new curriculum and teaching approaches around sexual harassment in the Fall.	

# Conclusion

Though youth-adult co-design work is complex, at its heart the imperative is simple and clear, “Listen to and partner with young people, and especially young people who are part of marginalized groups, to honor their agency to co-create the conditions needed for their own well-being. Young people have much to teach us about creating identity safe, culturally sustaining, humanized spaces in which we can all heal, learn, and grow.” (Osta 2023). As educators and students, in partnership, stay grounded in this purpose, the work can move forward. Together, in creative relationships across power and difference, we can forge an adaptive path towards real action and real changes that bring about more equitable student experiences in classrooms, schools and systems.



**“That willingness to be vulnerable, to take action — even when and especially when we don’t have all of the answers, is a critical practice when leading for equity in complex systems such as school districts, in which solutions to equity challenges can rarely be known in advance and where ongoing innovation, reflection, and adjustments are required to make progress.”**

**Kathleen Osta and Ashley Kannan**  
*Partner With BIPOC Youth to Make School Better For Everyone*  
(Osta 2022)

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.

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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

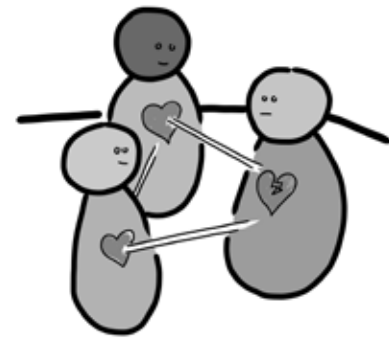
Adopt district and state policies that advance equity by centering students' experiences, voices, and humanity.

# Appendix B: Liberatory Design Mindsets



## Attend to Healing

The effects of oppression are complex and often hinder our ability to take action. Integrate ongoing healing processes when designing for equity.



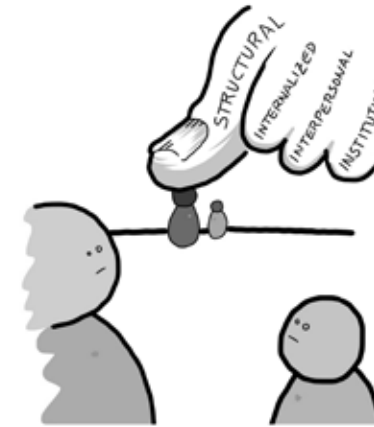
## Build Relational Trust

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



## Exercise Creative Courage

Every human is creative. Creative courage allows us to push through self-doubt and creative fragility so we can design bravely against oppression.



## Recognize Oppression

Learn to see how oppression, in its many forms, has shaped designs that lead to inequity.



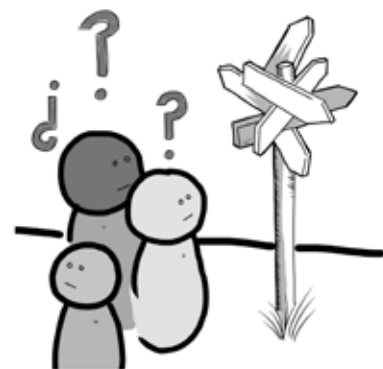
## Seek Liberatory Collaboration

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



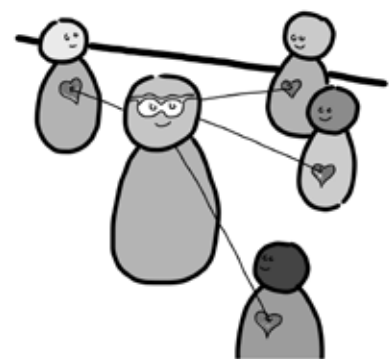
## Share, Don't Sell

Practice transparency and non-attachment in sharing ideas with collaborators.



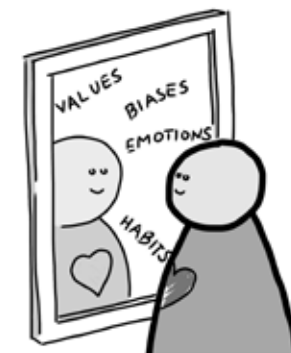
## Embrace Complexity

Recognize that equity challenges are complex and messy. Stay open to possibility. Powerful design emerges from the mess, not from avoiding it.



## Focus on Human Values

Get to know the community we are designing with in as many different ways as possible. Anchor all of our decision-making in human values.



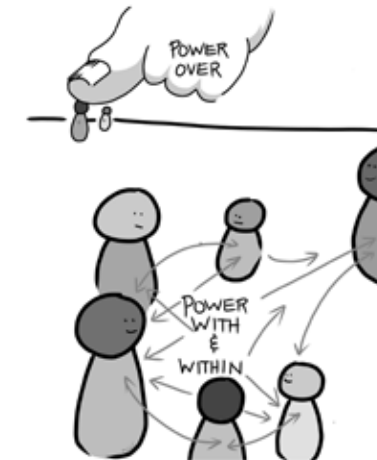
## Practice Self-Awareness

Who we are determines how we design. Looking in the “mirror” reveals what we see, how we relate, and how our perspectives impact our practice.



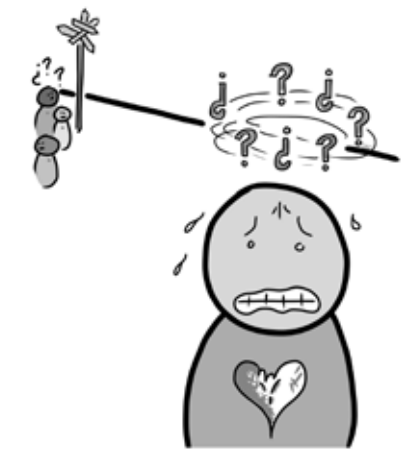
## Take Action to Learn

The complexity of oppression must be addressed with courageous ongoing action. Experiment as a way to think and learn — without attachment to outcome.



## Work to Transform Power

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



## Work with Fear and Discomfort

Fear and discomfort are anticipated parts of equity design work. Identifying the sources of such feelings offers us a context to work through them and continue to design.





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