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Commentary

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Why Speculative? A Future-Oriented Case for Youth Labeled as Disabled

Kris D. Gutiérrez, PhD[1]

Keywords
relational infrastructure, prolepsis; re-mediation, utopian methodologies, ecological

Introduction

An important turn in education, particularly in the learning sciences, is the focus on proleptic or future-oriented approaches to research and design, including speculative (Garcia & Mirra, 2023) and utopian methodologies (Brown & Cole, 2001; Gutiérrez, 2018; Gutiérrez, et al., 2020; Rajala et al., 2025), with the intent of moving beyond approaches to inquiry that take questions of practice, policy, and histories of peoples and land as settled. These future-oriented conceptions have long histories in Afrofuturism, especially the work of Octavia Butler (1993), with utopian methodologies obtaining in social theories, including the work of Ernst Bloch (1986) and having had a resurgence across disciplines—from the humanities to studies of social movements (Sannino, 2024). The articles in this special issue, "Speculative Visions for the Education of Learners at the Intersections of Disability and Language," look to speculative frames and sensibilities to engage and reimagine research, policies, and practices relevant to youth labeled with disabilities (LWD). In doing so, this collection of essays focuses attention on a population of students historically underexamined in learning disabilities research—that is, multiply categorized youth labeled with disabilities who are multilingual learners from nondominant communities. This is such an important contribution. It makes sense, then, that the authors seek methods and analytical frames that resist the binaries and aim for complexity, pluralities in identities, and historicized understandings of the myriad, complicated, expansive, and joyful ways youth labeled with a disability live in the world.

In this commentary, I ask: Why speculative? What are its affordances in engaging and re-mediating the complex infrastructure with the LWD population? In particular, how does a speculative analytic help to create a new relational infrastructure in special

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education ecology(ies) that opens up new understandings of people, practices, and possibilities?

Why Speculative?

Paraphrasing Leont'ev, U.S. institutions are preoccupied with explaining how children came to be who they are, instead of seeking to understand how children can become what they are not yet (as cited in Cole, 1979, p. 151, and discussed in Gutiérrez et al., 2017). This proleptic orientation to what is "not yet" is also understood as the mechanism of learning that brings "the end to the beginning" (Cole, 1996, p. 183). My own approach to participatory research, social design–based experiments (SDBEs) (Gutiérrez, 2008, 2016), as with a number of essays in this issue aspiring to this approach, seeks to advance a method of inquiry that is organized around the possible. Thus, I think it is useful here to provide a brief discussion of the speculative, future-oriented orientation of social design–based inquiry, as anchored in cultural historical theories of learning and development (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1987, 2001; Leont'ev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978)—the predominant theoretical orientation of this issue. SDBEs, with their proleptic aims, involve historical actors who "invoke the past in order to re-mediate it so that it becomes a resource for current and future action" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 154; see also Gutiérrez, 2005; Gutiérrez et al., 2009; Gutiérrez, Becker, et al., 2019).

As my colleagues and I have written (Gutiérrez et al., 2020), SDBEs evolved with conceptions of utopia rooted in traditions of inquiry in sociology, notably the work of Levitas (2013), whose emphasis on "human flourishing in [the context] of possible futures" (Levitas, 2013, p. xi) similarly involves "re-reading the present from the standpoint of the future, transforming it into the history of the future" (p. 218). This conception of utopia is particularly relevant to SDBEs, with their focus on educational transformation and just social futures (New London Group, 1996) for immigrant, translingual, and otherwise nondominant communities and has particular resonance for research, policy, and practice relevant to the education and lives of youth labeled as disabled.

This frame of who youth can become rather than frames that rely on static or short-term visions of who they are as measured by labels, categories, and cultural conceptions of what counts as normative—and even IEPs, which often envision a narrow and limited trajectory for youth—animates the essays in this volume (see González, Pacheco, Hong, Lor, & Roberts; Lim & Ko; and Pacheco, 2026). Consider, for example, González et al.'s and Pacheco's (2026) uses of the testimonio as a "future-making" tool for envisioning and enacting children's present in the future, providing a much-needed and nuanced empirical account of bilingual youth labeled with disabilities. Understanding how their focal youth made sense of their educational experiences helped families and researchers co-construct a present and future vision for restructured and reimagined school systems.

Within this view, we would expect to find students stretching against normative conceptions, revealing ingenuity, the playful imagination, translingual and embodied sensemaking, and complexity in youth's as well as teachers' practices. And here I note a key contribution of this special issue: If we are keenly observant participants and observe LWDs across a range of events, practices, and contexts, we would capture a more expansive picture of youth's practices, their intersectional identities, and their possibilities (Gutiérrez, 2023, 2025a). In short, the authors in this issue call for understanding the plurality of who LWDs are and, thus, reimagine infrastructures that support students in the present for the future (see paper by Artiles, Batz, Cuba, & Alvarado, 2026). Importantly, SDBEs' methodological imperatives direct us to multisited inquiry in which people's learning is understood within and across activity systems (Gutiérrez, 2020; Gutiérrez, Higgs, et al., 2019; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014), creating opportunity to capture the multiplicities of practices and ways of being, learning, and doing that become evident when we become ethnographers of movement (Gutiérrez, 2023; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014), that is, as we participate with people across a range of venues. In this issue, the authors show youth's possibilities (as well as those of adults who interact with them)—from Roberto's everyday home life to the school setting (Pacheco, 2026), to reimagining afterschool spaces where teachers can imagine anew an expansive biliteracy context for multilingual children with and without disabilities where they engage in new forms of biliteracy without being racialized or otherwise marginalized,[1] and in which their teachers could develop more expansive conceptions of youth and their possibilities (Martínez-Álvarez, Arana, & Conlon Macías, 2026). Taken together, I view these studies as "small scale instantiations or realization of possible futures" (Gutiérrez, 2005).

Relevant to this issue's articles, the iterative nature of SDBEs also requires a reframing of what counts as outcomes and endpoints, as the objects of utopian and participatory inquiry are better understood as "moving horizons of possibility" (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 331). Utopian inquiry's provisional nature (Rajala et al., 2025) invites proleptic pedagogies and designs organized around expansive forms of social dreaming (Espinoza, 2008, 2009)—a kind of worldmaking in which a collective imaginings of a more just education and social life—*both in the here and now and in the future*—are made central (Gutiérrez, 2025b). Mirra and Artiles's (2026) argument about why speculative is instructive here. Mirra notes the influence of fiction, notably Butler's (1993) work, on her understanding and generative use of the speculative and the importance of thinking about the past differently. As Mirra notes,

> I was very influenced by the idea that fiction is a way not to escape reality, but rather to push the boundaries of reality by thinking about what we can gain creatively from what has happened in the past and the present. So it's not an escape, but a deeper engagement to craft something new. (Mirra & Artiles, 2026)[2]

Here using the past as a resource to move between the present and the future helps make evident and productively preserve the tension and the need to move from abstract notions of utopian ideals to concrete processes, designs, and infrastructuring, what

Levitas (2013), drawing on Bloch (1986), referred to as "a move from the purely fantastical to the genuinely possible" (p. 6) (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Lim and Ko's (2026) future-making redesign, for example, draws on Garcia and Mirra (2023) to create mediational artifacts that support the realization of teacher dreaming through what they describe as a "disciplined rehearsal of educational worlds." In this speculative pedagogical design, healing, thriving, and humanizing learning for multilinguals with disabilities enables youth to thrive.

Following Wartofsky (1979), creating a relational infrastructure involves learning to see historically and relating this process to the practices of "picturing and modeling" new social futures (Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 189; see also Gutiérrez, 2011 and Artiles et al., 2026). Of consequence, seeing historically in the present facilitates imaginings of the ongoing re-mediation of functional systems, of infrastructures. We have written to this point. Informed by critical feminist sociology of science and science studies perspectives as analytical frames (Bowker & Star, 2000; Hall et al., 2002), SDBE's work focuses on "how the world gets built materially, symbolically, and culturally to advance some forms of knowledge and not others" (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 332). Within this perspective, it is the relational nature of human life and inquiry that surfaces as the most salient aspect of infrastructures and "infrastructuring" (Penuel, 2019; see Artiles et al.'s analytical frame in this issue to study intersecting disability/language differences). Utopian approaches in social design–based experiments underscore the importance of developing historicized and long-term relations of reciprocity and mutual exchange in interaction, across practices and roles, across the lifespan of the "social experiment" to build with partners what I call *relational infrastructures* (Gutiérrez, 2025a) that are fundamental to transformative forms of sustainability and, importantly, relational equity (DiGiacomo & Gutiérrez, 2015; see also Gutiérrez, 2015 and Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). Shea and Jurow's (2020, p. 539) description is useful here,

> [W]e treat infrastructure as: embedded in social arrangements, extending beyond a single practice, a target of learning for newcomers to a practice, and connected to the values of the associated practice in which it is a part. As these authors explain, infrastructure is a relational concept that is nearly invisible when it is functioning well for a particular type of person to serve a particular purpose. When it breaks down or is seen as getting in the way of desired goals, one can become aware of how it is put together, whom it serves well, and who suffers as a result of its constitution. (Star & Ruhleder, 1996)

This is the ethic that authors in this issue make central in their work with multilingual youth who are also labeled as having disabilities; in doing so, they use this ethic to push on extant policies, practices, and dispositions in ways that make the relational nature of robust and dynamic notions of culture and learning organic to practice and situated materially in the everyday lives of LWD (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). A question I have previously posed to literacy educators is relevant in this domain: How do

we make visible and empirically account for the additional developmental demands that multilingual learners labeled as disabled must negotiate "as they move across home, school, and other community settings and interact with family members, teachers, peers, and other adults who also bring 'sedimented' features of their life's activities and experiences to bear on their ways of interacting and participating?" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 151; see also Gutiérrez, 2005).

Conclusion

Although not explicit across the papers, there is an ecological orientation to the work advanced by the collection of authors. I have argued extensively about the affordances of an ecological approach in which culture is dynamic and always contested:

> I use the term ecology, mindful of the debate about and the limitations of existing theorizations of the concept of "ecology" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cole & Gajjamaschko, 2010; Packer, 2010a, 2010b; Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995) and its problematic bounded concentric circles and nested-Russian-dolls metaphor. Instead, as Packer (2010a) notes, the ever-changing forms of life and the different positions and practices that people occupy blur life's boundaries, so that rather than concentric circles, "its linkages will be more like tangled roots" (p. 24). (Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 188)

Drawing on Walker and Salt's ecological resilience framework (2006), my work, broadly speaking, has been concerned with re-mediating and imagining new systems and ecologies that are resilient, sustainable, and transformative; ecologies that are designed for adaptability, variability, and relationality—design features important to the ecosystems' ability to withstand disruptions and tensions, especially those important to transformative change (Gutiérrez, 2025a, p. 2). As they are iterated over time, this issue's emergent speculative projects could function as tertiary artifacts (Wartofsky, 1979), that is, "imaginative artifacts that color the way we see the 'actual' world, providing a tool for changing current practice" (Cole, 1996, p. 121; see also Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 195). I paraphrase questions informed by Wartosky's (1979) argument that "perception has a history" (p. 191)—questions I raised in 2011 and 2016 and still find relevant here:

> if perception is historically and culturally mediated, as Wartofsky has argued, then we must ask ourselves, What perceptions of learning ecologies are we imagining for our [LWD] children? What perceptions underlie our research and design-based interventions? And what role can education research play in advancing a more expansive social and pedagogical imagination for all youth [especially LWD youth] across all schools and communities, locally, nationally, and internationally? (Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 195; see also Gutiérrez, 2011 for its initial discussion)

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Notes

1. See Artiles (2019) for an elaborated discussion of how issues of equity and race mediate the schooling and social life of learners labeled as disabled.
2. See Antero Garcia and Nicole Mirra (2023) for an expansive treatment of the speculative.

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