

FOCUS on Research

Newsletter of the



In This Issue

- President's Message
- CEC-DR Diversity Committee Spotlight
- Finance and Long-Range Planning
- CEC-DR Families Research Spotlight
- CEC-DR Resources
- CEC-DR Public Policy News



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President's Message

Look Back, Imagine Forward

Audrey Sorrells, PhD
Texas Christian University

I am honored to serve as the incoming president of the Council for Exceptional Children Division for Research (CEC-DR). I acknowledge and am deeply grateful to my predecessor, Wendy Oakes, for her mentorship and friendship, and her outstanding leadership and contributions to DR during her presidency, and to Chris Lemons, past president, for his commitment and efforts to advance diversity and inclusion in the DR leadership. I believe that shared power, voice, and responsibility are critical aspirations for advancing the mission and goals of DR. Wendy and Chris, along with Kathleen Lane, have provided extraordinary mentorship and support during my tenure on the presidential line and board.

No one achieves singularly, and there are individuals on the board who carry tremendous responsibility for the success of DR, including the DR Executive Board and committee members. I want to thank board members for their amazing contributions and partnership, as well as recognize our newly elected officers of the executive leadership: Emily Solari (president-elect), Jessica Toste (vice president), and Marie Hugh (secretary). Anne Foegen continues in her position as treasurer. I would also like to express the division's appreciation and gratitude to Bree Jimenez (2014–2023)

and Michelle Cumming (2017–2023) for their long-term commitment to the members and mission of DR and the individuals we serve as they step down from the board to fulfill other leadership roles in CEC. I will miss their presence and insights. A full list of the DR board and committee members can be found [here](#).

Look Back: Mission, Commitment, and Achievements

I begin my term combing the annals of the past, reflecting on special education research and DR. Perhaps I chose to start with historical reflections, honestly and critically, with a deep desire to know the past—not to stay in the past, but to ensure I don't stay there. The mission of DR, and its long-standing commitment, is a good place to revisit and often, to remind ourselves of the intent of the division to be devoted to the advancement of research related to the education of individuals with disabilities and/or who are gifted, and to celebrate the achievements and impressive accumulation of knowledge in the field. The goals of CEC-DR are clear: *include* (italicized for emphasis) the promotion of *equal* partnership with practitioners in designing, conducting, and interpreting *research*

(continues on page 2)

President's Message (continued from page 1)

in special education. A cursory look, because I have many more hours to examine and reflect, has led me to two preliminary observations. First, I am following the footsteps of some great researchers, practitioners, and leaders in special education. Since 1987, and for more than three decades, the division has been led by individuals who were motivated and persistent in pursuing the advancement of research for improving educational outcomes of individuals with disabilities. Second, DR has aimed for progressive mission and vision: advance “research that centers the most pressing educational needs for all children and families from diverse, marginalized, vulnerable, and underrepresented backgrounds” (amended and approved by the DR Executive Board on February 12, 2021; approved by DR membership on March 12, 2021), an overarching goal of success for DR. I am encouraged by the original spirit and intent of DR, and I believe the mission establishes the bedrock for reimagining and progressive action. I will be talking about this more in future messages.

As I think about the spirit and intent of DR in its pursuit of knowledge generation and dissemination, I believe it is important to keep the mission and goals before us. While not always transparent, special education, by law and promise, is to guarantee equitable access to specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of every eligible individual with an exceptionality, and one aim of special education research is to ensure the field is replete with evidence-informed practice, policy, and programs that are effective and appropriate for all persons with exceptionalities. As we consider and are responsive to our mission and values, it is almost impossible to not address students’ unique diversity, equity, and inclusion. Even as our terminology and methods have evolved over time, our mission and commitment have remained firm—to attend to difference in a meaningful, equal, and equitable pursuit. DR’s mission remains a worthy endeavor, and it is my desire to do what I can to enhance our work and inspire division members to remain committed to our purpose. We must continue to prioritize our aims, focus our energies, and maximize our reach and impact.

I’ve decided that it is necessarily appropriate to acknowledge the achievements of our forerunners, for they are a great cloud of witnesses to what has worked and

faltered, even failed. It is not prudent for the division or for those we serve to rest on the laurels of our past or ignore the missteps, missed opportunities, inequities and exclusion, and the sobering reality that our work has been a liberator for many but an oppressor for others. Our challenge is keeping front and center what we are providing for so many individuals with disabilities, particularly groups that have historically failed to achieve satisfactorily; subsequently, poor outcomes are still a reality for millions of exceptional individuals and their families. For example, consider Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s admonition of America’s broken promise of civil rights to all Americans but particularly segregated African Americans (see Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 1963). Similarly, Sharon Vaughn and colleagues, in their research more than 25 years ago, revealed “broken promises” in delivering appropriate reading instruction for students with reading disabilities. Both have resulted in decades of research to redress such social and educational disparities and inequities.

Looking back with the hope of reimagining forward is a key to celebrating the past, engaging the present, and pressing forward to the future. The critical lens of the past can tell us where we stand today and how we might move forward. We can learn why systems consistently work for most students yet persistently fail for some. The past can be chaotic and contemptuous, but it is also filled with warning signs. I hope that we can continue this conversation because denied learning is surely a formula of unintended replication and consequences. *The Friends of DR*, a new advisory council, can serve a valuable role of honoring the history of DR and special education research while supporting efforts to ensure that the division’s work addresses timely issues related to the field of special education as we transition into the second century of the Council for Exceptional Children.

Imagine Forward

DR has never been more relevant and important for those of us in the field than in our present time. There are numerous challenges we must continue to address, and there are abundant opportunities to learn, teach, mentor, and share. The changes around us—whether social, political, technological, scientific, economic, or otherwise—require that we navigate through new

(continues on page 3)

President's Message (continued from page 2)

and increasingly complex systemic landscapes, which profoundly impact students, educators, and our communities, and we need more data and understanding to respond to unique needs. The division has, under the past three presidents, imagined forward, coming closer to fulfilling the mission and vision of DR. I will continue to focus our efforts on diversity, collaboration, building networks, and expanding our storytelling. The division committee chairs have been leading efforts to address these and other goals, and I hope in future messages to share what we are doing and also expand opportunities for more input from division members. Here are the CEC goals and DR-specific, targeted objectives that I hope to explore with you in the coming year:

CEC Goal 1: Develop and support an effective and diverse workforce of special education professionals.

- Support and advance multiple research perspectives and designs that consider a range of diverse identities.
- Support and advance research conducted with schools, families, and communities to increase the representation of professionals.
- Support and advance the translation of research to improve the recruitment, preparation, and retention of education professionals with a range of diverse identities.

CEC Goal 2: Intentionally embed diversity, equity, inclusivity, and accessibility within CEC.

- Actively pursue the accessibility and translation of research and public engagement with education professionals, families, communities, and policy makers.
- Elevate research by scholars from underrepresented groups.
- Center research improving the education access, experiences, and outcomes of BIPOC students with disabilities.
- Intentionally prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusivity in research from design to dissemination.
- Provide ongoing professional development to support researchers in utilizing advanced, rig-

orous research methods to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusivity.

CEC Goal 3: Increase the impact of CEC's policy agenda for education professionals and for individuals with disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

- Advocate for increased National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER) funding to improve outcomes for young people with disabilities.
- Diversify approaches to advocacy: with small, heterogeneous state teams, DR student engagement, and effective communication.
- Leverage strategic partnerships (COSSA, Friends of IES, TED, university governmental relations staff) to increase funding for special education research.

CEC Goal 4: CEC as a globally recognized leader in the field of special education.

- Promote DR as the leading resource for special education researchers.
- Expand membership to include diverse geographic representation.
- Enhance the value of DR to members and other invested parties.

Thank you for your outstanding service. We are following giant footsteps. I am inspired by the commitment to CEC-DR, the field, and all their achievements. Indeed, the growth, visibility, and impact of DR have been propelled collectively by individuals, past presidents and members of the DR Board and Executive Board. I look forward to continuing this important work towards fulfilling the mission of DR. Do not hesitate to let me know your thoughts and bring to the division current and relevant news and insights, as well as your own research stories, at audrey.sorrells@tcu.edu. I am excited about our future, and I am confident that we will be steadfast in addressing the pressing challenges. In the next year our accomplishments will be many—within DR, as well as in the larger special education and disability conversation and community. ■

CEC-DR Diversity Committee Spotlight



Federico Waitoller, PhD
University of Illinois at Chicago

The second episode of the *DiveIn* podcast is out! While special education students encompass a wide range of racial, cultural, linguistic, and gender backgrounds, the special education

teaching force continues to be mostly White and female.

In the newest episode of *DiveIn*, we talk to Dr. Christopher J. Cormier about how to diversify the special education teaching force. Dr. Cormier also talks about his experiences as a Black special education teacher and provides recommendations for preparation programs that can nurture and develop justice-conscious special educators from minoritized backgrounds.



You can access this and other episodes of *DiveIn* at <https://divein.alitu.com/>. You can also subscribe via *Spotify* and *Apple podcasts*. Please help us to spread the word and share it through your peer networks and social media! ■



Finance and Long-Range Planning



Anne Foegen, PhD
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Committee Seeks Members!

DR members (including student members!) are invited to join the Finance and Long-Range Planning Committee (FLRP). FLRP is re-activating now that our financial status has stabilized, and we are currently exploring putting some of our DR funds to work to generate additional revenue to support DR priorities. If you are interested in joining the committee or have any questions, please reach out to David Lee (davidlee@psu.edu) or Anne Foegen (afiegen@umn.edu).

CEC-DR Families Research Spotlight



Kathleen Kyzar, PhD
Texas Christian University



Tracy Gershwin, PhD
University of Northern Colorado



Shana Haines, PhD
University of Vermont

As a committee, we often discuss the importance of methodology to our mission, but we have not yet written about it for this newsletter. Our committee's mission is threefold:

- (a) to develop and propose mechanisms for including individuals with disabilities and their families in research and dissemination processes;
- (b) to promote ongoing communication between research, family, and practitioner communities by assisting the research community in understanding critical issues for families of individuals with disabilities and by assisting families in accessing and interpreting research outcomes related to individuals with disabilities; and
- (c) to foster a research agenda that addresses critical issues regarding families of individuals with disabilities.

Conducting research methodology that enables us to engage with and respond to individuals with disabilities and their families is central to our mission.

We want to draw your attention to a book that helps us conduct such research, *Humanizing Methodologies in Educational Research: Centering Non-dominant Communities*, written by Cynthia Reyes, Shana Haines, and Kelly Clark/Keefe, and published by Teachers College

Families Research Spotlight (continued from page 4)

Press (2021). This book is for educational researchers interested in conducting ethically sound qualitative studies with diverse populations, including individuals with refugee or immigrant backgrounds and people with disabilities. The authors describe research practices that humanize both participants in the research and the researchers themselves, which comes to life through honest and deep discussion of a research study that involves families with refugee backgrounds, their children, school personnel, and liaisons. Authors provide recommendations for working within the limitations of Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards, communicating with participants via cultural and linguistic liaisons, researching with student researchers, and creating reciprocity with research participants. Of special interest to CEC-DR, guest contributors Alexandra Reed and Grace Francis propose a five-step process to disrupt traditional research approaches when conducting research about individuals with significant disabilities. Reed and Francis' approach aims to enrich research and its outcomes by including individuals with significant disabilities at each step of the research process.

As we continually seek inclusiveness and comprehensive accuracy of our research, it is critical that we habitually consider the ways we conduct ourselves as researchers and the outcomes of our comportment. Reading, considering, and discussing texts like this one can help us constantly shape our research practices to ensure they are ethically sound and true to the voices of participants, especially those with disabilities and their families. ■

References

Reyes, C. C., Haines, S. J., & Clark/Keefe, K. (2021). *Humanizing methodologies in educational research: Centering non-dominant communities*. Teachers College Press. <https://www.tcpres.com/humanizing-methodologies-in-educational-research-9780807765548>



CEC-DR Resources

Please check out the DR website frequently for podcasts and other resources such as the newest OPEN SCIENCE Briefs (#7 Material Sharing, #8 Peer Review). See below for the links to the podcasts.

- DiveIn Podcast: <https://cecdr.org/divein-podcast>
- SPED Legacy Podcast: <https://cecdr.org/sped-legacy-podcast>
- Find the OPEN SCIENCE Briefs here: <https://cecdr.org/cec-dr-publications/open-science> ■



CEC-DR Public Policy News

Reminder! DR is a Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) member, which allows you to sign up for member-only updates.

You can access more information about COSSA and sign up for updates on their website at <https://cossa.org/> ■