

FOCUS on Research

Newsletter of the



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President's Message

Advancing Special Education Research: A Call for Unity and Innovation

Jessica R. Toste, PhD, *The University of Texas at Austin*

As president of CEC's Division for Research (CEC-DR), I love connecting with people who are deeply committed to advancing the field of special education. Our shared mission of fostering high-quality, impactful research is more critical now than ever before, as the landscape of special education continues to evolve in response to the changing educational landscape.

Research is the backbone of progress in special education. It allows us to identify effective practices, challenge inequities, and advocate for evidence-based policies that improve the lives of students with disabilities, their families, and the professionals who serve them. In a field as dynamic and complex as ours, research not only provides answers but also raises new questions that inspire innovation and growth. The work of our members ensures that we remain steadfast in our commitment to equity, access, and opportunity for all learners.

We are at a pivotal moment for special education. Potential changes in federal priorities and policies could significantly impact how research is funded, conducted, and applied in practice. This is a time for us to stand united, advocating for the centrality of research in shaping the future of special education. Your support—whether through membership, participation in our events, or contributions to our initiatives—is essential as we navigate these changes.

The future of special education research depends on cultivating the next generation of leaders. CEC-DR is committed to supporting early career scholars, doctoral students, and emerging researchers by creating opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and professional development. Your involvement—whether through serving on committees, leading initiatives, or offering your mentorship—is vital to sustaining and expanding our impact.

As part of our ongoing efforts to strengthen CEC-DR, we continue to take a comprehensive look at our bylaws and procedures. This process is more than a routine update; it is an opportunity to ensure that our organizational practices align with our mission, values, and the evolving needs of our membership. Transparency, inclusivity, and adaptability are guiding this work to ensure that CEC-DR plays a role in the field for years to come.

I want to express my sincere gratitude for your dedication to CEC-DR and the field of special education. The expertise, creativity, and commitment of those in the special education community are the driving forces behind our collective success. I look forward to connecting with many of you at the 2025 CEC Convention in Baltimore, Maryland! ■

Mixed Methods: Opportunities and Challenges for Special Education Researchers



Jenny Root, PhD, BCBA
Associate Professor of Special Education
Affiliate Faculty, Florida Center for Reading Research
Florida State University

There is increasing interest in the utility of mixed methods research for exploring complexities of educational practices and outcomes in special education (Corr et al., 2021; Love et al., 2022). Mixed methods research is a distinctive research methodology that Creswell (2015) defines as the “collection, analysis, and integration of ‘both’ quantitative and qualitative data” (p. 2). Federal funding agencies such as the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) are adding explicit statements in their requests for applications that encourage use of “a mixed methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative methods for all project types, as appropriate” (NCSE, 2024, p. 4). This reflects recommendations from the National Academies 2022 consensus report, *The Future of Education Research at IES: Advancing Equity-Oriented Science*. The report highlighted mixed methods as a mechanism for ensuring research findings are relevant and applicable across populations and settings. In other words, integrating quantitative measurements with qualitative insights may enable us to better understand “what works, for whom, under what conditions.” This article describes three opportunities and corresponding challenges special education researchers should consider regarding conducting mixed methods research.

Opportunity #1: Expanded Research Questions

Most research published in special education is *mono-method*, meaning research questions can be answered with just quantitative or qualitative data. Although uncommon in special education, *multimethod* research uses quantitative and qualitative data to answer separate yet related research questions. The feature that distinguishes *mixed methods* from *multimethod* research is the integra-

tion or mixing of text (qualitative) and numerical (quantitative) data sets. As a result, mixed methods research has potential for analytic density that has “the depth of qualitative understanding with the reach of quantitative techniques” (Fielding, 2012, p. 124).

Mixed methods research designs enable methodologically rigorous investigation of research questions that would otherwise go unanswered. By using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, complex issues can be understood from multiple perspectives. Although necessary for establishing patterns and generalizing outcomes, quantitative data cannot fully capture the contextual factors that shape human behavior and experiences. On the other hand, the rich and detailed insights into individual experiences generated by qualitative data are not sufficient for determining broader trends or causal relationships. Just as quantitative and qualitative research methods ask different types of questions that require different types of data, mixed methods designs have unique research questions and processes for integration of quantitative and qualitative data sets. The added value of integrating the data sets which results in new insights is often conceptualized as “ $1 + 1 = 3$ ” (Fetters & Freshwater, 2015).

Mixed methods research questions are as unique in both form and intent as quantitative and qualitative research questions (Creswell, 2021). When done well, mixed methods designs can address the weaknesses inherent in mono-method approaches. They can address complex research problems by synthesizing numerical data with rich, descriptive insights. The process of integrating or mixing data sets (the “1s”) results in a *product* of integrated data (the “3”) known as meta-inferences (Younas & Durante, 2023). Essentially, these outcomes represent a higher-level understanding that only emerges from the combination of qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Challenge #1: Expanded Expertise Required

While the integration of quantitative and qualitative data sets is colloquially referred to as *mixing*, the monomethod data sets (the “1s”) are distinctly separate components that must be generated and analyzed with appropriate methodological rigor before they are brought together through integration to arrive at an

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Mixed Methods... (continued from page 2)

otherwise unreachable understanding (the “3”). The American Psychological Association Journal Reporting Standards for mixed methods research (JARS-MMR, 2020) reflects this expectation by directing authors and reviewers to the qualitative and quantitative standards for each section of a manuscript in addition to mixed methods specific standards.

The expanded methodological expertise needed to carry out mixed methods research presents a significant challenge for both faculty and doctoral students. For example, a doctoral student wishing to carry out a mixed methods dissertation study would need to have had coursework and experience with the quantitative design (e.g., single-case experimental designs), qualitative design (e.g., comparative case study), and mixed methods design (e.g., explanatory design). Similarly, a faculty member wishing to submit a federal grant proposing a mixed methods design would need to demonstrate that the research team has experience with and expertise in each area.

Opportunity #2: Team Science Approach

The changes in the questions we ask and the methods we use to answer them may require us to change how we compose research teams, as “collaborations become necessary whenever researchers wish to take their research programs in new directions” (Macrina, 1995). Team science is one approach to collaboration for addressing scientific challenges (National Research Council, 2015) that brings together professionals with a range of expertise to generate novel solutions to complex problems. Given that mixed methods uses innovations in methodology to address complexity, embracing a Team Science framework can relieve each researcher from needing to individually have deep expertise in each methodology and theoretical framework.

Both Team Science and mixed methods research have been embraced by public health researchers for addressing complex, large-scale issues (Gigliotti et al., 2024), giving special education researchers models to look toward. Public health research frequently employs mixed methods to understand health issues comprehensively, combining quantitative data on health outcomes

with qualitative insights from affected communities. Team Science enables examination of health outcomes from multiple perspectives (e.g., epidemiology, sociology, gerontology) and at multiple levels (e.g., patient, healthcare system, society). This approach can be adapted in special education to assess not only educational outcomes but also the social and emotional experiences of students, families, and educators. Forming teams from multiple disciplines (e.g., special education, cognitive psychology, school counseling) and examining educational issues at multiple levels (e.g., student, school, district) is likely needed to address pressing issues of implementation and scale-up.

Challenge #2: Multiple Research Paradigms

Choices regarding data collection, analysis, reporting, and interpretation of findings are shaped by the world view and philosophical assumptions of researchers. Such research paradigms encompass the beliefs and values that researchers bring into their work, either implicitly or explicitly (Guba, 1990). The four aspects of research paradigms include the nature of reality (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), inquiry (methodology), and values (axiology). The 2022 consensus report from the National Academies emphasized the importance of recognizing the influence of research paradigms on the questions researchers ask, methodologies they employ, and how they interpret their findings. The report underscored the importance of recognizing that different paradigms—such as positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory—bring distinct perspectives that can affect the understanding of educational phenomena. They suggest a pluralistic approach that incorporates multiple paradigms could lead to richer insights and more effective solutions to complex educational challenges.

Contending with seemingly conflicting paradigms may be a barrier to both mixed methods and Team Science. For example, one researcher may prioritize generating quantitative evidence from an observation tool or assessment they consider to be objective due to their positivist approach while another may be influenced by their interpretivist paradigm to focus on how

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Mixed Methods... (continued from page 3)

individuals describe their experiences and make meaning of their educational context. Because MMR involves integration and contextual understanding of all data sets, Johnson (2017) put forward dialectical pluralism as a ‘metaparadigm’ that could facilitate respect for multiple paradigms, perspectives, and theories. Instead of avoiding or suppressing the tension between methodological approaches, it can be leveraged to enhance the quality and depth of research by recognizing complementarity, encouraging dialogue and critical reflection, promoting innovation, and acknowledging the dialectical nature of our research (Johnson, 2017).

Opportunity #3: Reflexivity

All science is subjective to some degree, as researchers make decisions based on their training, values, priorities, and prior experiences (Root & Lindström, 2024). Explicitly acknowledging the different lenses through which we view our work and how they influence our perception and interpretation of data is critical for “enhancing our scholarly gaze” (Bratlinger et al., 2005, p. 198) and a defining feature of rigorous qualitative research. Recent guidance from The Qualitative Research Collective (2023) affirms the importance of researchers critically reflecting on how their backgrounds shape their research and how they fit into the historical context of educational research. The researcher’s role as an instrument for analysis is perhaps even more pronounced in mixed methods than mono-method qualitative designs because of the complexities of combining and interpreting both data sets (Root & Lindström, 2024). Adopting the metaparadigm of dialectical pluralism can facilitate such reflexivity.

Engaging in mixed methods research, particularly using a Team Science approach, presents an opportunity for researchers who orient toward quantitative methods to explicitly and continually reflect on their methodological decisions. Regardless of whether or not researchers decide to include positionality statements in quantitatively-focused manuscripts, explicitly acknowledging, discussing, and revisiting positionality will illuminate how their own perspectives, experiences, and assumptions may shape interpretation of the data. Removing bias or ensuring total objectivity is not realistic. Acknowledging positionality increases transparency

and credibility of findings regardless of methodology or paradigm.

Challenge #3: Peer Review

Publishing mixed methods research in special education journals poses unique challenges. Logistically, it may be difficult to adequately convey methods and findings from quantitative, qualitative, and integrated data within established page limits while still adhering to reporting standards (e.g., JARS-MMR, 2020). Furthermore, the rich, multifaceted insights generated from mixed methods studies may be more effectively communicated across multiple papers. In fact, for some complex or multi-staged designs the results of each step or stage are intended to be analyzed and published separately (Fetters et al., 2013). Reviewer inexperience with mixed methods research further complicates the peer review process, as they may not fully understand the rationale behind combining methodologies (e.g., transforming qualitative data into quantitative data) or may lack the expertise to evaluate the integration of different types of data. This may potentially result in biased feedback or rejection of valuable research contributions.

Providing clear and comprehensive explanations of mixed methods designs, including detailed justifications for the chosen methodologies and how they complement each other, can help reviewers understand the rationale behind the integration of qualitative and quantitative data. As more mixed methods research is conducted, researchers in the field must be willing to expand their own knowledge and expertise. Supplementary materials posted in an open-access repository can both alleviate pressure of page limits and provide additional explanations or supports for readers. For example, authors could submit a table demonstrating how the manuscript adheres to JARS-MMR (2020) or use the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* checklist of mixed methods elements (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2019). This may increase credibility and trustworthiness as well as replication. ■

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CEC-DR Diversity Committee Spotlight



Federico Waitoller, PhD
University of Illinois
Diversity Committee Chair

Who said this?

“Some Black families describe ABA therapy as a double-edged sword—helpful for survival in a white supremacist world, yet sometimes leaving emotional scars.”

Or this?

“Disability touches everyone, including very conservative Republicans. You mess around with someone’s family member, you’re crossing a line.”

If you don’t know, you haven’t listened to our podcast, *DiveIn*—and you should!

DiveIn doesn’t shy away from tough questions. We explore the nuanced and challenging issues around equity and inclusion in special education. In our latest episode, we sat down with Mitchell Yell and David Bateman to ask:

- What does a Trump administration mean for special education?
- Could IDEA or the Department of Education be dismantled?
- How will expanding voucher programs and charter schools impact students with disabilities?
- And how might policies like Title IX shape the future of these students?

Join us for these in-depth conversations and more. Be part of a growing community of listeners passionate about making a difference in special education.

Stream our monthly *DiveIn* podcast now or subscribe on Spotify or Apple Podcasts to never miss an episode. ■

CEC-DR 2025 Award Winners

Kauffman-Hallahan-Pullen Distinguished Researcher Award (Chair Jackie Lubin)



Paul Morgan
CUNY, Albany



George Farkas
University of California, Irvine

Martin J. Kaufman Early Career Research Award (Chair Chris Lemons)



Shannah Hirsch
Clemson University



Justin Garwood
University of Vermont

Early Career Publication Award (Chair Terry Scott)



Laura Rhinehart
University of California, Los Angeles

Distinguished Researcher from Underrepresented Groups Award (Chair Federico Waitoller)



LaRon Scott
University of Virginia

Research Improving the Educational Access, Experiences, and Outcomes of BIPOC Students with Disabilities Award (Chair Tisa Aceves)

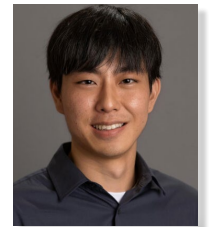


Maria Cioè-Peña
University of Pennsylvania

Student Research Awards (Kelly Whalon)



Quantitative
Brennan Chandler
Georgia State University



Meta-analysis/Synthesis
Andrew Chang
Vanderbilt University



Single Case
Alice Williams
Central Michigan University



Mixed Methods
Melanie Martin Loya
University of California, Davis

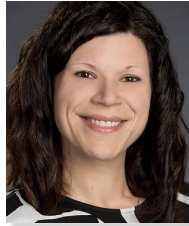


Qualitative
Kathryn Meyer
Binghamton University

Call for Nominations CEC-DR Officers



Audrey Sorrells, PhD
Texas Christian University



Jessica R. Toste, PhD (she/her)
The University of Texas at Austin

We invite you to make a difference for individuals with disabilities by helping us identify new DR officers. DR is devoted to the advancement of research related to the education of individuals with disabilities and/or who are gifted, and our goals include the promotion of equal partnership with practitioners in designing, conducting, and interpreting research in special education. This year, we will be electing a vice-president (four-year term: vice president, president-elect, president, past president). The term will begin July 1, 2025.

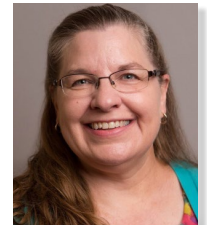
If you are interested in serving, or if you have a colleague who is eager to serve, please contact the DR past president, Audrey Sorrells (audrey.sorrells@tcu.edu), by March 1, 2025. DR leadership meets once per month virtually.

I encourage you to visit our website to learn more about our activities and see our current leaders in action. Nominees will submit a brief bio that highlights their areas of interest and intention for serving, which we can share with members. All applications will be reviewed by the Nominations Committee who will finalize the election ballot slate. Want to get involved but aren't ready for the executive committee? DR has nine different committees that work to advance the field of special education research, practice, and policy. If you are interested in committee work, feel free to email us and you'll be connected with one of our awesome committee chairs for further information. We hope you will consider joining our team! ■

Join the Division for Research's Finance & Long-Range Planning Workgroup!



Mary Rose Sallesse, PhD
*University of Alabama
at Birmingham*



Anne Foegen, PhD
University of Minnesota

Are you passionate about financial strategy and sustainability? We are seeking members to join our Finance and Long-Range Planning Workgroup for a one-year commitment. Together, we will focus on strengthening the Division's financial future, refining strategies, and identifying new revenue-generating opportunities. This is a chance to contribute to key initiatives impacting our long-term sustainability, from evaluating current financial practices to exploring investment opportunities, fundraising ideas, and future budgeting solutions. If you have a background in finance, strategic planning, investing, or just a passion for supporting the Division's growth, we'd love to hear from you! If you are interested, please contact the DR treasurer-elect, Mary Rose Sallesse, at msallesse@uab.edu. ■

2025 CEC Convention DR Events

Date and Time*	Event	Location
Wednesday, March 12, 9:00 am–12:00 pm	CEC-DR Executive Board Meeting	Room 331
Thursday, March 13, 7:00 pm–10:00 pm	CEC-DR Reception (with DLD and DEBH) @7pm	American Visionary Art Museum, 3rd floor reception hall with access to both museums
Thursday, March 13, 6:00 pm–7:00 pm	CEC-DR Business	Room 329

**Local time*



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