

Current Practices in Research Interview Report

Summary. I spoke with Dr Weiss about her research process. I learned she is passionate about researching effective collaboration, investigating professional identity, and understanding relationship development for special education teachers. Based on our conversation, I have gathered that her work primarily uses a sequential exploratory mixed-methods methodology with case studies for her qualitative study and descriptive as her non-experimental quantitative study. She has two main research questions: *How do we collaborate effectively in special education in K-12 schools? How do we most effectively prepare future teachers in special education?*

Recruitment. Because I am her GRA, I asked Dr. Weiss if she would be open to this interview during our weekly meeting. Aside from proximity and our newly established working relationship, Dr. Weiss was at the top of my prioritized list for several reasons: As her GRA, I was comfortable asking her; I thought it would help me better understand her work; and my secondary field is special education. Since she quickly agreed to an interview during our weekly meeting, I promptly scheduled an interview time with her that accommodated our calendars.

Setting. The interview occurred in Dr. Weiss's office on campus, where we often hold weekly meetings. Seated at a table, we engaged in a comfortable and uninterrupted conversation, fostering a sense of ease and connection.

Process. In the week leading up to the interview, I sent the questions to Dr. Weiss for her review, demonstrating respect for her time and allowing her to consider her responses. On the interview day, I printed out the questions for us to reference and confirmed that the

scheduled time was still convenient, respecting our mutual plans. I began the interview by requesting and receiving permission to record, ensuring transparency and respect. While our conversation was structured, it was relaxed, respectful, and avoided the formality and awkwardness of a typical Q&A.

Interview Transcript

Interviewer	So, thank you for joining me.
Response	Sure.
Interviewer	The first question I'm gonna ask is, what overarching research question do you hope to answer through your research?
Response	So I have two that sort of guide me as overall. So one is how do we do effective collaboration in special education in K-12 schools? And then the second, and these are really big questions if I have to put them, there are lots of specifics underneath them. The second one, how do we most effectively prepare future teachers in special education? So all of my smaller questions go under those two branches: teacher prep and collaboration and co-teaching.
Interviewer	So, when you talk about collaboration, are you talking about intraschool or interschool?
Response	I'm talking about professional, interprofessional collaboration. And like I said, there are lots of small questions under that, under those, those are just the broad overreaching, over-arching, like you said, research questions.
Interviewer	Is there one in particular that's really driving you right this moment?
Response	Well, we've done, We've done a bunch, well, in the teacher prep part, we've done a bunch of work with teacher identity, developing identity as a factor in effective collaboration. And then we've also done a bunch of work around e-coaching and using before it's kind of before COVID, we were doing things like bugging your coaching and using Zoom and a variety of those kinds of things. And we had some real resistance. I even had one teacher when she was supposed to be using it for the internship, because we were actually studying

it during internship. She literally like walked out of the session because she was so terrified of the whole thing. But now it seems like it's no big deal because everybody was so used to COVID and doing everything virtually, but it's it's not such a big deal anymore.

So that's that's been kind of cool. But the identity thing goes back to co-teaching and that's really where a lot of things started because that's what my dissertation was about – the general educators and special education teachers working together to co-teach kids with disabilities in the same classroom.

Interviewer	That is such an important relationship, and it's just that – it's a relationship. One the best relationships I ever had was someone who was, she was an English second language teacher, but she was crucial in the success that I had with a particular student.
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Response	But there's so many factors, and that's what gets into those smaller questions. There are so many factors because so many, like just if you look at our teacher preparation program here at George Mason, our special educators are required to take a consultation and collaboration class. No other teacher has to take a collaboration class or learn about collaboration – you know, effective like active listening, problem solving, how does this work, what are IEPs – no other teacher-prep program at Mason has any of that included in their program.
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Interviewer	That would be vital for anybody.
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Response	Correct, which is one of the reasons, again, this goes back into how all of these research things are intertwined with teacher preparation because of elementary ed and special ed...so, secondary ed, at one point in time, I was co-teaching that class with secondary social studies, and we had secondary social studies and secondary teachers with special educators, and we got incredible results from beginning to the end of the course about the understanding of collaboration.
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That faculty member left, and so we didn't have the co-teaching anymore. We started to get it rebuilt with elementary ed, and even though I'm not co-teaching it, we've got some elementary ed and other professionals who are coming into that class because we're talking about it a little bit more and collaborating on getting our students together.

Interviewer	So, I heard you mentioned a minute ago that – this is kind of Like where I hear you say your dissertation was what kind of you wrote it on that so that kind of fed into it – but what led you to wanting to write your dissertation on that which now has blossomed into all of this?
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Response

Well, actually I I told my advisor when I was doing my dissertation on this. I do not want this to define me, but it ended up being that way for some reason. So when I finished, I did my master's and my teacher licensure program at one of these programs that they say is top five programs. And then I walked into a school building and one of the first things they wanted us to do was to co-teach and we had had no training on co-teaching. When I tell the story in my collaboration class, when I walked into the building to begin, I was walking in to meet the assistant principal. And as I walked in, this teacher comes barreling out of the office and says, "I don't want to do that. I didn't ask to do that. I don't need that." And, the assistant principal who was standing there then later told me that that was the teacher I was co-teaching with and she had just told her that.

So I went into it with that situation and then had to build the relationship and the program and everything around it. And, so that sparked my interest in why are we doing this because it's just setting us up for failure.

Interviewer

Wow. I cannot even imagine that being, you know, you walk in, and that's the first message you get about what you're about to embark on. So, how did you rally back from that?

Response

Well, she was a secondary social studies teacher. And so my first license was in secondary social studies. So we connected on the fact that I knew the content, which is one of the areas of difficulty in this co-teaching relationship.

So she's like, oh, okay, you are just as much a secondary social studies teacher as you are a special educator, so then it's okay.

So we developed a relation, and then I co-taught with a number of other teachers in the building, but I think it was all sort of about developing that trust in relationship and being seen as a professional, which leads to the identity piece.

Interviewer

I was about to say, so she really had to make sure that you fit into her identity before she could even consider how to fit you in hers.

Response

Well, I had to be able to articulate what my identity was, what my area of expertise was so that then we could figure out how they work together. But what we've been finding in some of this research, particularly with special educators, is they don't have that particular identity that they can then articulate. So, for example, a math teacher, what's their identity? They're a math teacher. Math, right? So, but special education...special education, and probably you could talk to ten teachers and they would tell you, oh yeah, they know how to write IEPs, but what else, what's their other area of expertise?

And that sort of, that identity piece really developed from when I was first teaching this collaboration class. I asked these folks because it was at the end of their program and I'd ask my classes, so what makes you different? Who are you? The answer I was getting from most of these students was, "we're patient."

Anyway, so that sort of sparked, you know, a lot of these different experiences sort of spark my research interest. And I think that's, you know, when you expose your, when you're in schools, when you're in teacher prep, when you see these holes, that's kind of where you go down a path.

Interviewer

Wow. So when you do this research, what are your preferred research methods in tackling this?

Response

Well, because those kinds of things are, I would call them somewhat nebulous, right? Like you can't say that's a five in collaboration and do a lot of. So we've done some quantitative work, some basic quantitative work, like in co-talk classes, we can use quantitative measures to say how much time on, so if we have teachers who are teaching co-teaching in a certain way, how much time on task does a student spend? You know, we'll target a student so we'll look at time on task, we'll look at time to start a task, we'll look at number of times they engage or ask questions.

So there are some real, particularly for co-teaching, there are some quantitative pieces that you can, and with identity we've done a lot of work or we started doing some work on concept maps and asking teachers at different points in their training and their careers to do so.

Put in the middle, I am a special educator and then everything that goes along with being a special educator, put that around in a concept map. And so we can look at the number of concepts they put, the number of levels, and those kinds of things.

So there are some quantitative, and in one of the collaboration studies that we did for our collaboration class, we looked at differences between the beginning of the class, the end of the class, on numbers of concepts and measures and levels out from the circle, and which gives you more in-depth information from students.

So we've looked at some of those quantitative, but generally it's qualitative research. So it'll be case studies about teams and how they've developed their co-teaching. It'll be case studies about students and how they've developed their identity. We've done case studies on e-coaches, training E-coaches and how they develop and how they use E-coaching and how they use it differently. So, qualitative in most cases with... So maybe mixed methods is probably the easiest way to put it.

Interviewer	With qualitative being the majority?
Response	Yes, primary.
Interviewer	Gotcha. Okay. So the next question would be, what are your current projects? And you kind of have woven that into some of your answers.
Response	Yeah, we're still working on, we're still trying to do some scale-up work with the e-coaching. We are, I've got several, I got a grant with a colleague of mine to do a professional, to develop a professional learning series on co-teaching to train teachers. So we've got a couple of different places that we've done a bunch of development work. We're looking for a couple of places to actually try to use this professional learning series and then look at outcomes for teachers and their level of understanding and then implementation of co-teaching. We developed a lesson planning application to go along with that professional learning series so There is a Virginia Department of Ed co-teaching initiative that's going on right now that we're collecting data on. They're actually using the lesson planning application, so we're collecting data on the coaching that is required for them, the types of co-teaching that they're doing, and then the lesson planning that they're actually doing as well.
Interviewer	Have you had problems getting people to participate in this?
Response	Well, it's we haven't gone full scale into school divisions. We've asked smaller groups like I've done some work in Chatham County, North Carolina, because they decided to just start a program. But we haven't really gone full scale yet. This is kind of because we've done so much development work. So using it with smaller groups of teachers more to get feedback and understanding and develop it so it's like in a beta testing sort of thing. So we're moving out from there now.
Interviewer	How do you find people to participate in that? Because I mean, Chatham County, North Carolina – that's a little bit of a distance from here.
Response	Because there was someone that I knew who said, I'm starting a co-teaching program. Can we talk about what you're working on and how we might be able to use it? It's really been through connections with, so there's a high school in Fauquier County that I've been working with their assistant principal for years, and

they've been, and she allowed me to do some of the studies in her building, and then we've connected for a variety of different training opportunities. So it's really been through teachers or administrators who know about the work that we've been doing.

We haven't gone full out like to just randomly. We haven't gotten to that point yet where we like go to Fairfax County and say can we talk, can we use this for 25 of your teachers or something like that. Actually I probably never will because the other part of my research piece, one other component in the back of my mind is I've always been really interested in studying in rural schools, under-resourced schools, which goes back to my work with sort of the T-TAC and then one of my other projects that we're doing right now is we're trying to collect data with Alexandria City public schools to see, you know, they have these groups come in and like T-Tax and others and do professional development and then what happens with it.

So we're trying to collect some data to see if what they're actually putting into place is effective and changes teacher.

Interviewer

That's interesting. So When you're preparing for all of this and you're doing your preliminary work or seeing where other think people are researching what journals or what type of resources do you typically?

Response

Turn to I wish I had time to sit down and read a lot of journals. That sounds like you're doing... Well, so the majority of the journals that I focus on are like teacher education and special education. So that's the teacher prep world. The Journal of Teacher Education is the general ed version of it. So there really aren't that many journals related to teacher preparation.

There's a new one that we started with TED that I'm associate editor for, and that's the Journal of Special Education Preparation. So those are a couple, but then I also am, I keep track of and try to read as much as I can the journals around disabilities. So Exceptional Children, Journal of Learning Disabilities, Remedial and Special education, those types of.

Interviewer

Do you have one that you prefer to submit your work to?

Response

Most of the work that I just talked about is around teacher prep and teacher work, So many of the articles that I've written recently have been teacher education and special education where I submit. I've submitted to exceptionality. I have to think about that. Like the co-teaching intervention ones where we went in and looked at time on task and stuff like that we've been in a variety of. But they're mainly the intervention type things like whether it's journal of learning disabilities, learning disabilities research and practice or something like that or behavior disorders things like that.

Interviewer

You sound like a pioneer in this area.

Response

I don't know that I'm a pioneer but I sort of have these with a colleague Wendy Rogers. So we have, there's one path of co-teaching that's all rah-rah, you can't measure it. Let's just go in and make people feel good and hope that they're doing certain things.

And then there's another path of we need to train them specifically from the very beginning.

We need to go in and start looking at student outcomes. We have to start calling things. We have to look. It's, co-teaching started with those six models: one teach – one assist, alternative teaching, parallel teaching. And there was such an emphasis on, it's a marriage.

And everybody was looking at what model. And so Wendy and I were really like, it doesn't really matter what model you're using if you're not doing good instruction. So our thing was those are just grouping formats.

And what we really need to be looking at is you need to be looking at three things in the model that we built – three elements: good general education instruction. So you can't use co-teaching to fix a bad teacher.

The second part is what are you going to do to make the content accessible to the student with disabilities and everybody else in that classroom? This is the graphic organizers, the, you know, notes. Gosh, what are they? I'm blanking on the notes. Whatever, you know, where they leave blanks and the students have to fill in the notes. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Those are the things that make it accessible to everybody, but it's not specific to that student with a disability.

So then the third component is the specially designed instruction. So what happens in that classroom to teach that student with the disability, something related to their IEP goals, and the way that they're going to learn the skills they need to access that material. So a student who has reading comprehension issues, when are they going to learn or be taught specific strategies for reading comprehension that fits them, not just everybody in the classroom? Does that make sense? Yeah, it does. So our idea is in co-teaching, you got to think about those three elements of instruction and then you can think about those grouping formats to match your instructional objectives, right?

Like if you've got, you do small group alternative teaching, if you're going to teach this kid with a learning disability about a reading comprehension

strategy, but over here you're going to let other students be working on a specific strategy with primary source documents. Does that make sense?

Interviewer **Yeah, it's almost like matching your technology to what you're instructing. So it's matching the delivery method.**

Response Yeah, so you're focused. So those are sort of the two. Now this camp is slowly coming to this camp a little bit more because we're not getting huge outcomes.

And there was such, for such a long time, it was really just everybody did one teach, one assist, like the special educator would come in and be the instructional aide. But that's a heck of a high priced instructional aid who has expertise that's not being used. Which then goes back to the identity piece, right?

Like I'm not getting a master's degree with this specialized knowledge and sitting in the back of the room and just going around and poking the kids to say pay attention. You see where some of my passion is.

Interviewer **That's okay, I love it. That's where it should be though. So because that's a valuable resource and to that's like you know asking Thomas Keller just to come in and do your grocery shopping and put it in your refrigerator for you. It's not very helpful if that teacher is not enacting those skills that they have.**

Response And if they can't articulate what those skills are, they don't have that as their core identity, that I am a teacher with these specialized skills and expertise, then they can't be part of a co-teaching relationship because they can't tell you what their value at it is, which I know is a terrible word to use in education, but when you collaborate you have to bring something to the table and people have to value what you know about and value what you bring to the table. So, if you can't bring that to the table, how do you collaborate?

Interviewer **And I like the way that you said a while ago about, you said there was, there's one group where it's just like the rah-rah so it's like there's a confidence-building But there's also the skills building and that really seems like your particular area because if you have the skills building and you have some of these measured outcomes and you can articulate that, that's going to satisfy everybody expects a cheerleader, but everybody needs the skills So okay. Oh, that's interesting. That's kind of cool. Are there are any other areas of your research that are kind of exciting or you feel like need to be mentioned before we end our time together?**

Response

I don't know when I start talking about it I you know, I want to pitch all of my administrative stuff and just go, because once I get engaged in it, it's all, to me it's all exciting, because it's all working with teachers and helping them see outcomes.

It's not like adding one more thing to their plate, but it's trying to make what they do more efficient and effective. So when we get buy-in and engagement, particularly across time, we just see some amazing results. And that's, if I could spend all of my time doing that, I'd love to because ... well, we had one ... when we first started doing our bug and ear stuff, there was one student who's now an assistant principal at one of the local elementary schools who was getting his ... well, he had his provisional license in special ed and he had a self-contained classroom with students with emotional and behavioral disorders and was a fantastic student. So he was one of our guinea pigs and I was doing bug in the air with him and we had such a I mean he was like this is the greatest thing in the world because otherwise, you know, you have to, your perspective, the students' perspective and what they remember, and then you sit down and you talk about it, and that really, it's hard to actually think, and you can change behavior in the time, at the time as opposed to letting things continue.

So in the middle of one of these lessons, what we were trying to work on with him was getting, he was doing all the work in the instruction and the students weren't. So he was solving the problems. He was doing. So we wanted to turn it around. You're asking them questions. You're getting them to solve the problems. He was doing really well and he was really excited about how the students had done. So he's like, all right, we're gonna, you guys have earned your points. I'm gonna let you go to the, you know, whatever the chest to get their rewards or something like that. I'm like, do you really wanna do that? You know, in his ear, He's like, well, and then they went over and got totally distracted. It took 10 minutes, 15 minutes to do that. I'm like, he said, well, maybe that wasn't such a great decision. And he just started laughing. But you know, it was that feedback and reinforcement that teachers never get. Yeah, and he was so open to it as well. Yeah, well, but it also allowed me to say, hey, you're doing great. That's a great question. That's like, you know, students are engaged, that kind of thing. So he got all those positives at that time too. And then he's like, yes, and now we can go. And I'm like, oh, and he crashes. No, but I mean, then it's a fun thing. It's not an evaluative kind of thing – so, anyway well.

Interviewer

I know my mother my mother retired as a specialist teacher from North Carolina. So hearing some of the things that you're talking about, knowing how she had to advocate for herself, she was in a middle school and had to go and specifically say, okay, but this is what we can do. I think you're offering such a value, such a value to the field as a whole. I know my mother would probably be very grateful to work your doing.

Response Well, that would be great. I'd like that. I think the thing that I would offer if you're talking to people about research and things like that is you have to stay close to the schools. So if your research and interest is K-12 instruction, teachers, students, whatever, you have to be in those schools and understanding what is going on in those schools all the time. You can't just think about it from sitting in your campus office. You have to be in the schools and experiencing things and if you're doing teacher prep you got to be in there with students and understanding what they're seeing and thinking and then seeing them as they go into the classroom.

So that's been my big thing. I took a study leave semester before I got tenure, and I spent four days of the week sitting in classrooms, being part of a high school that I did my research in. And that totally just changed. And I can go back there all the time and I do and I you know go to different schools around here and I take on the internship or not the internship but the different clinical practice things so I can see students in the schools.

Interviewer Well, I thought of one last question and I will close out with this: So, what's your identity? How do you articulate yourself?

Response That is a fabulous question. I've asked so many people about theirs that I don't. Wow, I have to think about that. Well, we might have to come back to that for part two then, because I may have to think about it. So if I had to just right now spill out to you, special ed teacher first, teacher, educator, second, researcher, third, just that those, but I don't think I put them like in hierarchy. I think I put them in Like a Venn diagram that they all sort of link together in the middle for the position I'm in right now.

Interviewer That's interesting. That's very cool. It's cool because you said first, second, third. So I'm thinking you have it as a hierarchy. But then, to see you kind of ideate on that for a brief moment only to say, no, it's not a hierarchy. So, it's a relationship. Which, again, goes back to what you said in the beginning, and that is all of this is to help establish relationship.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Reflection

One thing that stood out during my interview with the researcher was her passion. It was easy to see how she devoted her time, energy, and effort to her research. Her desire to have professional, capable special education teachers in the classroom was evident. What was

revealed over time was the more significant thoughts she used to fuel her passion—the concepts of *identity* and *relationships*.

These two profound concepts form the cornerstone of her research. They drive her work and shape the future teachers she mentors. She knows and teaches that a clear understanding of one's identity creates the vocabulary to articulate it effectively, develops insights to determine one's value, and fosters the connections needed for meaningful relationships. Because she recognizes the potential of these future teachers, she equips them with the vocabulary to advocate for themselves and encourages them to add value to the classroom by demonstrating their capabilities.

While reflecting on the interview, I was inspired by what I perceived as an informal mentorship, in her words. Even though she is not formally assigned as my mentor, I gleaned guidance and wisdom from her experiences and insights. This “informal mentorship” prompted me to ponder questions such as: What is my student identity? What do I aspire my post-dissertation identity to be? How will my internally developed identity and the externally driven definitions of me shape my future identity?

Reflecting on this interview and my newly found questions, I was struck by how research questions can be deeply personal. Not only are they academic inquiries, but they can also be a form of self-advocacy and a manifestation of one's passion. These questions become the personally invited familiar struggle that gives one's work meaning, weight, focus, and direction. Consequently, they can also help shape one's identity and build relationships through meaningful connections and shared experiences.