

The inside out of journal editing and peer review: A collective reflection on the *Review of Education's* mentoring scheme for early career researchers

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Abstract

Academic journals have an ethical obligation to equip and support the next generation of researchers to be active members of academia, including in journal peer review. Although the peer review system is regarded by some as 'broken', peer review remains a crucial mechanism for gatekeeping and researcher development. As a group of established and emerging educational researchers, we have benefited from constructive feedback and criticisms from journal editors and peer reviewers. At the same time, we acknowledge that peer review has been one of the sources of frustration for many researchers due to delays, unfavourable outcomes and unhelpful feedback. In this piece, we reflect collectively on our recent experience leading and participating in a mentoring scheme on journal editing and peer review for early career researchers. Our reflections shed light on some hidden aspects of journal editing and peer review, including constraints and challenges faced by editors and peer reviewers. In addition to emphasising the need to empower early career researchers to participate fully in journal peer review through

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intentional, hands-on and sustained support, we advocate for a compassion-based approach to journal editing and peer review that values empathy, mutual respect and a focus on researchers' emotional well-being.

KEYWORDS

early career researchers, journal editing, journal peer review, researcher development

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCHEME

Since the change of guards of the *Review of Education* in January 2024, the new editorial team has been committed to building on the great work of the previous teams, including the journal's reputation for nurturing the next generation of educational researchers. In our inaugural editorial, we (Amy, Nina, Mel and Sin-Wang) outlined our vision and ambitions for the journal, one of which is about providing “support for the involvement and development of early career researchers (ECRs) from all parts of the world, including the provision of active mentoring opportunities” (Chong et al., 2024, p. 1). As a flagship journal of the British Educational Research Association (BERA), *Review of Education* fully supports ethical practices in educational research, including the following statement in the latest BERA research ethics guidelines (2024): “established educational researchers, and the community as a whole, have a responsibility to support the next generation of educational researchers...” (para. 58).

With this vision, the *Review of Education* “Behind the Scenes” Early Career Researcher Mentorship Scheme was launched in August 2024. “Behind the Scenes” presents a unique mentoring opportunity because, unlike other journal peer review programmes that focus on developing researchers' skills to review papers, it aims to provide first-hand experience to early career researchers about the entire peer review process, from reviewing an initial submission, inviting peer reviewers, to making an editorial decision. This cohort of mentees shadowed one of the editors to work on one to two manuscripts in the academic year. In addition to observation, mentees met with their editor to discuss the quality of the manuscripts, how to make decisions and the crunch points in the editorial workflow. Although it is the first “Behind the Scenes”, we received an astounding number of applications; from the 66 applications we received, 15 were selected to be mentees of the scheme. A briefing session was held in August 2024, followed by irregular one-on-one or group meetings between mentors and mentees. A mid-year get-together was organised in February 2025 for mentors and mentees to share what they have learned and provide interim feedback on the scheme.

With the 2024/25 scheme now concluded, we find it timely to look back and share some personal lessons learned.

REFLECTIONS FROM MENTEES

Jiayi Cen

I'm grateful to *Review of Education* for the “Behind the Scenes” mentoring scheme and to the whole editorial team, especially my mentor, Dr Melissa Bond, for letting me see and

take part in, the work from triage to reviewer invitations to decision letters in the peer review process.

As an author, I've often felt the wait was long, worried about fairness and inclusion (who gets asked to review, whose methods are privileged) and been anxious when there was little news. Stepping into the editor's shoes under my mentor's guidance changed that view. I met very practical hurdles: suitable reviewers are hard to find and harder to secure; manuscripts often sit just outside one's own expertise; peaks in workload and holidays slow things down, and safeguarding ethics and tone takes time. I also saw how editors try to meet these challenges: widening and staggering invitations, consulting co-editors, keeping proportionate requests in decision letters, chasing gently to preserve timelines and diversifying the reviewer pool to include ECRs to strengthen fairness.

This programme has been invaluable for me as an ECR. And I hope more ECRs can join future cohorts to understand and empathise with the peer review process.

Nysha Chantel Givans

At first, I was hesitant to apply for the BERA ECR Mentorship Programme, as I experienced feelings of imposter syndrome and questioned whether I would be selected. I struggled to recognise the value I could bring. However, this mindset has shifted over time. Receiving the acceptance email, and learning that my dedication to education was a key reason for my selection, restored a sense of confidence. Being part of the inaugural cohort of such a well-respected journal has been a point of pride, and I've welcomed every opportunity to share my involvement.

The support and guidance I have received from my mentor has been invaluable. One of the most significant aspects of the programme for me has been developing the skill of peer reviewing. I vividly recall the self-doubt I felt when asked to review my first manuscript. I questioned my ability and what insight I could possibly offer at this early stage of my research journey. However, I was encouraged to recognise the value of my perspective. I also approached the task by considering how I would want my own work to be reviewed, that is, with care, clarity and constructive intent.

I would strongly recommend this mentorship scheme to other early career researchers. It not only offers meaningful professional development in manuscript writing and reviewing, but also fosters confidence and a stronger sense of belonging within the academic community.

Caroline Godfrey

Although I have never seen myself as a hesitant writer, I have always been nervous about seeking publication in an academic journal. The submission and peer review processes have remained shrouded in mystery even though I have previously attended online training sessions aimed at encouraging ECRs to submit their work to prestigious journals. The ECR mentorship scheme changed all this, and it was only after I had worked through the steps that a journal editor must take, from sending initial responses to scholars to securing peer reviewers and accepting or rejecting manuscripts, that I felt the mystery of academic publication start to be dispelled. Working through these various stages and having access to the ScholarOne platform has, for me, humanised the 'behind the scenes' work that goes into editing a journal. Now, when I am ready to submit a manuscript, I will be able to imagine what is happening at the other end and am more likely to view the editors and the peer reviewers, despite their extended experience in academia, as fellow scholars working within similar

constraints as myself. Thanks to the ECR mentorship scheme, I can now view potential publication with enthusiasm rather than trepidation.

Xuechun Huang

Before participating in the scheme, I found the entire publishing process daunting and mysterious. During this mentoring scheme, I developed a better understanding of the role of editors. While some people suggest that editors act as gatekeepers, I now agree with the view that it is reviewers who act as gatekeepers and that editors are custodians. Our team dealt with manuscripts that we ultimately had to reject. A manuscript may be rejected due to poor quality or major methodological flaws or because the authors did not adequately address the reviewers' comments or concerns about quality. I learned how to write rejection emails and gained an understanding of the rationale behind rejection. Although publishing may sound difficult, I realised that avoiding desk rejections is a more achievable first step. I became aware that editing and reviewing are skills that take time to develop and can be improved with specific training. I hope that more similar opportunities will become available so that ECRs can integrate them into their professional development strategically. Thanks to this scheme, I now have the confidence to navigate the publication process and potentially take on more editorial and reviewing roles in my career.

Durdona Karimova

According to Trilling (2021), about 98 percent of Uzbek scholars' articles published internationally appear in discredited journals. As a postgraduate researcher from Uzbekistan, I am exploring the challenges and successes Uzbek scholars face in publishing high-quality articles in peer-reviewed journals. Therefore, to gain a clearer understanding of peer-reviewed journal requirements and submission processes and to obtain hands-on experience, I joined BERA's Behind the Scenes project as a mentee.

Under Dr Nina Bergdahl's supervision, I had the opportunity to review two substantial manuscripts and engage in the entire editorial process, which became a transformative experience in my academic journey. I have gained an understanding of editorial decisions such as "minor revision", "major revision" or "rejected", while navigating the journal platform and drafting emails to authors, which has built my practical skills. I learned how to select balanced reviewer panels, including experienced scholars and interested PGRs. Also, I had the opportunity to compare my feedback with that of other reviewers, critically assess different perspectives and filter the most appropriate suggestions. One standout moment was analysing a revise-and-resubmit case, where I explored the reviewer tone and author responses.

The mid-year online catch-up session connected me with mentors and other mentees to discuss our experiences and share challenges and findings. This mentorship has strengthened my confidence and competence as a developing reviewer and academic writer.

Yanghe Liu

Participating in the scheme was a pivotal step in my development as an ECR in teacher education. The programme offered a practical, behind-the-scenes look at the inner workings of academic publishing. Under the guidance of my mentor, Dr Melissa Bond, I gained first-hand experience in evaluating a systematic review manuscript. This process moved from

theory to practice, illuminating the careful judgement and considerable challenges involved in editorial work.

This direct involvement was incredibly valuable. It demystified the peer review process and sharpened my own analytical and writing skills. More importantly, it fostered a new sense of empathy for the collaborative effort required to strengthen scholarly work. The scheme created a supportive environment for learning and growth.

I now feel significantly more confident and equipped to engage with academic publishing. I am prepared to contribute constructively to my field as a future reviewer and author, carrying forward the values of ethical practice and mutual respect that this mentorship exemplified.

Alfred Io

My participation in *Review of Education's* mentoring scheme for ECRs demystified the often-opaque editorial process, which many PhD students (myself included) perceive as a daunting 'black box'. As an author, I have experienced the anxiety of submitting work to journals, where decisions feel arbitrary and reviewer comments sometimes seem contradictory. This mentorship programme, however, peeled back the layers of editorial decision-making; it revealed the careful thought, ethical challenges and teamwork involved in peer review. Working alongside experienced editors provided me with crucial insights into their multifaceted responsibilities: balancing high academic standards with supportive feedback, reconciling conflicting reviewer perspectives and making difficult decisions such as desk rejections, revisions or addressing ethical concerns. I now understand these decisions require careful judgement of many factors while maintaining journal quality standards.

This experience has yielded three key takeaways that I believe are invaluable for fellow ECRs. First, rejection as growth: editorial decisions are not endpoints but part of an ongoing scholarly conversation. Second, ethical collaboration: quality peer review thrives when all parties engage with integrity and generosity, dependent on mutual respect and shared investment in knowledge development. Third, the value of experienced guidance: actively learning from and seeking advice from established researchers accelerates our development and helps navigate publishing challenges. This mentorship has not only clarified the 'hidden curriculum' of academic publishing but also inspired me to pay this mentorship forward, helping turn the mysterious 'black box' into a transparent learning space for future ECRs.

Sasha McKoy

As an aspiring academic and ECR, publications have consistently been highlighted to me as a vital component in enabling the successful trajectory of this journey. Thus, it is an accolade I continue to strive for in an attempt to elevate my professional and personal profile. On this journey, I have gained awareness of the barriers to obtaining publication through my participation in online workshops and also the experiences I have endured firsthand in my own attempts to become a published author. While the online workshops were effective in aiding my understanding of the publication process from the perspective of successful authors, acceptance of my application to *BERA's Review of Education* 'Behind the Scenes' Early Career Researcher Scheme was a real game-changer. It was meaningful in offering new insight from the editor's perspective, gaining understanding of the peer review process, gauging the makeup of what constitutes a potentially publishable paper and the varied stages from start to completion of the review process overall. Over the course of reviewing manuscripts myself and discussing my thoughts and feedback with the editor, it importantly

enabled access to the editor's lens, where I was able to note gems I will utilise moving forward.

Rebecca Tickell

As my own doctoral research centres on the being and the doing of teacher mentoring, I am acutely aware of the advantages access to an experienced mentor can bring. Consequently, when I saw the advert offering mentorship for early career researchers on the 'Behind the Scenes Early Career Researcher Scheme', I knew I had to apply. As the mentorship offered was provided by the editors of the *Review of Education*, one of the top-ranked journals in this field, I recognised that I would be accessing some excellent learning opportunities.

Having already coauthored my first paper and completed my first peer review for a journal, this programme provided an ideal opportunity to gain experience of the next step: a glimpse behind the curtain from a journal editor's perspective. As an ECR, the processes around article acceptance and rejection are largely hidden from view, and working with my mentor, Dr Amy Wong, gave me the chance to demystify the editorial process. From recognising unethical practices such as salami-slicing and duplicate publication to understanding what journal editors look for in a high-quality article, I have learned a great deal and have much to thank Amy for.

Zhen Yang

Taking part in the behind-the-scenes mentor scheme has been an important learning experience for me. The first two manuscripts I was assigned both resulted in desk rejections. When I first examined them, I felt they were not at the quality level expected by the journal. However, because the topics and methods were outside my immediate field, I was not confident in making decisions on my own. With guidance from my mentor, Dr Nina Bergdahl, I gradually developed a clearer understanding of the journal's standards. This gave me more confidence in my own ability to assess manuscripts and to act in an editorial role.

This experience also made me think about the process from the author's perspective. Submitting a paper to a journal is not only about the quality of the research but also about respecting the publishing process. Authors need to choose journals that are a suitable match for their work, follow submission guidelines carefully and make sure their work meets the standards of the journals. Failing to do so can increase the risk of desk rejection. Through this scheme, I have learned both about how to make editorial decisions and how to align research with the right publication outlets.

Shishi Zhang

Taking part in the *Review of Education's* Mentoring Scheme for Early Career Researchers (the Scheme) was an extremely valuable and rewarding experience for me. Together with two other mentees sharing similar expertise in social science, we formed a mentoring group with our mentor Sin-Wang. Over 8 months, we discussed and reviewed two manuscripts through five online meetings, regular email exchanges and shared Google documents. The process demystified the practice of peer review and journal article publication while also helped me write professional and comprehensive reviews through both theoretical guidance (e.g. Mason & Chong, 2023) and hands-on practice.

The benefits of the Scheme extended beyond practising peer review. Learning from Sin-Wang and fellow mentees has guided me into self-reflection on conducting and reporting research, providing me with the lens of an “outsider” view towards my own PhD project and thesis writing, and therefore led me to more critical and in-depth thinking to navigate research.

Participating in the Scheme has equipped me with the capacity to write professional peer reviews, boosted my confidence to trial further publications, and enhanced both my research and academic writing. I feel grateful for this opportunity to be a part of the inaugural Scheme.

REFLECTIONS FROM MENTORS

Nina Bergdahl

After an initial online meeting, I worked 1:1 with the mentees in my group, guiding them through the editorial platform and the publication process. Because editorship involves working with people, one cannot foresee every interaction. Instead, the experience is shaped by the principles and values that guide action when unexpected events occur. Yet, the experience was rewarding for both mentees and editors. For example, the mentees followed the progress of manuscripts they had reviewed. Seeing their own critique alongside that of other reviewers allowed them to appreciate alternative ways of understanding qualitative aspects of writing, what reviewers look for in a manuscript and how critique can be formulated, considered, resolved or rebutted. This is a part of the necessary socialisation into scholarly life, which is critical for ECRs. The experience moves beyond mechanically accepting critique; it is about developing experience, knowledge and wisdom so that one can contribute at the forefront of their disciplines and engage in well-reasoned considerations. The fact that the mentees raised questions on how to balance opposing reviewer positions and recommendations provided me opportunities for reflective practice, as I then needed to articulate the motivations behind my decisions and I regard this as a rewarding aspect of the ECR scheme.

Melissa Bond

After meeting my mentees for the first time and getting to know their interests, it became clear that trying to find manuscripts that would perfectly align with each of them would be impossible; just as it is sometimes with trying to find the perfect peer reviewer for a manuscript. Instead, I decided to choose a manuscript that I felt would be of general interest, was a systematic review and that was a potential candidate to lead to publication, so that the mentees could experience the entire life cycle of the editing and peer review process.

Sin Wang Chong

There are many things I like about this scheme, but if I had to pick one, it would be the opportunities for mentors to clarify why editors or peer reviewers do what they do. At some point in our careers, we have all been affected, either positively or negatively, by decisions or actions of a journal editor or peer reviewer. While some of these are intentional, I would argue that some are due to constraints or factors beyond the editors' control. My mentees found it most helpful when I shared with them the conundrum or powerlessness of those who are in power. In my meetings with my mentees, I shared a lot about the constraints of being a

journal editor. To many, journal editors are knowledgeable, experienced and resourceful. While these are true, I was intentional in showing my limitations and challenges, including difficulties in securing peer reviewers, the need to seek advice from other editors on topics or methodologies that I am not familiar with, time spent on responding to queries and complaints from authors, and how these may lead to delays in the peer review process. Editors and peer reviewers must maintain scientific standards, but rigour and compassion do not need to stand in each other's way. Seeing journal peer review through the lens of compassion and emotional well-being is my take-home message to my mentees.

Amy Wai Yee Wong

I thoroughly enjoyed working with my mentees in this ECR mentoring scheme. The one thing that I like most is the opportunity to work alongside the mentees on every step of the decision-making process, from the beginning until the end. This opens our eyes to understanding some of the assumptions that authors may have when they submit their manuscripts. Clarifying these assumptions helps set the authors' expectations, for example, the length of time to make an editorial decision on the submitted manuscripts.

In addition, we shared some of the challenges encountered by the editorial team, such as ensuring the manuscripts sent out for reviews are of high quality, finding appropriate reviewers and maintaining timely communication with the authors. It is important to find a balance between the available time and resources of both the reviewers and the editorial team members to uphold the quality of the manuscripts published in the *Review of Education*.

We also discussed the important role of an editor and agreed that an editor not only makes decisions on the manuscripts but also acts as a liaison between the reviewers and the authors. Although it is a lot of hard work being an editor, my mentees and I recognised that it is an absolute joy to see a manuscript being accepted and published. We should not forget to celebrate this moment of achievement.

CONCLUSION

Journal editing and peer reviewing can be a lonely uphill battle. When it comes to the question of "why we do it", researchers are taught to think in terms of serving the "greater good" such as for the development of others; other times, when such an ulterior motive fails to motivate, researchers resort to a mindset that focuses on the material and reputational gains of participating in academic publishing. From the reflections, while mentees and mentors discuss practical strategies related to the technical aspect of editing and peer reviewing such as going through "the entire life cycle of the editing and peer review process" (Melissa), the most powerful revelations for participants are those related to empathy and socialisation. As noted by the editors, this scheme unveils the role of journal editors as "a liaison between the reviewers and the authors" (Amy) and that editing and peer reviewing are part of the process of "socialisation into scholarly life" (Nina). By making known what happens behind the curtain of journal editing and peer review, it enabled participants to step into the shoes of others and see journal peer review "through the lens of compassion" (Sin Wang), which helps them understand the challenges and constraints editors and peer reviewers face. At the same time, the scheme helps build the confidence of mentees; many of them express their willingness to pay it forward, sharing what they have learned in this scheme with their peers. On this positive note, we look forward to the launch of the second cohort of the mentoring scheme soon.

AI STATEMENT

Nysha Givans used *Read and Write* and *ChatGPT* to support the writing process. Specifically:

- *Read and Write* was used to listen back to the draft and to check accuracy and clarity in writing.
- *ChatGPT* was used to suggest improvements to the structure and flow of the paragraph. All substantive content, arguments and ideas remain entirely the author's.

Other authors declare that they have not used any AI tool when preparing and writing this publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sin Wang Chong: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Nina Bergdahl:** Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Melissa Bond:** Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Amy Wai Yee Wong:** Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Jiayi Cen:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Nysha Chantel Givans:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Caroline Godfrey:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Xuechun Huang:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Durdona Karimova:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Yanghe Liu:** Writing – review and editing; writing – original draft. **Alfred W. T. Lo:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Sasha McKoy:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Rebecca Tickell:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Zhen Yang:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Shishi Zhang:** Writing – review and editing; writing – original draft.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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