

# An Editors' Tale: Past, present and future of *Management in Education*

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Management in Education  
1–5  
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Management & Administration Society  
(BELMAS)



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DOI: 10.1177/0892020620963100  
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One of my most vivid memories of my early days as Editor of *MiE* was the day that Ron Glatter, Past President of British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS), showed Joan Woodhouse and I past copies of the journal. I spent the next few weeks browsing past copies and ruminating on how much education has changed – yet not changed – in the world of education. The very first copy of *MiE* was produced in Spring 1987 pp.; the Editor Richard Finn introduced it:

This new magazine is designed to help you, the hard working manager in education, do your job even more effectively. [...] all of the contributions have been written in a way which should allow you to transfer them to your own work situation.

Although editors, publishers and covers have changed throughout the last 23 years, and we don't use the term 'management' quite as often as we did, it being replaced by the more popular term, 'leadership', in many articles, the essence of *MiE* is still essentially the same: It seeks to create a sense of community in its readers, to bring together research and practice and to provoke thoughtful critique of educational management in all its guises and at all phases of education, from early years to higher education (HE). As I read through the copy, I became fascinated by the way that this task has been embraced by the editors who have led the publication, from the very first one to my predecessor, Linda Hammersley Fletcher, who edited the journal for an astounding 12 years!

As part of BELMAS 50, I decided to track down some of my predecessors to ask them what their thoughts were and what innovations they instigated during their time as editors: Neil Hetherington took over the journal in 1999:

My first editorial was published in February 1999 even though at that time I hadn't been appointed as editor. In that editorial I introduced myself as the secondary school teacher that I was and expressed the privilege that I felt (masking the disbelief) of being asked to carry out the role. As we approached the year 2000, there was an element of reflection in that editorial, talking about the 50th Anniversary of the UN declaration of Human Rights which might (or might not) have had an impact

on the BEMAS conference themes of values in educational leadership.

I was aware that the majority of the contributors to the magazine come from a particular sector of education, namely HEI... this might lead to a one sided conversation and was keen to receive articles from people who are new to writing. I did confess that I wasn't sure what stopped people from putting their experiences into the public realm, although I have mused elsewhere on the effect of different accountability structures – practitioners don't have to publish. '...the intractable problem of the cultural change needed if end-users are to interact with this research. It seemed to me that the necessary change needed to be predicated on an increase in confidence amongst educational workers, and when this happens people will feel able to talk about their work and will be more willing to consider the ideas of others'. (*MiE* April 2000)

Since then the challenges Neil struggled with have not gone away: Intensification of workloads for those in schools, Further Education (FE) colleges and Universities gives rise to heated discussions in the press and in staff-rooms, as colleagues in every phase of education lament the erosion of precious protected time for development and reflection. Equally, the challenge of creating a journal that acts as a bridge between research and practice is still with us, as Linda Hammersley Fletcher commented:

Was it a magazine for teachers to read, or was it in fact covering a wider audience and in need of a more academic stance? Throughout my period as editor I felt strongly that this should be a journal trying to do the impossible. That is to meet the needs of academics alongside the wider school, college, local authority and an international audience (to name just the first that come to mind). I wanted to encourage well researched thought pieces, articles backed by research, papers capturing actual experiences, and all written to a high standard.

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A tall order indeed, finding the right balance for the journal has exercised editors and editorial boards since then – creating a journal that is markedly different from *EMAL*, while also retaining high standards, is a challenge we still face today. In spite of this, *MiE* presents opportunities too: opportunity to try new article types, new approaches to reviewing and new ways of encouraging nascent writers to test out their writing ‘muscle’ in a well-respected journal. Over the years, editors have adopted differing approaches to encouraging new writers through the door: Angela Thody, Editor from 1991 to 1997, explained how she went about it at BELMAS conference:

To widen the pool of our writers, initially largely only established university academics, to include newer academics and practitioners in both schools, further and higher education. I used the BELMAS Conferences to find new writers by scouring the papers and then giving potential writers, both practitioners and new academics, opportunity to publish – I used to give out letters at the conferences to those whose papers were suitable. These letters I had inadvertently printed on yellow paper and members would go around comparing who had the ‘yellow’ seal of approval.

### Crafting and editing: A writer’s toolbox

Our editorial board today comprises a wide mix of people, journalists, academics, governor support professionals, PhD students and school leaders, all bringing their unique perspectives to the table. This has enabled us to introduce a range of new articles to the journal over the past 4 years, such as opinion pieces, interviews, reflective pieces and, more recently, a middle management section. Each genre of article brings with it its own challenges: opinion pieces must be provocative yet also evidence based; reflective pieces too must be crafted in such a way as to *create a strong contemporary resonance while also invoking a range of reader-responses, encouraging the readers to think at a deeper level about the issue in question, and foster a desire to read more about the subject and encourage them to reflect on their own experiences.*

Thinking about the response that an article will provoke in the reader is often a skill that is neglected by new writers: keen to get the words onto the paper they become lost in their writing – a feeling that experienced writers are familiar with too. That is why, in our writing sessions, we cannot emphasise enough just how important it is to *leave an article to go ‘cold’ for a couple of days before returning to it.* If writers (in all genre) did this more often, many pieces would be much more ‘publication ready’ when they come to us. Writing and editing are two very different skills; we can do both, but not on the same day! Reviewers often spend a fair amount of time pointing out issues that you or your colleague could have done, before you submitted the piece. That said, our reviewers are a core part of what we do, and the reason why we do it well, as Linda pointed out: ‘Without review articles become polemic and or lacking in precision or academic quality and the editors predilections may become what is published’.

The power of the editor has been written about extensively and examined from academic and non-academic perspectives. Laband’s famous article (Laband and Piette, 1994) on favouritism versus the search for good papers pointed out that although journal editors occasionally publish sub-par papers authored by colleagues and former grad students, ‘on balance their use of professional connections enables them to identify and capture good papers’ (p. 194). Refereeing of *MiE* papers has not always been in place, as Angela Thody told us: ‘the early Research Assessment Exercise was placing pressure on academics to publish so we offered to have papers refereed’. Reviewer skill is all too important when it comes to creating good copy, and the bottom line is that reviews should, whether they recommend rejection or not, offer comments that direct the author to improve the piece, so that the extensive work that went into it is not wasted. *MiE* employs an extensive set of criteria in order to offer maximum guidance to reviewers and authors. This may seem a little top heavy to those who are used to writing for publication, but it ensures that there is transparency between authors and reviewers about the criteria against which judgements are made and revisions recommended.

In HE in England, we have lived with the Research Assessment Exercise for a long time now, but its impact on what and where academics publish has had a profound effect on what can be published and where. One of the unintended consequences of this policy has been to make interdisciplinary work very difficult to publish. This, in terms of impacting practice, is divisive in a number of ways: Complex problems that infuse the world today – often termed ‘wicked issues’ – are not resolvable from a single disciplinary perspective but require a 360-degree approach. There are numerous examples of this, perhaps the most striking and tragic being the death of Victoria Climbié, which resulted in new legislation mandating a multi-agency/multi-disciplinary approach to child protection. There is a movement in HE to break down disciplinary barriers, as Zahir Irani, Dean of Management and Law at the University of Bradford, wrote in *The Guardian* in 2018 (Irani, 2018), and a number of universities are establishing cross- or interdisciplinary centres. *The Sage Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* names a number of interdisciplinary journals that focus on a particular area from an interdisciplinary perspective. But for many, being part of a particular discipline is a big part of their identity, and certainly here in England, the ability to work in different disciplines is often seen as a weakness, rather than a strength. This is also driven by UK policy and accountability regimes that demand strict adherence to discipline.

Education in many ways is already interdisciplinary: we draw on literature that includes sociology, business, philosophy and economics, to name but a few. Our plans for the future include themed issues from a multi-disciplinary perspective; so again, we hope to be breaking new ground, something that all of my predecessors did in myriad ways, from Angela’s start-up of a refereeing process to Neil’s and Linda’s aim to include more school, FE and HE staff contributions. As the world changes, so do we.

## Breaking new ground

That said, *MiE* has since its inception broken new ground, not least in the area of equality: since 2016, we have published a number of themed issues in new areas, each containing the most up-to-the-minute research and commentary, for example, issues on Complementary Schools (October 2020), Leadership and diversity education in England: Progress in the new millennium?; Leadership preparation and development; Exploring research methods for educational leadership, and Gender in educational leadership; Where are we in research?

Perhaps one of the most striking differences between the early editions of the journal and those that came after is the shift in focus from the United Kingdom to the international and the recognition that management issues are fairly generic the world over, although the context in which they are enacted, colours perceptions and assumptions. With that in mind, the ways in which articles are framed is key to the readers' ability to understand what the challenges really are: However, we still receive a substantial number of articles that assume that the readership understands that particular context, without it having to be explained!

## Impact and *MiE*: Disseminating your research

As a journal, I believe we have a responsibility to our writers to disseminate their work as widely as possible. That is why 4 years ago, I founded the BELMAS blog, with the intention that having published in *MiE* writers could do a quick summary of their work with a link to the main article. It is not always easy for academic writing to be converted into a high-impact short piece, such as a blog: we have short attention spans – A study by Neil Thurman, Professor of Communion at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munchen, found that 55% of blog readers will read a blog post for 15 seconds (Thurman, 2017). Yet as the journal moves towards a staggering 80,000 article downloads<sup>1</sup> from 199 countries for 2020, compared to 61,000 in 2017, it is clear that a combination of Twitter, BELMAS-blog and BELMASChat – a chat hosted on Twitter on particular topics, with articles from *MiE*, made available free of charge beforehand – that our online presence is a vital element in the future of the journal: In 2019 alone, there were over 71,000 visits to the website, via desktop computer, mobile device and tablet. With the impacts of Covid-19 still reverberating around the globe, it is more important than ever that the journal uses online communication channels as effectively as it can.

## On the up!

Since 2016, when I took over first as Co-Editor in Chief, then subsequently as Editor in Chief, when my colleague Joan stepped down, we have achieved a substantial amount. It has been another very busy year for *MiE*, with the introduction of new types of article and work on our bumper



Figure 1. Past issues of *MiE*.

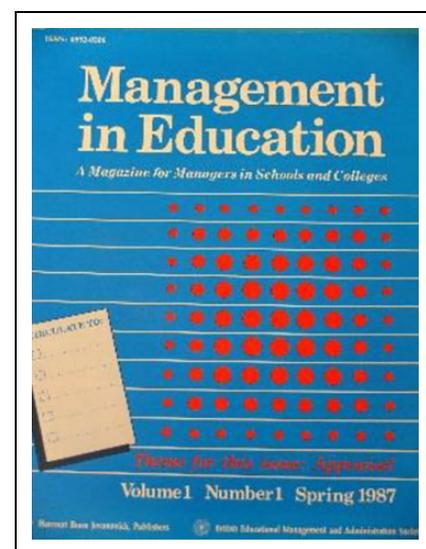


Figure 2. *MiE* first issue.



Figure 3. Social media: *MiE* Twitter feed.

issue to celebrate BELMAS 50 in January 2021. It has also been very challenging for us all due to Covid-19. As Figure 4 shows, our submission rate has skyrocketed this year, with 99 articles being submitted already (year to date).



Figure 4. Total article downloads.

Year	Total downloads
2016	53,363
2017	61,963
2018	66,880
2019	75,643
2020 YTD	35,749

If this continues, our submission rate will be the highest it has been since I started as editor, 4 years ago. The quality of articles has gone up, and this is reflected in our increase in accept ratio, from just 18% in 2018 to 39% in 2020 (Figure 4). Our article guidelines and new reviewer criteria have paid off. We are also working a lot more effectively now with new authors, giving them substantial guidance on how to improve their writing. Our peer review policy is also bearing fruit, with new reviewers paired with those who are more experienced. We rate all of our reviews in terms of content and timeliness and have built a bank of reliable and robust reviewers. *Management in Education* is now rated in the top 20 Education Administration journals on Google.

As we move forward into the next stage of the journal and 50 years of BELMAS, it is time to reflect to celebrate our successes and the hard work of previous editors, their deputies and editorial boards and to look forward to the challenges and changes yet to come. As the world of education evolves, sometimes in response to, and sometimes apparently oblivious of, the political, social and economic challenges that occur, *MiE* is ideally placed to be the voice

of evidence-based management in education in an international context.

### Acknowledgements

The author thanks Angela Thody, Neil Hetherington and Linda Hammersley Fletcher for their thoughts and contributions and Maggie Preedy and Stephen Rayner for help in collating the information.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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### Note

1. Based on year to date figures.

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