



Free to Publish, Free to Read: Elevating Diamond Open-Access Journals in Special Education and Related Fields



Andrew M. Markelz
James Madison University

Bryan G. Cook
University of Virginia

Lisa Dieker
University of Kansas

Sarah A. Nagro
Texas A&M University

Benjamin S. Riden
James Madison University

William J. Therrien
University of Virginia

Margaret P. Weiss
George Mason University

Abstract

Contemporary scholarly publishing is dominated by large, for-profit publishers whose business models restrict access to research and prioritize profit. These constraints are particularly problematic in applied fields such as special education, where educators, families, and policymakers rely on research to inform practice but are often excluded by paywalls. Diamond open-access (DOA) publishing, defined as free to publish and free to read, offers a promising alternative that aligns with values of equity, accessibility, and community-driven scholarship. This paper examines the limitations of the current publishing ecosystem, situates DOA within the broader landscape of open-access models, and synthesizes the benefits and challenges. Although DOA journals enhance equity and may increase scholarly impact, they face barriers related to sustainability, visibility, and prestige. To address these challenges, we introduce the Alliance of Open Access Special Education Journals (www.OpenSEAJournals.com), a collaborative network designed to strengthen DOA publishing through shared visibility, community building, and advocacy. We describe the Alliance's guiding principles, member journals, and strategic initiatives. We conclude with a call to action urging scholars to actively support DOA through submission, review, dissemination, and institutional advocacy. Advancing DOA publishing represents a critical step toward a more equitable, accessible, and impactful system of scholarship in special education and related fields.

Keywords: *academic publishing; accessibility; equity; open access; scholarship; special education*

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Large, for-profit publishers have dominated modern scholarly publishing for decades (see Larivière et al., 2015), fostering perverse incentives in both publishing and academic culture, such as prioritizing profits and citations over quality and access (Edwards & Roy, 2017). Diamond open-access (DOA) publishing, in which articles are free to publish and free to read, offers an emerging alternative with significant benefits for researchers and the public, particularly in applied fields like special education in which practice and policy are directly informed by published research and scholarship.

Diamond open access (DOA) is based on the idea of sharing knowledge and on a commitment to social values such as embracing diversity (across subjects, disciplines, and languages) and equity in access and participation. In this way, Diamond OA stands for the autonomy of scholarly publishing and the provision of service to research communities without commercial interests. (Hahn et al., 2022, p. 8)

Despite this potential, DOA journals face important challenges as they continue to develop within special education and related fields. The purpose of this paper is to introduce and contextualize the emerging role of DOA publishing and describe the formation of a newly established coalition of DOA journals in special education and related fields. In the following sections, we discuss the contemporary model of scientific publishing and some of its primary shortcomings, introduce DOA and its benefits and challenges, present the Alliance of Open Access Special Education Journals, and call for scholars in special education and related fields to support DOA to help advance the field.

Problems with the Contemporary Model of Scientific Publishing

A fundamental problem with modern scholarly publishing is that many articles are locked behind paywalls and cannot be accessed freely by people who are unaffiliated with institutions, such as universities, that pay for access. As such, many teachers, administrators, parents, and policymakers are denied access to published special education research and scholarship. Cook and colleagues (2026) found that only ~16% of published articles in special education journals in 2022 were licensed open access and permanently available to the public. Inaccessibility due to journal paywalls significantly impedes the potential impact of published research and scholarship in special education. For example, special educators cannot translate research they cannot access into practice.

The primary purpose of paywalls is to generate profit for scholarly publishers. Because these publishers hold near-monopolies in many fields, universities have little choice but to pay high subscription fees so their faculty and students can access otherwise restricted research (van der Kolk, 2026). Because journals do not pay scholars for conducting research, writing papers, or reviewing papers (e.g., Aczel et al., 2021), scholarly publishing is among the world's most profitable industries. For example, the largest scholarly publisher, Elsevier, reported ~\$1.5 billion in profit in 2024, with a massive 38% profit margin (Beigel et al., 2025). For-profit publishers have begun to embrace gold- and hybrid-open-access publishing, in which authors can make their articles free to read by paying article-processing charges (APCs). However, APCs for many journals are expensive (famously, *Nature's* AOC is > \$US11,000), and these approaches merely shift the source of publishers' profits from consumers to authors. For example, Elsevier collected ~\$583 million in APCs in 2023 alone (Beigel et al., 2025).

Evidence suggests that the profit incentives underlying scholarly publishing have undermined the quality and culture of science (Abizadeh, 2024). For example, journals' profits are tied in part to the volume of articles they publish and the frequency with which those articles are cited. Somewhat paradoxically, the increasing volume of publications and focus on citations tend to ossify science rather than drive the pursuit of new ideas (e.g., Chu & Evans, 2021).

While rewards remain tied to volume, prestige, and impact of publications, researchers will be nudged away from riskier, local, interdisciplinary, and long-term work. The result is a treadmill of constant activity with limited progress, whereas core scholarly practices – such as reading, reflecting, and engaging with others' contributions – are deprioritized. What looks like productivity often masks intellectual exhaustion built on a demoralizing, narrowing scientific vision. (Beigel et al., 2025, pp. 4-5)

Most broadly, scholarly publishers have wrested control of the scientific literature base away from researchers and scholars. Large publishers that are motivated primarily by profit margins set the rules for how science is reviewed and published, making scholarly publishing and science in general less innovative and responsive (Mudditt, 2024).

The Diamond Open-Access Alternative

There are several ways to make scholarly work freely available to readers (see Lindstrom et al., 2025). However, some of the most prominent models (e.g., gold open access [where all articles in a journal are freely available] and hybrid open access [where individual articles can be made open]) require authors to pay substantial APCs. Another model, bronze open access, involves publishers temporarily making articles free to read without having an open license; however, these

articles can be placed back behind a paywall at any time. Some authors also share published versions of their articles online without permission (e.g., on ResearchGate or personal websites), a practice sometimes called “black open access.” Although this approach is common (Cook et al., 2026), it violates copyright and may result in the article being removed from public access.

A more sustainable and legal alternative is green open access, or self-archiving. In this model, authors post versions of their work that lack publisher formatting (such as preprints and postprints) in online repositories such as EdArXiv or PsyArxiv. Although postprints contain the same content as the final published version, relying on readers to locate manuscript versions of articles in repositories or on personal websites is highly unlikely to solve broader access barriers (Fleming et al., 2021).

An emerging alternative in the scholarly publishing landscape of special education is DOA. DOA journals are similar to gold OA journals in that all articles are free to read; but they differ by also being free for authors to publish in (i.e., no APCs) – free to publish, free to read. DOA journals are usually online-only and operate at relatively low cost. Their expenses are typically covered either by organizations or foundations that support free public access to research, or by institutions (such as university libraries) that aim to provide an affordable alternative to the costly traditional publishing model.

Benefits of Diamond Open-Access Journals

The potential benefits of publishing in DOA are many. Conceptually, it provides the primary benefit of open-access publishing (e.g., making publications freely accessible to all consumers) without the drawbacks of other open-access models (e.g., cost to authors in gold and hybrid OA). Indeed, Kumari and Subaveerapandivan (2025)

found that authors perceive DOA as highly equitable and inclusive, more so than gold open access due to the lack of APCs. For authors who want to increase the reach and impact of their work, there is strong evidence of an open-access citation advantage, meaning that open-access articles are cited more often than those behind paywalls. This pattern has been found across disciplines (Momeni et al., 2021; Piwowar et al., 2018), within special education (Fleming & Cook, 2026), and for measures of article use and social media attention (Wang et al., 2015). For example, in 2017, the American Educational Research Association unintentionally made all its journals open access for two months. During that time, monthly downloads across its six traditionally paywalled journals increased markedly, with individual journals experiencing increases ranging from 55% to 95%. In contrast, downloads for its gold open-access journal did not change (Gershenson et al., 2020). Greater downloads of peer-reviewed articles by consumers who would not otherwise access them seem especially important in applied fields like special education in which practice is directly informed by research.

Challenges Associated with Diamond Open-Access Journals

Although free-to-publish and free-to-read journals offer important benefits in scholarly publishing, DOA journals face several practical challenges. DOA journals tend to be small publications tied to specific communities and topics, have little financial support, and rely heavily on volunteer labor (Bosman et al., 2021; Brun et al., 2024; Simard, 2024), which create challenges to the model's sustainability, infrastructure, visibility, prestige, and scalability.

Absent publisher profits, DOA journals can—and typically do—operate on limited budgets

(Bosman et al., 2021). However, publishing scholarship is never free (Herb, 2026).

When no revenue is collected from subscriptions or APCs, someone must absorb the expense. Often, that “someone” is a small editorial team working unpaid, a university department stretching its limited budget, or a scholarly society relying on volunteer time. (Sayab, 2025, para. 12)

Lack of support from large, well-resourced publishers also impacts infrastructure. Volunteers in DOA journals often provide human infrastructure for critical tasks such as copyediting and proof reading. Technical and production infrastructure for managing the peer-review process, generating machine-readable versions of papers, tabulating views and downloads for each paper, and checking for plagiarism is often absent, outdated, and suboptimal, and/or depletes already strained budgets (see Bosman et al., 2021).

The small scale, limited budgets, and inadequate infrastructure of many DOA journals contribute to restricted visibility, prestige, and credibility. Indexing, which is critical for content discoverability and serves as an indicator of journal quality and prestige (Padula, 2019), poses a major challenge for DOA journals. Indeed, Simard and colleagues (2025) found that only 16% of the DOA journals examined were indexed in Web of Science and Scopus, compared with 45% of gold OA journals. One DOA journal editor described this process as “a vicious, hegemonic circle — we are too small to be included, and we’re kept small because we’re not included” (Bosman et al., 2021). The absence of indexing and impact factors may discourage many researchers from submitting to DOA journals. In addition, researchers and readers may mistakenly associate new or small-DOA journals with predatory journals (Bueter, 2023),

thereby undermining perceptions of their quality, credibility, and prestige.

If DOA is to move beyond a boutique model of academic publishing (Herb, 2026), it will need to scale beyond a loose collection of small, community-driven journals. Although many advocates of DOA publishing are driven by idealistic visions of replacing large, for-profit publishers in scholarly publishing, the field remains dominated by for-profit publishers, with only ~6% of published articles coming from DOA journals (Herb, 2026). As Rice (2026) noted, given the challenges related to budgets, sustainability, infrastructure, and visibility, the DOA model “may be viable on a small scale, [but] it is not viable at the scale suggested by current policy ambitions” (para. 4). If those ambitions are to be achieved, DOA journals will need additional supports to enhance sustainability, visibility, and infrastructure—particularly supports grounded in greater coordination and collaboration.

The Alliance of Open Access Special Education Journals

The Alliance of Open Access Special Education Journals (OpenSEAJournals.com; hereinafter the Alliance) was established to advance DOA publishing in special education and related applied fields by, in part, addressing the aforementioned challenges. The Alliance serves as a collaborative infrastructure, bringing together DOA journals that share a commitment to free-to-publish, free-to-read scholarship. Its core purpose is to demonstrate that rigorous, impactful scholarly publishing in special education can thrive without paywalls or APCs. At its foundation, the Alliance is guided by three principles:

1. Equity of access – Research should be available to practitioners, families, policymakers, researchers, and students without financial or institutional barriers.
2. Equity of participation - Scholars should be able to publish based on the quality and relevance of their work rather than their ability to pay publishing fees.
3. Scholarly quality and integrity - DOA does not require compromise in peer review standards, editorial rigor, or ethical oversight.

Overview of Member Journals

The Alliance functions as a networked ecosystem in which member journals retain editorial independence, ownership, and identity while benefiting from shared visibility, values, and support. The seven journals currently affiliated with the Alliance collectively reflect the breadth and applied nature of special education scholarship. Current journal membership includes:

- *Research in Special Education (RiSE)*: The mission of *RiSE* is to (a) openly disseminate rigorous, relevant, and accessible research that contributes to the advancement of special education and related fields and (b) openly publish commentaries, theoretical analyses, and practical guides to advance the rigor, openness, and equity of research and practice in special education and related fields.
- *Journal of Special Education Preparation (JOSEP)*: *JOSEP* publishes research-to-practice articles for special education faculty in higher education settings. *JOSEP* brings its readers the latest on evidence-based instructional strategies, technologies, procedures, and techniques to prepare special education teachers and leaders. The focus of its practical content is on immediate application.
- *The Dialog: A Journal for Inclusive Early Childhood Professionals*: The mission of *The Dialog* is to promote the translation of research to practice in pursuit of meaningful inclusion for young children and their families across

early childhood personnel preparation, practice, and policy.

- *Focus on Exceptional Children*: The mission of *Focus* is to publish invited manuscripts that critically examine contemporary issues, synthesize research and its implications, and propose innovative agendas related to the education and development of individuals with disabilities across the lifespan. The journal emphasizes evidence-based practice, policy relevance, and conceptual analysis, aiming to inform researchers, practitioners, families, and policymakers.
- *The Journal of Case Learning and Exceptional Learners (JCLEL)*: *JCLEL* publishes special education case studies for students with moderate to extensive living and learning needs. Case studies are accepted for publication as either observation-based descriptions of individual experiences or as intervention-based descriptions of individualized education program team decisions, interventions, or associated outcomes.
- *Transition in Practice*: The mission of *Transition in Practice* is to publish research-to-practice information and materials for special educators/practitioners in transition and secondary education settings.
- *Single Case in the Social Sciences (SCSS)*: *SCSS* publishes original experimental single-case studies, systematic reviews or meta-analyses of single-case research, and methods articles to enhance the rigorous conduct and transparent reporting of single-case studies.

Current and Future Activities of the Alliance

The Alliance was designed not only to support existing DOA journals in the Alliance but also to address the structural challenges that have limited the visibility, influence, and perceived legitimacy

of DOA publishing in special education. Its activities focus on amplifying the benefits of DOA while actively confronting issues of awareness, sustainability, and prestige that have historically constrained such journals.

At present, the Alliance serves as a centralized hub for discovery and advocacy for DOA journals in special education and related fields. Through its public-facing platform and other efforts (e.g., presentations), the Alliance increases the visibility of member journals. It provides clear signaling to authors, reviewers, institutions, and readers about shared values and standards. In this way, the Alliance serves an important norm-setting function, reinforcing that scholarly rigor is determined by editorial leadership and review processes rather than by publication fees or publisher brand.

The Alliance also plays a community-building role, bringing together editors and scholars who might otherwise operate in isolation. Independent DOA journals often rely on a small number of volunteers and operate with limited institutional support. By fostering collaboration across journals, the Alliance reduces duplication of effort, facilitates the sharing of expertise, and creates a professional network committed to sustainable, scholar-led publishing in special education and related fields.

Looking ahead, the Alliance is focused on building capacity while maintaining a low-cost, non-profit publishing model. Future efforts emphasize supporting editors and reviewers through shared guidance and training resources that promote consistency and quality without sacrificing editorial independence. The Alliance also aims to broaden how impact is understood and evaluated in special education scholarship. Rather than centering narrow metrics such as journal impact factors, future initiatives will highlight alternative indicators of influence that better align with the

field's applied nature, including practitioner reach, policy relevance, and the use of open-science practices (e.g., shared materials). These efforts are intended to support authors whose work directly informs practice and policy but may be undervalued within traditional evaluation systems.

Finally, the Alliance is committed to engaging faculty, professional organizations, and academic institutions in conversations about recognition and reward. By advocating for DOA journals in promotion, tenure, and merit processes, the Alliance seeks to align scholarly incentives with values of equity, access, and public impact. Through sustained collaboration and transparent infrastructure, the Alliance positions DOA not as an alternative or marginal model, but as a viable, ethical, and forward-looking future for publishing in special education and related fields.

We believe that establishing a stable and visible presence of DOA journals in special education and related fields will meaningfully advance scientific progress, equity, and the translation of research into practice. Although DOA journals are unlikely to replace traditional, for-profit publishers soon, they represent a viable and necessary alternative—particularly in applied fields where access to research and scholarship directly affects educational outcomes for learners, families, and practitioners. Sustaining this model, however, depends not on passive support but on deliberate, collective action from higher education faculty, who are central to shaping the norms, incentives, and practices of scholarly publishing.

A Call to Action for the Scholarly Community

If DOA publishing is to move from a promising alternative to a durable and respected part of the scholarly ecosystem, scholars must actively participate in building and legitimizing it. We urge faculty in special education and related fields to take the following actions:

1. *Submit High-Quality Work to DOA Journals*

Scholars can directly influence the credibility and impact of DOA journals by submitting high-quality empirical studies, syntheses, and practitioner manuscripts. Publishing strong research and scholarship in DOA journals signals confidence in the model and helps build their reputation and visibility.

2. *Integrate DOA Benefits into Publication Decision-Making*

When selecting outlets for manuscripts, scholars should weigh not only perceived prestige, but also accessibility and potential impact on practice and policy. Choosing DOA journals aligns dissemination decisions with the field's applied mission (i.e., ensuring that research reaches all interested educators, families, and policymakers).

3. *Serve as Reviewers and Editorial Leaders*

DOA journals depend on scholarly expertise to maintain rigorous peer review. Scholars can contribute by:

- Serving as peer reviewers and providing timely, high-quality feedback
- Joining editorial or advisory boards
- Mentoring early-career scholars in reviewing for DOA journals

4. *Develop and Lead Special Issues or Practitioner-Focused Series*

Scholars can help expand the reach and relevance of DOA journals by proposing and guest-editing special issues, particularly those that:

- Address high-priority topics in special education
- Translate research into actionable guidance for practitioners
- Highlight interdisciplinary or underrepresented areas of scholarship

5. *Promote DOA Scholarship in Teaching and Mentoring*

Scholars shape the next generation of researchers and teacher educators. They can:

- Assign DOA articles in coursework to normalize their use
- Encourage graduate students to publish in DOA venues
- Teach students about open-access models and responsible dissemination practices

6. *Advocate within Departments and Institutions*

A critical barrier to DOA adoption is the continued reliance on prestige-based metrics (e.g., impact factors) in promotion, tenure, and merit decisions. Scholars who are faculty in higher education can:

- Advocate for recognizing DOA publications as high-quality scholarly contributions
- Support broader definitions of impact (e.g., practitioner reach, policy influence, public accessibility)
- Encourage departments to explicitly include open-access contributions in evaluation criteria explicitly

7. *Increase Visibility and Dissemination*

Scholars can help amplify DOA journals and published articles by:

- Sharing DOA publications through professional networks, conferences, and social media
- Citing DOA articles in their own work
- Highlighting DOA research in presentations, workshops, and professional development

Moving from Support to Stewardship

The future of DOA publishing will not be determined solely by editorial teams or institutional sponsors; it will be determined by whether faculty collectively choose to steward a more equitable and accessible system of scholarly communication. Every submission, review, citation, download, and policy change contributes to shaping that system. Free-to-publish, free-to-read journals can become a

sustainable, credible, and high-impact model for disseminating research in special education and related fields, but only if scholars treat them as integral to the field's future. The question is not whether DOA journals can succeed. The question is whether we, as a scholarly community, are willing to invest in and take responsibility for their success.

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