evaluation of the NERF bulletin trial

phase two report

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evaluation of the NERF bulletin trial: phase two report

final report

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Headline findings

This study found that the NERF Bulletin is **well positioned** among other kinds of products available for communicating research to teachers and lecturers.

The Bulletin offers **quality-assured research summaries** with potential appeal to teachers and support staff. It also provides **sources of further information**. These features make it of potential interest to teachers, who see it as a useful addition to the market place.

Teachers will tend to skim-read the Bulletin, only choosing to read items of **particular relevance** to their work. For this reason, design features that make the content easy to navigate are much appreciated.

The current appearance of the Bulletin is **not sufficiently appealing** and would deter teachers from wishing to engage with it. Suggested improvements include better layout, more space on the page, use of colour and visual elements.

Teachers are likely to **use the Bulletin** in a number of ways, including:

- for general information
- to follow up items of particular interest with further reading
- to recommend items to colleagues
- to contribute to further study
- to inform their own research
- to validate their practice
- to change their practice.

1 Introduction

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) on behalf of the National Education Research Forum (NERF) has commissioned two issues of an evidence-based bulletin for practitioners. The Bulletin aims to provide a conduit for research to reach teaching communities across England. In doing so it is hoped that the Bulletin will make an important contribution to school and college improvement and teachers' professional development. The NFER has been commissioned by NERF to evaluate the effectiveness of the Bulletin by obtaining a representative cross-section of views from teachers and local education authority (LEA) staff.

In phase one of the evaluation, the research team carried out a questionnaire survey of teachers in English nursery, primary, secondary and special schools. The survey sought to identify both the extent to which teachers currently read, apply or carry out research and also their views on the potential effectiveness of the Bulletin (Taggart *et al*., 2004). The current report will therefore concentrate on findings derived from phase two of the evaluation. It had the following aims:

- to help position the NERF Bulletin among other kinds of products available for communicating research to teachers

- to provide information about the way teachers might use the NERF Bulletin in developing their practice and in school improvement.

To meet these aims, the research involved seven focus group interviews with school and college staff (40 people in all) and telephone interviews with four people responsible for continuing professional development in LEAs.

1.1 About this report

The following section sets a context for the evaluation and summarises key findings from research into teachers' use of research. Chapter 3 contains some brief details about this evaluation and chapter 4 considers practitioners' views on appraising and accessing research. Chapter 5 describes practitioners' views on the Bulletin and chapter 6 discusses the Bulletin in relation to other publications and websites. The report ends with conclusions and recommendations (chapter 7) and an appendix containing further information about the study's sample and methods.

2 Teachers' engagement with research: a context

In a keynote address to the Teacher Training Agency Annual Conference in 1996, Professor David Hargreaves made the case for teaching to become an evidence-based profession (Hargreaves, 1996). He presented a challenge to teachers to develop a stronger emphasis on research-informed practice and for researchers to disseminate research in more accessible ways. This has generated much debate, both in research and policy communities, on what these accessible ways might be. An important element of this discussion has been to draw on research into practitioners' use of research information.

2.1 Influences on teachers' use of research

A recent NFER research project considered the role of LEAs in promoting the use of research for school improvement (Wilson *et al*., 2003). The project began with a comprehensive review of the literature on the use of research to improve professional practice (Hemsley-Brown and Sharp, 2003). Further work at the NFER and elsewhere (Rickinson *et al*., 2003; NCSL, 2003; Walter *et al*., 2004; NERF, 2001) has added to our understanding of the key issues and has enabled us to identify the main barriers to and facilitators of practitioners' use of research. The main barriers to their use of research evidence concern:

- time

- access

- relevance

- the influence of teachers' professional culture.

The main factors facilitating practitioners' use of research evidence are:

- making research-based information readily available

- ensuring that research addresses practitioners' interests

- ensuring that the presentation of research information is clear, concise and appealing to the audience

- reassuring practitioners that the information is from a trustworthy source and is well conducted

- making explicit the generalisability and practical application of the research

- providing evidence of the benefits of using research, especially from fellow practitioners

- providing incentives and rewards for using research.

In addition to these specific points about teachers' use of research evidence, it is important to consider the relationship between engagement *with* research and engagement *in* research. Both may be seen as contributing to the development of improving pedagogy and reflective practice, which many have argued to be at the heart of professionalism. As McBeath *et al*. (1996) argue: 'The commitment to critical and systematic reflection on practice as a basis for individual and collective development is at the heart of what it means to be a professional teacher' (p. 7).

3 About this study

Focus group interviews were conducted in seven institutions across four educational phases – nursery, primary, secondary and further education (FE). Each focus group comprised a broad range of practitioners, including headteachers, teachers/lecturers, nursery nurses and teaching assistants. The size of the groups ranged from five to eight individuals (see Appendix for further information).

The NFER approached institutions that were already known to be research-engaged. For a more in-depth discussion of the research-engaged school see McBeath *et al*. (1996). Those who agreed to take part were interested in finding out more about research in general and the Bulletin in particular. For this reason, their views cannot be considered to be typical of practitioners across England. On the other hand, by approaching those with an interest in research, it is hoped that this evaluation will provide an indication of the potential for the Bulletin to contribute to evidence-based practice.

The main aim of the focus group interviews was to find out about the potential of research information to inform practice. More specifically we asked practitioners about:

- the types of research they relate to

- the methods they use to find out about research

- their views on the second edition of the Bulletin in relation to other research-based publications and websites.

4 Practitioners' views on appraising and accessing research

The focus group participants were asked about the kind of research they considered to be valuable; the kind of research 'they related to'. There was a high degree of consensus across all focus groups in addressing this question. Research seen as valuable was considered to possess the following qualities:

- relevance to the audience

- concise/succinct presentation

- easy to skim and well signposted for the reader

- inclusion of case studies

- easy to translate into classroom practice.

These findings corroborate previous research and emphasise the point that teachers will engage with research information if they consider it to be an effective use of their time.

It is useful to note that there was frequent mention, among the focus group participants, of the work of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam on assessment for learning (see Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al.*, 2002). Practitioners felt that this work engaged with their own reflections on classroom practice and, indeed, affirmed some of their intuitive perceptions concerning formative assessment.

There was some evidence of a distinction between the expectations of experienced practitioners, who were more content to adapt research findings to their own ends, and those of their less-experienced colleagues, who wanted items of immediate practical use. At a sixth form college, for example, a newly qualified teacher who teaches a BTech course in construction professed his inexperience in addressing the gaps in key skills needed by his students:

I am surprised I am having to do such a lot of teaching of basic communication and maths. I don't know how to do that best and at the moment, I am doing it by trial and error so I would like to know what the best practice is. Lesson ideas and plans would therefore be very useful.

4.1 Accessing research through the internet

Focus group participants were asked how they found out about research evidence. The most immediate responses from all groups related to using the internet. Participants referred to the usefulness of search engines as a starting point for finding research, although they commented on the difficulty of finding exactly what they wanted. This was well expressed in the following two quotations: the former is from a primary practitioner and the latter is from a secondary practitioner:

> *The internet has opened up a whole new world. I don't know how you could do a course without the internet because at least it gives you a starting point.*

> *I have a preference for printed materials because it takes such a long time to find things on the internet.*

Participants from an FE college referred to the potential of the college intranet to act as a research portal. In this case, part of the intranet had been given over to an area for staff training and resources, where skills and expertise could be shared. In the other college, one of the practitioners had discovered some useful resources for teaching key skills on the intranet. However, she had only come across these by chance. She then made the point that because of the tendency for practitioners in the college to work in relative isolation, it was not sufficient to put information on the intranet without telling colleagues how to find it.

Respondents' reasons for the choice of internet/intranet were the comprehensiveness of information, the availability of computers and the opportunity for dialogue via a discussion forum. A wide range of websites were mentioned, most commonly those provided by the DfES and National College for School Leadership (NCSL). Others included local authority websites, TeacherNet, NFER, National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA). In one of the secondary schools, the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) made used of an online forum for SENCOs, where research articles are shared.

In addition to internet resources, DVDs were mentioned in two of the focus groups. These were considered to be a convenient, interactive format in which examples of good practice could be disseminated in a clear, graphic and straightforward way which minimised the need for written text.

In a focus group interview held at a sixth form college, one of the practitioners referred very positively to *Teachers' TV* as a resource for discovering new research-informed ideas about teaching and learning. None of the other six practitioners present had seen any programmes on this channel but were very keen to find out about it. The conversation quickly turned to details of transmission times, cost and availability, which involved everyone in the group.

4.2 Accessing research through printed materials

When asked about their engagement with research literature, the single most common publication mentioned was the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*. Although staff recognised that this was not a dedicated research publication, they considered that research included in the TES was likely to be relevant and clearly expressed. However, one of the primary schools did not subscribe to the TES. A teacher at this school explained that staff did not always want to read educational literature: *'sometimes you need to get away from teaching'*.

The second most common type of literature to which focus group participants referred was that provided by unions and teacher associations, usually in the form of the union magazine. Associations for headteachers such as the National Association for Headteachers (NAHT) and the Secondary Heads Association (SHA) were mentioned most often. Teachers engaged with research through these publications because of existing personal subscription or membership: learning about research is therefore *one* of the perceived benefits of these publications, along with staying abreast of news and educational events.

The third kind of literature mentioned took the form of succinct reports and newsletters produced by educational bodies such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) the NCSL (*ldr* magazine) and the Institute of Education, University of London. This kind of literature, constituting a report or bulletin, was often issued free, received by email or downloaded from a website. Research conducted by Ofsted was mentioned favourably in two focus groups, in particular the review of the literacy and numeracy strategies and the publication *Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools*. One practitioner made a point of reading the analysis of performance data carried out by the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA) every year.

> A practitioner at the early years centre mentioned an article in the *Times Educational Supplement* which she had read about two years ago. The article summarised research about behaviour management, focusing on reinforcement of positive behaviour. In particular, it showed how a teacher's tendency to draw a child's attention to something they had done well had encouraged the child to repeat the positive behaviour. She decided to adopt this strategy herself and was pleased with the results.

As regards more specific journals and specialist publications, these were accessed mostly through personal subscription. Practitioners at secondary and FE level subscribed to specialist publications such as *Teaching Geography, Pastoral Care, Support for Learning,* and the *British Journal of Psychology*. Other publications were produced by the Association for Science Education (ASE), the Association for Teachers of Mathematics (ATM), the National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN) and the Association for the Teaching of the Social Sciences (ATSS).

Primary and nursery practitioners mentioned that, in addition to personal subscriptions, their schools had institutional subscriptions to journals such as *Child Education* and *Early Education*.

> In a secondary school with an established culture of engagement with research, staff had established a practice whereby one person would recommend a book (*The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell was mentioned). This was then circulated, as a way of stimulating ideas, establishing a common frame of reference and contributing to organisational change.

4.3 Accessing research through mediators

An emerging theme in the focus group discussions was the role that key people played in acting as mediators or 'gatekeepers' for research evidence. Sharing of research was often informal, usually from headteacher/principal to other staff.

> One secondary school had developed a more formal means of sharing research. It had established a research unit which worked in partnership with a local university to nurture research projects. The head of the research unit explained that part of his role was to disseminate research information throughout the school.

A year 1 teacher and primary strategy coordinator endorsed the importance of sharing research among colleagues, referring to it as 'mini-building blocks which make you the teacher you are'.

A primary headteacher posed an important question: she recognised that the 'layers of management have a responsibility' to disseminate research information, but queried 'who does it for managers?'. Later on in the discussion, the same headteacher suggested that LEA advisers are 'the people whose job it is to know what is current and where to point you'.

LEAs have the potential to provide mediation and networking roles. The research team explored this with four LEA advisers, asking about their role in relation to sharing information about educational research. All four interviewees were from authorities which were known to have an interest in promoting research engagement.

The interviewees were all able to identify key networks in their authority where research did or could potentially play a part. These included:

- contributing to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) initiatives, such as Professional Learning Academies and training programmes for school staff (including Advanced Skills Teachers, trainee teachers, newly qualified teachers and teaching assistants)

- discussion within school networks (e.g. primary schools, networked learning communities)

- contributing to a specific encouragement of practitioner research (e.g. through LEA networks)

- forming part of accredited postgraduate courses (some of which had been developed in partnership with the LEA)

- forming part of the information provided to schools (e.g. through intranet sites and newsletters)

- informing advisers' own responsibility for broad areas of work, such as school improvement or remodelling
- helping to meet the information and CPD needs of advisory teams.

The advisers acknowledged their own role as leaders and mediators. All four said that their role included sharing information (including research information) with others. For example, one described herself as: 'acting as a facilitator and giving pointers to teachers'. One went further, stating that his role included: 'valuing and giving permission to research. It is still a matter of addressing hearts and minds, raising the status of research and giving messages affirming its importance.'

In order to provide a mediating role for research information, LEA advisers themselves need to be well informed. The four LEA interviewees said they accessed educational research in a variety of different ways, most commonly through professional journals and the internet. Two LEAs used a document summary service, which provided brief synopses of key educational publications, such as official reports and strategy documents. However, it could be difficult for them to fit this responsibility into a busy schedule. One adviser said: 'Printed materials are not used in a structured way. For example, I have on my desk an article on mathematics teaching which someone has copied for me.'

4.4 Accessing research through continuing professional development

Both the LEA advisers and the focus group participants were asked about the role of research in CPD.

The four LEAs had differing organisational approaches to CPD. For example, whereas one adviser had direct responsibility for organising training courses, another LEA had delegated CPD to an independent provider. One adviser had overall responsibility for professional development of staff at an early stage in their careers. She mentioned that her authority had just made a commitment that all their courses would be 'supported by up-to-the-minute research'.

Focus group participants also mentioned the role of research information within CPD. Three areas of continuing professional development were discussed by the focus group practitioners:

- conferences, seminars and workshops
- formal programmes of study such as foundation courses, masters degrees and doctorates
- research projects with LEA adviser and/or academic support.

Seminars, workshops and courses were acknowledged to be important sources of research information, as one practitioner said: 'When you go on courses, they tend to summarise research for you.' There was general agreement that attending a training event where a particular piece of research was 'well presented' made an enormous difference to the ways in which practitioners engaged with research and how they reflected on their teaching.

In particular, practitioners mentioned speakers on the subjects of assessment for learning and 'brain-based' learning who presented their own classroom-based research in an engaging, confident and inspirational way. National conferences of headteachers and, in one case, the International Conference of Principals, were seen as important fora for the dissemination of evidence-based practice.

Several participants talked about the impact of hearing research presented by an inspiring researcher. A headteacher of a primary school said she was 'inspired by people' – a comment that was echoed by other practitioners in other focus groups. She recalled presentations by two researchers (Louise Stoll and Dylan Wiliam). These sessions had prompted her to search out recommended research publications. Similarly, a primary teacher, commented that 'listening to Alistair Smith [a researcher] profoundly changed the way I taught and I did go off and read the books'.

Involvement in formal programmes of study provided opportunities for engagement with research and theory.

A teaching assistant in a primary school explained that studying for a foundation degree had helped her to open her mind to educational theory. In her opinion, those who were teaching in the 1980s did not seem to value educational theory. She had read work by Tina Bruce (an early years researcher) and realised that she had ignored Piaget and Vygotsky in the past. Theory seemed more relevant now and the course had made her read more.

> A teacher in the same school agreed that theories are becoming more important for teachers. She was taking part in a course on thinking skills, which made reference to Piaget and Vygotsky. She said, 'In my PGCE [postgraduate certificate in education], there was no reference to these theories, but I have found them useful.'

Practitioners engaging in further study said this had made an impact on how they read research articles. For these people, a good set of references was important to enable follow-up reading and cross-referencing between research publications.

Several of the focus group discussions touched on notions of professionalism. For example, a primary school headteacher suggested that there had been a change in culture recently, resulting in a tide of critical thinking in schools: 'Now there is a heavier emphasis about how research informs practice in school, teachers are more into questioning what they are doing.'

Some LEAs had developed an authority-wide policy of encouraging school staff to engage with research. They supported schools in developing action research projects alongside national initiatives such as the Best Practice Research Scholarships and with support from leading academics such as John McBeath. Practitioners acknowledged an important link between involvement in their own research and interest in the findings of national research studies. A head of humanities talked about the role of research in professionalism:

> *It's part of the professionalism of the job – before it was about being a teacher teaching in the classroom, it's definitely changing… Research is part of the professionalism that we need to reclaim for ourselves, like doctors and lawyers have. We are now finding out about the pedagogy of teaching and the craft of it.*

4.5 Key messages on practitioners' access to research

- Focus group participants see the internet as the first point of call for finding relevant research.
- They also access research findings through printed journals and newsletters.

- Mediators have a central role to play in disseminating research throughout the education sector. Key mediators included LEA staff, trainers, headteachers/principals and other staff with posts of responsibility.

- Mediators need access to concise and relevant information that is easy to pass on to others.

- CPD provides opportunities for practitioners to access and become interested in research. Inspirational speakers are important catalysts for engaging practitioners with research.

- The climate of research engagement (propagated by LEAs and school leaders amongst others) plays an important part in whether and how practitioners interact with research.

5 Responses to the Bulletin

This section contains information from both the LEA advisers and the focus group participants concerning their responses to the NERF Bulletin. The second edition of the Bulletin was sent to participants in advance, although not all participants had had the chance to study it in detail before the interviews took place.

The four LEA advisers had a range of responses to the Bulletin. One adviser was already aware of it and using it in his practice. He said:

> *It* [the Bulletin] *informs my thinking, sharpens my focus and keeps me relevant. I send parts round to other colleagues (such as members of the local authority senior management team and lead senior advisers). I take digested elements of it to put in the local authority paper and on the intranet to all schools.*

The other three advisers were not aware of the Bulletin until they were approached by the NFER team. One of them was not well disposed towards it, finding it 'difficult to penetrate' and being unsure of its purpose. Not surprisingly, this adviser was not committed to using it in future. The other two were more positive. They suggested that they could recommend articles to colleagues, put the Bulletin on websites/intranet sites and use it in CPD. One said: 'I am in the process of setting up a CPD website for teachers and a link to the Bulletin could go on this. I also intend to raise awareness about it at conferences.' The other had decided to recommend one of the articles (on behaviour management) to the mentor for graduate teachers.

Only one of the focus group participants had seen the Bulletin prior to being sent a copy for the purpose of the evaluation. Nevertheless, the idea of the Bulletin was broadly welcomed.

One practitioner said: 'Looking at the NERF Bulletin, I can see that there are a lot of things which could benefit my research.'

The positive responses from focus group participants can be grouped into three broad categories. There were statements about the relevance of the content and the level of detail, the opportunity for readers to find out more about a specific article, and the relative ease with which readers could navigate the Bulletin.

First, the clear relevance of articles to practitioners' work was noted by participants in all settings. The substantial, and sometimes demanding, nature of the articles was also appreciated and, for many participants, was seen as preferable to more attractively presented articles which were perceived as slight or lacking in gravitas. The comment from one practitioner, 'You'd probably learn more from [The] NERF [bulletin] because the research is more detailed', was typical.

Second, there were positive comments about the use of design features to enhance the readability of the Bulletin. In particular, the participants liked the use of:

- summaries ('because you can see what is relevant', 'it's a summary that draws you in')
- text boxes (which allow you to 'jump in and out', 'dip into it' and 'stand out when speed reading')
- clear headings
- jargon busters ('saves you looking up words')
- a front cover with ('short, sharp keywords').

As a result, it was felt that the Bulletin was 'easy to find your way round'.

Third, the participants appreciated the opportunity presented to them, via the 'hot websites' and 'how do we know this?' sections, to follow up an article by finding more information. This was seen as a key advantage of the Bulletin compared with other publications.

One primary teacher commented on the value of using the Bulletin as a means of celebrating success. She made the point that, in some cases, the research in the Belletin, although recent and potentially challenging to established practice, would be familiar to practitioners. This could have the effect of raising morale since it would signal that practitioners were in the vanguard of current educational thinking. She commented that 'when reading the Bulletin, it was interesting to see what we were doing already' and made reference to the article on Assessment for Learning: 'we're quite hot on this here'.

However, there were a number of negative comments about the Bulletin, centred on its unattractive appearance. This was thought to counteract attempts to make the Bulletin readable and easy to navigate. Comments concerned the 'dense' appearance of the page design and layout, and the lack of a separate front cover.

Practitioners in the early years and primary groups were particularly emphatic that they disliked the appearance of the Bulletin, due to its lack of colour and pictures.

The following comments are typical of those made by participants in relation to the appearance of the Bulletin:

The front page is more like the contents page. It needs a front cover.

I might read the Bulletin, although at the moment the front cover and colours used wouldn't really tempt me to pick it up if it was lying around.

If you want people other than leaders to read something like this, it needs to be shorter.

There's no 'scribble space' to write notes. It's too packed.

I would rather see one article on one page.

There are different things on the same page so it's not easy to read.

One participant from a sixth form college commented on a perceived lack of rationale to some aspects of content:

I found some things quite odd – like 'How do we know this?' – sounds like something you would find in a primary school book. Something I found quite difficult was the definition of effect size which left me none the wiser. However, other things were expanded which didn't really need to be.

She considered this to be indicative of a lack of rationale that contributed to an 'uneven tone' among the articles. A teacher at the early years centre made a similar point, wondering what market the Bulletin was aiming for: 'It's funny to have some articles with basic information and then others with more complex articles in a magazine like this. Was it [for] NQTs or more experienced teachers?'

Some participants questioned the concept of a product aiming to be relevant to all sectors of education and all subjects of the curriculum. For example, practitioners in the early years centre felt that the Bulletin lacked articles with relevance for their sector. A secondary headteacher said that he would have to photocopy each part of the Bulletin separately to distribute to different subject specialists. In his opinion, a themed publication would be preferable: 'a single issue bulletin is much easier for schools to manage.' This comment was echoed by one of the

LEA advisers, who described the Bulletin as 'a scattergun approach'. This made it difficult to decide what to do with the information. In his view, it would have been much easier to use if the research had been thematic, because then he could have passed it onto a relevant colleague.

From discussion in all focus groups, it was clear that, because the participants could not rely upon all the Bulletin's content to be relevant to their particular context, they would only choose to read and use parts of it, as one practitioner said: 'I would be tempted to skim-read it, but I don't think I'd be tempted to read the whole thing.'

A practitioner from an FE college summed up the views of many of the focus group participants who had made the effort to engage with the Bulletin despite its unattractive appearance: 'it's actually much more interesting than it looks.'

5.1 Key messages on responses to the Bulletin

Positive responses to the Bulletin included the following points:

- it was useful for informing practitioners' thinking
- it was relevant to practitioners' own classroom practice and/or research
- it was seen to contain credible evidence
- certain design features enhanced its readability
- it referred to sources of further information.

Negative responses to the Bulletin centred on one point:

- the multiplicity of sectors and themes made the Bulletin's content difficult to access.

6 Considering the Bulletin in relation to other products

Practitioners were asked to look at two other printed publications and comment on them in comparison to the Bulletin. Publication A is a journal that is produced twice a year and aims to provide practical applications of research for headteachers and teachers. Publication B is a monthly glossy magazine in an A5 format that is aimed at school leaders. It contains 'news' items and features policy rather than research, although it may include reference to research findings. Focus group participants had not necessarily seen these publications before. Their comments therefore tended to focus on surface-level features such as the design and layout, rather than an in-depth appraisal of content.

Practitioners in all sectors commented that they liked different aspects of the three publications. They liked the concept and content of the Bulletin, but preferred the appearance and layout of publications A and B, which made better use of space, colour and photographs. For example, staff at a primary school liked different aspects from all three publications. They wanted the A5 size and layout of publication B, but wanted to retain some of the ideas in the Bulletin such as the 'jargon busters' and website addresses.

Much of the discussion centred on the need to match reliable research evidence with attractiveness and ease of navigation. A practitioner in the early years centre said: 'Publication A is easier to read because it's well set out, but you'd probably learn more from the Bulletin because the research is more detailed – precise and concise'. She explained that her reason for saying this was that the Bulletin contained more quantitative data. A practitioner at a secondary school said:

> *The one that has the most rigour* [the Bulletin]*, is the hardest to read and the one with the least rigour* [publication B] *is the most appealing to read. You need people to pick it up, but to have enough rigour for them to go back to it another time.*

When comparing the three publications with one another, practitioners made several interesting comments about the concept, design and content of publications aimed at a practitioner audience.

6.1 Concept and purpose of different publications

Practitioners recognised that the three publications had different (and complementary) purposes. They thought that the Bulletin compiled short snippets about different research reports so that teachers can go on to read further research if they wished to. On the other hand, publication A contained longer, more comprehensive research articles. Publication B was seen as 'a magazine', which was 'news led' rather than containing detailed research. One practitioner from a secondary school remarked 'there's no depth to it' [publication B] and 'it leaves you hanging'.

Another secondary school participant explained, 'the Bulletin has been put together for teachers and you can flick through several articles, whereas for [publication A] you are more likely to read one or two articles'.

Practitioners recognised that the content of the publications differed depending on their purpose. They felt that the Bulletin was a particularly useful addition for busy practitioners because it enabled the reader to get a quick overview of research findings which they could follow up if they wished to by further reading or accessing the recommended websites.

6.2 Comments on differences in design and layout

As noted above, practitioners commented that they preferred the design and layout of publications A and B over the Bulletin because they were clearer, more attractive and easier to skim read. For example, one secondary teacher commented that 'the diagrammatic information is a good idea [in publication A]'.

Practitioners differed in their liking of the 'glossy magazine' look of publication B. Several said it would 'draw them in' and that they would read it from 'cover to cover', but others said it did not appeal and was too 'overdone'. One practitioner from a secondary school commented, 'I would question the validity of the content because it's *so* glossy.' On the other hand, several practitioners liked the A5 format of publication B because it would be easy to carry around and read whilst travelling.

Design features of the three publications which practitioners found particularly attractive were:

- clear layout, using signposting, bullet points and text boxes

- use of case studies

- an attractive front cover indicating the content of the publication

- use of visual elements and colour

- comprehensive references and sources of further information.

6.3 Websites containing research for teachers

As mentioned above, practitioners said they commonly used the internet to find research. The NFER team showed focus group participants examples of research pages from two UK websites. The majority of practitioners preferred features from one of the two. Listed below is a summary of practitioners' comments about what they particularly liked about website A.

- It clearly highlighted the relevance and practical implications of the research. One secondary school practitioner said she would go straight to the section titled 'what are the implications for staff, parents and carers?'.

- It had accessible language: two primary school teachers agreed that it was 'very readable and user friendly'.

- It had a limited amount of text on one page. Some practitioners commented that although there was the same amount of information on both websites, on website A the content had been cleverly laid out on several different pages with a link down the left hand side to each new page. As one teaching assistant explained, 'it gives you a little taster, it makes you want to click on it.'

- It had clear, bold headings and signposting (e.g. the use of bullet points). Teachers stressed the importance of scanning over websites to find relevant information in a limited time.

- It featured key messages on the first page. As one practitioner in a sixth form college commented: 'I like the site as it gives the salient points quickly.'

- It had tools such as 'printer friendly options' and 'email to a friend', the search engine and keywords. Participants explained it was very important to be able to print material from websites so they could read it at their leisure and make notes on the downloaded pages.

There were two features of website B which practitioners appreciated:

- a clear site map on the left hand side to allow for easy navigation.

- the use of case studies.

Although website A was well liked, there were two aspects of it which practitioners disliked. First, the web address at the bottom of page did not print out properly. Practitioners felt it was very important that this printed out, so that they could return to the source if they needed to. Second, it had a long and complicated title. As one practitioner in a primary school commented, 'I want something in teacher language.'

6.4 Key messages from a comparison between research-based products for practitioners

Practitioners recognised that different publications served different purposes. Nevertheless, they liked printed publications which had:

- relevant research content coupled with practical applications

- accessible language

- case studies of practice

- an attractive front cover

- clear layout and good signposting

- use of colour and illustrations

- comprehensive references and sources of further information.

The above points were reiterated for web-based products. In addition, practitioners liked research on websites to have:

- a limited amount of text on each screen

- clear sections with easy navigation

- good printing capabilities

- tools such as search facilities and 'email to a friend'.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

Phase two of this evaluation has served to reinforce several of the messages from previous research. It has also provided a considerable amount of detail on the features of research products that are more or less appealing to practitioners.

Our main conclusion is that the Bulletin can make an important contribution in communicating research to teachers. It will add to and complement existing products. The participants in this study saw the Bulletin as contributing to an extended view of professionalism, whereby teachers and other staff become more reflective, better informed and willing to change their practice to achieve better outcomes for their pupils.

Practitioners recognised that the content of publications differed depending on their purpose. They felt that the Bulletin was a particularly useful addition for busy practitioners because it enabled the reader to get a quick overview of research findings which they could follow up if they wished to by using the recommended further reading or accessing the recommended websites.

One of the consistent themes to emerge was that in order to be useful, research must be relevant to practice. But it is important to recognise that relevance is a multifaceted concept. Practitioners wanted research to be relevant to their phase and to demonstrate an empathy with classroom practice. Research into topical issues was considered to be highly relevant, as was educational theory. However, relevance also varied according to personal preferences, career pathways, involvement in further study and engagement in research. Participants also paid tribute to the importance of personal contact with inspiring researchers or with colleagues who recommended research to them.

As well as the importance of relevance, this study has reinforced the multifaceted nature of knowledge transmission. Teachers may encounter research through magazines, newsletters and the press. Research does little more than raise awareness among some, but for others it may lead to further reading, reflection and even impact on their practice. Research may reach teachers directly, or indirectly though influencing policy-makers, opinion leaders and trainers.

7.1 Recommendations

The recommendations arising from this study are simple and straightforward.

- NERF should continue to produce the Bulletin.

- The Bulletin should be redesigned to make it more visually appealing.

- Thought should be given to increasing the relevance of the Bulletin for different phases of education. Grouping items together in relation to educational phases and/or themes would help to increase its appeal.

- The Bulletin should be promoted to teachers using both direct and indirect pathways (e.g. through key publications, websites, organisations and roles).

Appendix 1 Sample description and methodology

Phase two of the evaluation included a small number of focus group interviews and telephone interviews. The evaluation took place in the spring of 2005.

Focus groups were conducted in seven institutions across four educational phases (nursery, primary, secondary and FE). One focus group was carried out in an early years centre and two in each of the other sectors. The institutions differed considerably in size, from a primary school comprising approximately 200 pupils, to an FE college with approximately 12,000 part- and full-time students. Each focus group included a broad range of practitioners, such as headteachers, teachers/lecturers, nursery nurses and teaching assistants. In the FE college, staff predominantly came from the information and communications technology and business department. The groups ranged in size from five to eight individuals (a total of 40 practitioners).

Institutions were identified from:

• those who were involved in the NFER research project on investigating the research-engaged school

• through personal contacts from previous work carried out both at NFER and other institutions

• recommendations from other colleagues.

The institutions that were willing to take part were particularly interested in finding out more about research in general and about the Bulletin. Therefore, it must be noted that the sample of institutions we visited was likely to be atypical of schools and colleges across England. Every institution we visited was positive about reading and using research but each was at a different stage of becoming a research-engaged community. In the FE institutions, secondary schools and one primary school, practitioners were conducting their own research, both in terms of small and large-scale projects. Some practitioners had either gained or were studying for further qualifications, particularly those in the secondary and FE sectors.

A schedule was developed that focused on a range of issues, including:

• research that practitioners had used in their work

- the types of research they relate to

- the methods they use to find out about research

- their views on the Bulletin and other publications and websites.

The group sessions lasted an hour and took place on the school premises at a convenient time for participants. The sessions were recorded with the permission of the participants and the notes were transcribed.

During spring 2005, telephone interviews were conducted with four LEA officers with responsibility for coordinating the CPD of teachers and lecturers. The selection of interviewees was based on personal contacts.

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews with advisers was to find out about how research informed teaching practice in their authority and how the Bulletin may contribute. More specifically we asked them about how they kept abreast of research, how research is presented to teachers or lecturers and their thoughts on how they may use the Bulletin. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour.

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