Journal of Information Literacy

Article

Seeking Information: A study of the use and understanding of information by parents of young children

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Abstract

This paper presents the preliminary findings of research examining the information seeking of parents. It is the belief of the author that information seeking theory is an important foundational concept of information literacy. The hope is that this investigation, which focuses on the everyday life information seeking of parents, will help to add a different perspective to the concept of information literacy and how it can be relevant to everyday life.

The research has been carried out as part of a PhD project and primarily comprises of 33 interviews with parents of primary school aged children in Leeds, UK. Participant observations and informal discussions with professionals supported the interviews.

The data is in the process of being analysed. However, at this stage of analysis, there are a number of emerging themes. These themes have been termed as: assessing; catalysts; emotions; hindrances; internet; people; places; questions; system; and trust. This paper will present a summary of these themes as they currently stand.

The research focuses on the everyday life information seeking of parents of young children, an area of study that has not received much attention from the LIS community. It is hoped that the research will help provide a fresh theoretical perspective of how information literacy theory can be developed in the context of everyday life information seeking.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

Information literacy has been described as the *zeitgeist,* or spirit of the times (Candy. 1996 p139). Certainly this seems true to some extent for the LIS community and also the UK government, where, information literacy in its widest sense has been associated and used synonymously in conjunction with a number of new literacies (Bawden, 2001; DCMS, 2009); all of which are being perceived as important competences for the twenty-first century citizen.

The direction of information literacy theory and research first found wide acceptance in academia (ACRL, 2000; ANZIIL, 2004; Behrens, 1994; Bruce, 1997; Rader, 2000; SCONUL, 1999). In addition information literacy has also found general acceptance in wider spheres as reported by the UNESCO/IFLA state of the art report (IFLA, 2007) promoted by the Prague declaration (UNESCO, 2003) and later the Alexandria proclamation (UNESCO, 2005).

The past twenty-five years have seen an exponential growth in the access to information for the ordinary citizen. The reasons for this growth are multifaceted and include the proliferation of the internet, 24-hour news and media coverage and greater access to books and other printed media. There has also been a huge cultural and political shift in the views and attitudes towards families and parenting in the UK. The political changes in the UK can trace their genesis back to the former Conservative government's Children Act 1989. The Act had child welfare at its heart and is notable for defining parental responsibility in UK law for the first time. The Act defines parental responsibility as "all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property" (Children Act 1989, section 41). Eight years later, New Labour, after their 1997 election win, placed children and families at the heart of their policies, or as Freely (2000) notes:

> … the catalyst was New Labour, the first government in this country to ever acknowledge that the problems of modern family life are too big and too important to be left for individuals to resolve privately. But like all shifts, this one has been decades in the making. If we look back over the newspapers of the past twenty years, we can see several debates running in parallel and then converging under the tutelage of New Labour (p.4).

In 1998, Labour published two important reports, the first, *Meeting the Childcare Challenge*, (DfEE, 1998) followed by *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998). These documents helped to formulate the government's vision for the first National Childcare Strategy, and paved the way for the establishment of the flagship Sure Start programme in 1999. These reports helped to focus government policy on children and families in ways not seen by previous generations. A central theme of this policy change was an increase in parental choice and parental responsibility and was accompanied by a range of messages targeting family life, such as advice on healthy eating and parenting skills. This combination of increased access to information about parenting and the wider politicisation of childhood and family life has resulted in parenting becoming a staple of the British news media and politicians. One of the most notable examples is the continuing debate over the safety of the MMR vaccine and the part the media and politicians have played in the whole episode. Another recent example of a widely publicised report was the investigation by The Children's Society entitled *The Good Childhood Inquiry*. This report identified five key areas of concerns and anxieties reported by children and their parents. These areas being: issues relating to child safety; child care; child support; child freedom; issues of fairness; and issues of respect (Layard & Dunn, 2009; The Children's Society, 2006).

Parents today not only have greater access to information about parenting, but also find themselves and their families under greater socio-political scrutiny. This poses the questions: how and why do parents seek information, how do they assess it, and how do they use it? There is relatively little research examining the information seeking of parents and consequently their information literacy. A study on parents' information needs by Marden and Nicholas noted that "the public have been wholly neglected by information researchers" (1997, p.5), a view that is fully echoed by Harris and Dewdney (1994) and

Savolainen (2005). There have been numerous studies about information needs in different academic disciplines such as health and social care and family studies. These studies however, have tended to focus on specific aspects of parents' information needs such as their need for health information (Bath & Guillaume, 2004; Dail & Way, 1985; Koepke & Williams, 1989; Simanski, 1998; Smith & Callery, 2005; Walker, 2005). There are also examples of relevant unpublished research commissioned by the government such as the study commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and entitled *Childcare Act: Qualitative Research into Parents' Information* (COI Research, 2007). This report formed part of a wider consultation investigating how local authorities could meet proposed new legal responsibilities placed upon them by the Childcare Act 2006.

2.   Method

The aim of the research was to purposively identify parents from different socio-economic groupings in Leeds. It was established that purposive sampling would be best achieved by targeting primary schools, as they are usually defined by small geographic catchment areas. Gaining the support of head teachers was crucial. It was recognised that accessing head teachers is notoriously difficult. To aid in this process, it was felt that advocates were needed. Before, approaching head teachers, support from two Education Leeds agencies was solicited, firstly the Leeds Healthy Schools Initiative, and secondly Parent Support Advisors. Both of these agencies work closely with schools and are well known to head teachers throughout the city. With their support and practical help, letters were sent through the internal Education Leeds postal service to head teachers of all 223 primary schools in the city. This was followed-up two weeks later by an email to head teachers with an attachment of the original letter.

In the first instance twelve head teachers responded to say that they were interested. Meetings were arranged with the head teachers to discuss the project and provide assurances that their involvement in the project would have a minimum effect on the school's workload. After the initial meetings five schools were used in the research, two from deprived areas, two from more affluent areas and one a socio-economically mixed church school. Through links with the church school, an opportunity came about to recruit parents who attended a local church. It was felt that the church group would give an interesting contrast to those parents recruited from the schools.

Glaser and Strauss' (1967) theoretical sampling provided a basis for the sample size. This is the process where data is collected, immediately coded and then analysed prior to the next set of data collection. Theoretical saturation determines how many times this process is repeated. A sample is deemed to have been saturated when all the categories created through coding are judged to be well developed and further data gathering and analysis adds little to them. In the case of this research theoretical saturation occurred at the twenty-fifth interview. However, the initial open ended coding identified additional areas that needed to be investigated further, one of these being the issue surrounding parents and the MMR vaccine, the subsequent interview schedule was changed to include these additional factors. Another reason for extending the sample was to obtain additional data, which would add to the texture and depth of source material.

The primary method of investigation used was semi-structured interviews. In all, thirty-three interviews were conducted lasting on average about an hour, the shortest being twenty-five

minutes and the longest two and a half hours. This resulted in transcripts totalling approximately 170,000 words. At the end of each interview the interviewee was asked whether they would mind being contacted again in the future, in case I needed to check the accuracy of my interpretation of their responses. On four occasions, the interviewee did not attend the pre-arranged interview and, when telephoned to try and re-arrange, either verbally agreed and later failed to attend a second interview or they persistently ignored the telephone calls. In these cases, after the second attempt it was felt that these interviewees were obviously unwilling to go ahead with the interview and any attempt to contact them was dropped. It is interesting to note that these occurred with interviewees linked to the two schools in the most deprived areas.

3.   Coding

The first phase of data analysis is open coding, a technique used in grounded theory to create a set of categories that emerge from the data. At its basic level this comprises of an initial line-by-line examination of the transcripts, where questions are asked about what is happening. These question include: *'What is the data saying?'*; '*What is happening in this instance?'*; and *'Where does the data fit?'*. After this process the categories and codes were refined using a range of techniques starting with the constant comparative method, a technique where similar incidents are grouped and compared (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process started immediately after the first interview had been transcribed and prior to the second interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guba, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Qualitative Research Solutions (QSR) NVivo 8 software was used to aid the coding and analysis of the data.

4.   Results

The results are still being analysed and as such are still tentative and subject to refinement. However, after the initial open-coding, a number of categories emerged from the data, these are: assessing; catalysts; hindrances; emotions; internet; people; places; questions; system; and trust.

4.1   Assessing

This theme relates to how parents assess the information they acquire in the context of their parental roles and responsibilities. Parents appear to use a whole range of techniques in order to make decisions about information. There is no linear approach or hard and fast rule to this decision process as it is very much context based. One discernable approach used by nearly all parents at some stage is that based around "gut feeling". Here, tacit knowledge seems to play a large part in their interpretation of the data, as well as a complex interaction of personal values, beliefs and trust in the information source.

One widely used strategy for assessing information that was noted is where a parent is searching for specific answers. One such example was given by a mother, Beverly, who investigated the MMR vaccine. She said that she would keep looking for, and reading, as

much information about the subject as possible because, as she noted, "the same information comes up again and again, so you take that it must be reasonably reliable".Thus the frequency of the message she received helped legitimise it in her mind. This strategy of assessing was also highlighted by three other parents.

Another interesting observation was the discernable difference in the approaches taken by parents from different socio-economic backgrounds when assessing and choosing secondary schools. Those parents in the lower economic groups, on the whole, tended to resign themselves to sending their child to the local comprehensive without much research into alternative options. This was in stark contrast to parents in more affluent areas who actively set about finding out as much information from as many sources as possible. These included community gossip, school's reputation, Ofsted reports, visiting the school as well as asking their children what they wanted. Once they had gathered all the information, they would construct a complex method of assessment, based on their values and expectations of what a school should offer. It could be argued that this distinction between the two groups highlights parental expectations and adds to the current debate in British society about social mobility and the widely held perception that the middle-classes both expect and obtain better access to services, such as school selection.

4.2   Catalysts

Catalysts are enablers that support and encourage parents to look for and find information. This theme stands in direct opposition with the concept of hindrances, which also emerged from the analysis. Examples of catalysts are positive experiences, such as the knowledge of being listened to and easy access to relevant information.

Catalysts among lower socio-economic groups often revolve around "advocates" or "gatekeepers" in the form of parent support advisors and family outreach workers. Where parents in these areas are connected into the 'system' such as social care, educational or the health services, they have ready access to all the help, advice and support they need. Examples include, access to parental skills courses, help with claiming benefit and target support for health-related issues. Certainly for those parents who are in the system and lack the necessary skills or confidence to find information for themselves, on the surface, this approach seems to be a great success. However, the caveat is that anecdotally, it seems, to create a dependency culture, as illustrated by Dani, one of the mothers interviewed "If I have a problem, which I have in the past, I have come and seen Elizabeth [Parent Support Advisor] straight away". This means that in some cases parents become dependent on a particular support worker and do not learn to proactively look for and assess their own information needs. As with Elizabeth, who reported that parents ask for her help even after their children have left the school that she is based at.

Another important facet of catalysts is the easy access by the parent to what they consider to be good information. During the interviews, many of what were seen as catalysts for those "everyday type questions" seemed to revolve around those sources which provided easily accessible and "credible" information. How a parent defines credibility is governed by a complex set of personal assumptions, values, and experiences.

4.3   Hindrances

Hindrances that prevent parents from finding information are often closely aligned to emotions and feelings. They often refer to how receptive parents are towards specific sources of information. For example, one parent noted that she found it difficult to accept

advice or trust information from someone who does not have children. In her case, she questioned how her health visitor could possibly give her advice about raising children, when she did not have children herself. Other examples include feeling "intimidated by professionals" or "suits", as one mother called them.

Another example of hindrances is that of mismatched communication. One parent complained that health professionals often speak in a "different language" without realising it and that she had to go home and try and search the internet to find out what they were talking about.

4.4   Emotions

Emotions are closely aligned to the themes of hindrances and catalysts in that they either spur a parent to find information, when they feel empowered, or they can hinder a parent from seeking information when they feel alone, anxious or depressed. For the most part, negative emotions are expressed in the context of an inability to find information, help or answers, and this often leads to fear and anxiety about the problem. One example being the fear and anxiety of not knowing what to do when a young child is sick, especially if it is the first time that the parent has had to deal with a particular situation. As Dasie said: "one of my kids had a rash one time...I rang my husband's mum, 'they have a rash what do I do?' So she was there for me...I panic when it's my kids, they're not allowed to be poorly".

Other more long term issues relate to having a child with special needs and the parental need to find answers and support. One such example is Andrew, who desperately sought for information and answers, resulting in worry and anxiety as he and his wife had to endure six months of uncertainty until their son was officially diagnosed with Autism. For Andrew this uncertainty spurred him to search for as much information about the problem and its possible outcome as he could get.

A third example of the role emotions play in information seeking, as reported by parents was the degree to which there were times when they felt a pressure, even anxiety about making the right decision for their children. Examples include the pressure felt about whether or not to give their children the MMR.

4.5   The internet

The internet has become a major source of information for parents and is seemingly being adopted as a "first port of call" or a starting point for looking for information. Only two of the parents interviewed reported that they did not have regular access to the internet. In one case a middle class mother was in the process of having the internet installed because she felt that she was being "socially disadvantaged" by not having online access at home. Attitudes to the internet were generally very positive. One parent described the internet as "just like magic", while another called it "a great big library". On the whole, parents considered that they possessed the necessary skills to be able to search and use the internet effectively, with the majority of parents using Google to look for information.

Many parents expressed general worries about being able to trust the reliability of the content of websites. One parent stated that she wouldn't trust the internet for anything health-related, this statement being based on the fact that she simply uses Google as a method of searching for information. Most parents suggested that they tended to stick to websites belonging to known or trusted organisations such as NHS Direct, BBC and larger charities. Parents used the internet in many different ways. Dasie feels that where she lives

she is socially isolated, does not have any local friends and does not trust her neighbours. To combat this isolation, she has developed friendships and relationships through internet chat rooms. The relationships in the chat rooms have become a trusted source of help and advice for her and have developed into very real friendships as she met-up with her chat room friends on occasions in the real world.

Beverly is another mother who often uses the internet, such as the parenting chat rooms on the Mumsnet website. She has also used the internet extensively when looking for information about the MMR vaccine. Through a conversation in an internet chat room, she came across a web site which provided an alternative view to the "official" medical line on the MMR vaccine. After following the internet links on the site, as well as participating in the online discussion groups, she was convinced that the MMR vaccine was not proven to be safe and that her children should have the single jabs.

4.6   People

Personal relationships with trusted friends or family members seem to be the single most important source of information for parents. There are many different reasons why someone becomes a "trusted person" in the life of a parent. Andrew explained that he had two very close friends, but he would speak to one friend in particular about parenting issues. When asked why he consulted one friend over the other, he replied "he is more like me". For many parents, their own family and parents played an important role as a source of advice and support, primarily because they were seen as experienced and had "seen it all before". Yet a considerable number of parents reported that their own parents were "old school" and that parenting today is very different to how it was in the 1960s and 1970s and therefore tended not to use their own parents, preferring siblings or friends as sources of help or information.

There seem to be noticeable distinctions in the way that parents in different demographics use family and friends as a source of help and information. Some of the parents from the lower socio-economic groups mentioned that they didn't like asking their family, friends or neighbours for help, advice or information. When probed, a number of reasons emerged. These included a determination to solve their own problems, mistrust and a perception that their 'business' would be 'blabbed' or spread around the community in gossip; that everyone else in the neighbourhood was in the "same boat" and had their own problems; they didn't want to be seen as weak; a fear of social services getting involved, or of been seen as a failure by others. These attitudes have led to a great deal of social isolation and are often accompanied by harrowing accounts of clinical depression and even attempted suicide, which in itself illustrates the human dimension of not being able to adequately gain information to obtain help and support. The reverse seems to be true for more socially mobile parents. For them, work colleagues and friends provided a great source of information, this being reminiscent of Pettigrew's (1999) "information grounds" a concept of information sharing between individuals that has equivalence with Chatman's (1991) "small world" theory, which involves a limited form of searching based upon a small social group. Parents from the higher socio-economic groups often recounted how they would use their extended networks of professional friends for advice and support. One such example is Lisa, who was having problems with her son's school teacher. She spoke to her sister-in-law and also a friend, both of whom were teachers and asked them what they thought and how best to deal with the situation.

4.7   Places

Parents use a wide range of sources, but in this section I have excluded the internet, and people as these issues were examined earlier. In general terms, books and parenting

magazines seem to be particularly popular especially for parents with very young children. There is a perception that books and magazines are safe and reputable sources of information that can be relied upon and trusted. Parenting magazines were favoured by many parents when their children were young because they contained articles by "real doctors" and also provided a lot of "real life stories" and examples of how other people have dealt with situations and issues. This notion of being able to look at examples of real life situations and being able to see how other parents have coped is perhaps one of the reasons why television is also a very popular and trusted source of information, especially the programme *Supernanny*[1]. *Supernanny* is seen and used by many parents as a source of information regarding discipline and behavioural issues. Most of the parents interviewed, said that they had watched the programme to some degree and that they had used aspects of her techniques, notably the naughty step a method of disciplining young children by removing them from a confrontational situation and placing them on a step or a chair for every minute of their age. Interestingly, watching programmes such as *Supernanny* seemed to help reinforce parents' self-belief in the way they were parenting and made them feel that they were doing a "good job". The levels of critical awareness applied to television varied, however, the general consensus was that, "if it is on TV it will be have been checked and should be reliable".

Interestingly from an LIS perspective, public libraries do not seem to be seen as a place for parents to try and find information. One mother said that her son uses the internet at the library after school. Another mother said that she had once been to her local library to find out about local guitar lessons for her son and in this case the library was unable to help. Only one other mother mentioned that she had gone to the library to look for some information about puberty suitable for her daughter.

4.8   Questions

Nicholas and Marden (Marden & Nicholas, 1997; Nicholas & Marden, 1997) compiled a list of typical questions parents with young children asked. Interestingly my research follows this same list to a greater extent. Questions parents have, change over time and are often dependent on the stage that the family are at. For example, first time parents will often have more questions than parents with a second child, or an older child or teenager. Generally however, question types can be broadly summarised as:

- **early childhood issues:** sleep, food, child development, immunisations, child development;
- **later childhood issues:** school choice, homework, clubs, academic attainment; and
- **specific issues:** children with behaviour problems, children with illnesses, benefit entitlements.

4.9   System

The system includes structures, organisations and bureaucracies that parents may interact with, such as local education authorities, social services and health services. Experiences differ widely for those parents who are considered to be "in the system". David had a very positive experience when he wanted to take custody of his neglected grandson. He recognised that the system was there to help and so he co-operated with social service requests and has received all of the "help and information I needed". However, Fern and Fiona each expressed their exasperations at being "caught in the system" and pointed to the

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[1] Supernanny is a popular reality parenting television programme produced by Shed Media and originally broadcast on Channel 4 in the UK.

inadequacies of social services as they have failed over many years to provide them with information, help and support. The consequence of this is a feeling of isolation and breakdown of trust between the parent and the support service. Fiona even blames the long-running "saga" with social services and their lack of support for her depression.

Andrew was very positive about the multi-agency help and support he and his family were given when his son was diagnosed with Autism. However, Andrew noted that, as he and his wife were both educated professionals, he felt that that this had helped them to be pro-active and navigate the system (bureaucracy), which at times could seem daunting and difficult.

4.10   Trust

Trust is an important concept that threads through and links all of the themes together. Parents gather "trusted sources", which can take the form of a person or a source, such as books. Often parents spoke about seeking help and advice from friends or family who had gone through a similar life-phase, for example people with older children, who were therefore considered to have valued experience. Interestingly, for those parents in the lower socio-economic groups their reliance on parent support advisors and family outreach workers was on the whole very positive, however, problems seem to occur when a trusted advisor moved away and a new person came into post. This then required a re-building of trust, something that didn't always happen as one outreach worker explains "this woman moved away and she got a new advisor but she keeps ringing me up…and that causes problems".

5.   Conclusion

This paper has sketched some of the preliminary themes and the general direction of the research as it stands at this time. This means that many of the initial themes, as outlined here will be fine-tuned as the study progresses. What is clear however, is that, for the parents I have spoken to, trusted personal contacts seem to be the main source of information, as they tap into and use other people's experiences. In the lower socio-economic areas there is heavy reliance on parent support advisors. A major concern that I have, having spoken to parents and support workers and through my own observations, is that a dependency and total reliance on the advisors seems to develop. This is in stark contrast to the socially mobile parents who actively use their social capital.

The question remains: how relevant is current information literacy theory when applied to the complexities of everyday information seeking? The current information literacy competencies may work well in academic, educational or even professional settings, but how well this translates into the wider, more complex setting of parenting remains to be seen. This in itself poses a reflective question, what does it mean to be an information literate parent?

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