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*The Process of Knowledge Acquisition  
through Interpersonal Communication in  
the "Parents As First Teachers" Programme*

*A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the Degree of  
Master of Management  
in Communication Management, at  
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## ABSTRACT

Communication researchers interested in the role played by knowledge in social terms have produced a variety of explorations in recent times of “knowledge gaps” and informational inequities between various groups in society. More broadly, studies of the significance of issues of relative access to information and thus ability to participate in civil society have been described as the sociology of knowledge.

Arising out of an interest in documenting successful strategies in bridging knowledge gaps, the present study aimed to explore an information programme called Parents As First Teachers (PAFT), which operates on the basis of a one-to-one relationship between informationally needy individuals (parents of newborn infants) and trained experts in parenting matters. This arrangement continues monthly for three years. It seemed likely that this information programme could present an example of an effective receiver-focused model of bridging knowledge gaps.

A series of 22 in-depth interviews was conducted with parent and educator participants in the PAFT programme in Auckland, New Zealand. In addition, observation was carried out of the hour-long monthly home visits so that a detailed picture could be obtained of the significance of the interpersonal relationship between parent and educator for effective learning. Transcripts of interviews were analysed using a coding protocol developed on the basis of the research objectives.

The study found limited support for the contentions of extant information poverty literature in regard to self-imposed isolation and avoiding disclosing problems. Interviewees preferred to isolate themselves within their neighbourhoods, but they did seek information via family and social networks. They were also highly motivated in regard to seeking the best for their children, and it is possible that motivation in this instance has been a more powerful factor in knowledge acquisition than education, often used as a predictor of response to informational need.

The significance of this study is in its detailed presentation of the information world of the insider, and the support the data give for a situational approach to knowledge gaps. It signals that there is a definite role for a close and trusting

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interpersonal relationship between source and receiver in the knowledge acquisition process. Two key areas for follow-up studies are the role played by interpersonal communication networks in disseminating knowledge beyond the original knowledge exchange context, and whether the strong motivation observed in the parents interviewed for this research was attributable to the PAFT programme itself or was a characteristic already present in participants.

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*For my parents  
Charles Lawrence 1917 - 2000  
Thelma Lawrence 1913 - 1999*

*and for my long-ago mother  
Jessie Lawrence 1923 - 1958,  
my own first teacher.*

*I am learning that having had the gift of something very precious, you  
can never really lose it.*

*ere*

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Most of all I thank the staff, parents and children involved in Parents As First Teachers at two organisations in Auckland. They will know who they are, and I will express my thanks to them in person. They entrusted me with their experiences, memories and ideas, giving me their precious time. I value these gifts very much. Without the support and interest of these women, this research could not have happened. The findings of the study also belong to them, and in turn, I hope that these will cast some useful new light on the valuable work that PAFT does in the community, and I will then be happy with a job well done.

*Te manu kai te miro, nona te ngahere  
Te manu kai te matauranga, nona te ao*

The bird that feeds on the miro, theirs is the forest  
The bird that feeds on knowledge, theirs is the world

*(Devito, O'Rourke & O'Neill, 2000, p. 1)*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### *Purpose and Context of the Research*

Communication researchers have, since the 1960s, sought to explain the reasons why “the power of communication campaigns [is] vastly over-rated” (Dervin, 1980, p.76). Where once it was assumed that the injection of information into a social system would result in its uptake and use, studies have increasingly challenged the hypodermic model and begun to examine information as a user construct, and as having a situational more than an absolute meaning (Dervin, 1980). Furthermore, studies show that the challenge posed to organisations by groups of individuals who lack sufficient information with which to make informed choices cannot necessarily be solved by simply exposing those groups to informative material (Williams & Sligo, 1999). In addition, such a strategy implies that informational benefits for the receiver can be defined by the source (Dervin & Nilan, 1986, cited in Kuhlthau, 1991).

In the past, it has been common for institutions, especially governmental agencies, to use mass mail-outs of brochures, booklets or pamphlets as important components in information campaigns. These written channels are now more likely to be used in combination with other interactive communication activities such as group-based activities and telephone hotlines (Gadon, 2000, <http>), because it is recognised that communication is not a passive process in which units of meaning are simply transmitted from source to receiver. While this linear approach, deriving from information theory first developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in the 1940s

(Griffin, 1997) might be a useful model for organisations because it is convenient, efficient, and at least the communicative gesture is seen to have been made, there is now little doubt that just making the information available is unlikely to bring about change in an audience. In some way, other conscious processes of interaction and cognition need to be engaged, so that information can become internalised by individuals as knowledge that can then be made relevant to their own needs.

The present study has been developed from a basis of literature on knowledge gaps and the related concept of information poverty. Studies of these communication phenomena have come to varying conclusions, but they have often drawn links between the likelihood of people acquiring knowledge and their educational and socioeconomic status. People's ability to access the information they need in order to give sense to their lives, it has been thought, is likely to be influenced by the level of education they have attained and thus their information seeking skills.

These studies have since been complemented by, if not superseded by, studies that are favouring close consideration of the individual as an agent or actor within his or her context of need. This study aims to assess the extent to which this contextual focus is useful in understanding knowledge acquisition as a process defined through a user construct. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 leads one to consider the possibility that an understanding of situational variables is likely to be very important, and that attention needs to be paid to the role of trust if client receptivity is to be established and retained in an effective information programme. Researchers are suggesting that the places to look for effective methods of

overcoming information deficits are those innovative programmes that involve sources in directly engaging with targeted users, and initiating an interactive process through which individuals' information needs may be met more effectively by involving them in the process of defining those needs (Gadon, 2000, [http](http://); Kuhlthau, 1991).

The present study began with contacts made by the researcher with a private social services provider that has adopted this interactive model of bridging knowledge gaps. It appeared to the uninvolved observer at the outset of this study that the organisation's practice reflected a belief that information users can be encouraged to develop information seeking behaviours that will take them beyond a passive receiving role. In order to achieve this, the organisation made information available in such a way that the individuals were drawn wholly into the process of defining the need for change, and were supported by a long-term relationship with a trained professional so that the individuals themselves became the agents of change. From a communication research point of view, it seemed likely that this approach would be beneficial, in a lasting sense, in the lives of the organisation's informationally needy clients.

This study therefore started with a "grand tour question" (Werner and Schoepfle, 1987, cited in Hussey and Hussey, 1997, p. 127), or general overview of the research direction, which was:

How does an information programme used by the organisation facilitate knowledge acquisition through interpersonal communication?

This very general question helped to give the study direction without constraining it. A response to the research problem which is to a degree prepared to be responsive to the evolutionary nature of a phenomenological study is thought to be an appropriate starting point for naturalistic inquiry (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). In this case, the underlying question implied a hypothesis that interpersonal communication increases the effectiveness of an information campaign being targeted to a particular group. In order for the study to establish to what extent this hypothesis was valid, a series of more specific objectives was developed as outlined in the next section, below.

The study was intended to be exploratory, and to examine the extent to which information needs can be defined and met through ongoing interpersonal contact between client and professional. It sought to generate data that would help to define those interpersonal dimensions that are significant in effective uptake of information, and thus highlight the need to consider the user perspective in any similar educational programme. The context chosen for the study was a parenting programme called Parents As First Teachers (PAFT), delivered by many provider agencies throughout New Zealand. Parents As First Teachers is explained in more detail towards the end of this chapter.

### ***Research Objectives***

The aim of this study was *to explore the role of interpersonal communication in parents' acquisition of knowledge about child development and care in the Parents As First Teachers programme.*

Specifically, the study aimed to assess

- ◆ What forms of interpersonal communication are relevant to acquisition of knowledge about child development and care in Parents As First Teachers?
- ◆ To what extent is knowledge acquisition in this regard associated with family, neighbours and community networks?
- ◆ What is the significance of trust in acquiring knowledge about child development and care in the Parents As First Teachers programme?

The term "child", as used in the above aims, is preferred in this thesis because "infant" implies a specialised focus on a narrow age range. Although the Parents As First Teachers (PAFT) programme in New Zealand involves visits to families until their children reach the age of three, in the US where the programme is also delivered, the visits continue until the child reaches five years old. Thus it is a programme aimed at a critical period of children's intellectual and emotional development, beyond infancy, through toddlerhood to early childhood and entry to formal education. However the PAFT curriculum used by the professional parent educators employed to deliver this programme shows that there is a strong agenda for intervention at the earliest possible stage in families where lack of information is likely to lead to poor outcomes for the newborn child. To this extent, the PAFT programme has a particular focus on parents with their first newborn infant, this being a situation and time of crucial need for parents. Therefore the present study did tend to involve families with younger babies, but the term "infant" is generally not used for reasons outlined above, and to avoid the impression that the children referred to in the thesis were exclusively babies

under the age of two years, this being the generally accepted definition of infancy (Newman & Newman, 1975).

### ***Information and knowledge***

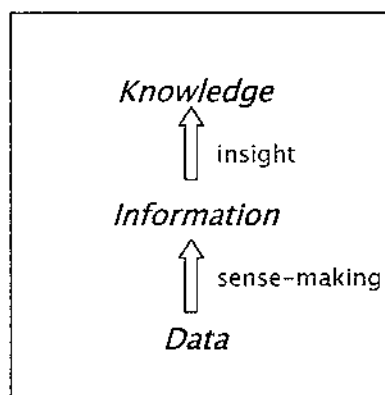
It should also be pointed out that the research objective for this study focused on *knowledge* acquisition. For this reason it is important to distinguish between *knowledge* and *information*, since the two terms are used extensively throughout the literature consulted for this work, and not always in ways that clearly point to a difference in meaning. There is the potential here for considerable ambiguity, since the terms tend to be used in different ways (Buckland, 1991), or apparently interchangeably; for example, knowledge gaps are sometimes referred to as information gaps. The process of distinguishing between the two concepts is not aided by the fact that, while knowledge gap theory and information poverty studies (key concepts explored in Chapter 2) deal with largely similar ideas and research contexts, and it can be inferred that information poverty is the condition experienced by individuals who fall into so-called knowledge gaps, it might be supposed that “knowledge” gaps will not be successfully addressed by “information” campaigns if they are conceptually different things. Other researchers prefer to use the term “communication campaigns” (Dervin, 1980, p. 76; Gadon, 2000, <http>), signalling a concern for mutuality in the process of knowledge acquisition.

*Information* can be thought of as data (unprocessed potential meaning) that have been systematised in such a way as they are made sensible and useful for a particular human purpose (Sligo, 1994). Information is a term “used ...



for objects, such as data and documents ... regarded as being informative" (Buckland, 1991, p. 351) and can be equated with "evidence, as things from which one becomes informed" (ibid., p. 353). It can have an existence independent of users, and yet some argue that information requires "at least two persons: one who tells ... and one who listens, reads, watches" (Belkin & Robertson, 1976, cited in Buckland, 1991, p. 354) for it to be informative.

*Knowledge*, on the other hand, is information that has been acquired, understood and internalised by an individual so that it is meaningful for that person's needs. It has become part of that person's cognitive baggage, lodged in the mind and able to be recalled for later use. Buckland (1991) suggests that the two concepts can be separated by their connection with the tangible and the intangible: "if you can touch it and measure it directly, it is not knowledge" (p. 352). Sligo (1994) argues that the term knowledge has necessarily become differentiated from information because "the widespread use of information as computer-based data" (p. 61) has created a need for a term that equates more with a higher-order product of human thinking. According to Buckland (1991), knowledge is always intangible, a user construct (although it can be represented symbolically as text, sign, symbol, word and so on). What becomes apparent is that, in teasing out the distinction, we are dealing with a progression:



Thus it is possible to draw a distinction between information and knowledge, and reminders of it are included at times throughout the thesis so that the key concern of this work, *knowledge* acquisition, remains clear. In addition, however, the processes of knowledge acquisition through the application of *information* to a context of need, and the negotiation of a user-constructed meaning between the expert and the client, are an important complement to the reasoning used in this study. Kuhlthau (1991) encapsulates the relationship between the two concepts in a useful way:

Evidence of the transformation of information into meaning is present in the products or presentations in which users share their new knowledge with others. (p. 361)

This view clearly represents knowledge as personal meaning created out of information by users, and embodies the progression illustrated in the diagram above.

### ***Parents As First Teachers***

Since this thesis investigates the Parents As First Teachers programme, some basic background information on it at the outset will help the reader to understand the research context.

Parents As First Teachers (PAFT) is the New Zealand version of a programme initiated and established in Missouri in 1981, called Parents As Teachers (PAT). It expanded rapidly throughout the USA, establishing a reputation as a cost-effective way of providing support to families and education to children through the earliest years of children's lives. Independent evaluation

research showed that PAT children were significantly ahead of comparison groups by the end of their first year at school (Pfannenstiel, 1989, [http](#)). By 1993 more than 1000 programmes were operating, and by 1998 there were 2000 in 49 states as well as internationally. The number of sites has since passed the 2500 mark.

- Philosophy of PAT

The US-based PAT programme gives strong affirmation to the role parents can and should play in educating their babies, and the significance of early engagement with babies as a means of stimulating appropriate intellectual, social and emotional development (PATNC, 2000, [http](#)).

- PAT Goal

To ensure that the programme remains “on the cutting edge of research and curriculum development” (PATNC, 2000, [http](#)), the PAT National Centre promotes access to Parents As Teachers by all families with young children by adapting the programme to meet the needs of special populations. It would seem, therefore, that it actively seeks to ensure that families who might not normally access the information they need, do in fact benefit from the programme.

- Home visits

The basic educational component of the PAT/PAFT programme is the home visit, in which a trained educator spends an hour each month helping parents to understand “and have appropriate expectations for each stage of their child’s development.” (PATNC, 2000, About Parents as Teachers). In New Zealand, the government funds PAFT through Early Childhood Development

for parents with their first baby for three years, or 36 hour-long home visits for each family.

- New Zealand's Parents As First Teachers: Ahuru Mowai

In 1993 New Zealand implemented the PAT programme, initially running a pilot. By 1995 it had become established in NZ as Parents As First Teachers. From the mid 1990s, work was being carried out on a Maori dimension to *Born to Learn™*, the curriculum provided by the US programme, and this was incorporated in 1999 into the NZ version, called *Ahuru Mowai: Born to Learn™* (Early Childhood Development, 2000).

In New Zealand, PAFT serves first time parents who enrol before their children are 3 months old. New Zealand currently has 64 PAFT programs and slightly more than 200 educators... New Zealand PAFT serves more than 9000 families. (PATNC, 2000, PAT News).

The Maori overlay is not intended simply to be a version of a non-Maori education model, but to enhance it, "to complement learning within the cultural context" (Tarrant, 2000, p.2).

Two provider sites offering the PAFT programme were researched: the first was Organisation A, mentioned above for utilising the client's perspective to optimise its delivery of a wide range of support services for West Auckland residents, especially Maori. The second site was Organisation B, contracted to deliver PAFT in Central Auckland. Using the same multiple methodologies in both cases, extensive data collection was carried out, mainly through in-depth interviews with a range of programme participants. These data were

analysed and assessed so that a fuller understanding of the user dimension in this information programme could be obtained.

### ***Overview of the Thesis***

This thesis is structured into six chapters. Chapter 1 establishes an overview together with a statement of the objectives of the research project, together with background information on the Parents As First Teachers programme. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature relevant to knowledge gaps and information poverty. It proceeds from a broad overview of the social science context, to a review of relevant communication theory and research. It concludes with consideration of the gap in the current research that this study attempts to fill.

Research design issues, complex in this case, are explained in Chapter 3. Since a combination of methodologies was used as a means of obtaining as full a picture as possible of the significance of interactivity and engagement in effective knowledge acquisition, several data collection methods were justified. In addition, since researcher observation was used as an important methodological “glue” to hold together the perspectives gained from in-depth interviews and other qualitative data, ethical issues are explored here also.

Chapter 4 summarises the results of twenty-two in-depth interviews with parent participants in the PAFT programme, and with parent educators and co-ordinators of the two provider sites. In addition, findings from

observation of interactions, from educator training, and from analysis of PAFT curriculum material are summarised.

Chapter 5 synthesises these several sources of findings, presenting analysis of themes that emerged from the data, and concluding with some implications in terms of knowledge gap and information poverty theory, and of potential information provider use of these findings.

To conclude, Chapter 6 discusses the limitations of the study and points out areas to be investigated in future research, arising from this study.