‘Not that I wouldn’t trust them, I trust probably two of them …’

Exploring the Information Worlds of Ethnic Minority Adolescents in Ireland

Jean Henefer

Abstract

Recognition of the need to provide for the social inclusion of all young people was demonstrated by the Irish Government’s ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the drafting of the National Children’s Strategy (2000) and the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children. The focus of international literature regarding the integration of ethnic minority children tends to concentrate predominantly on educational issues such as the acquisition of host country languages. However it is clear in this body of work that integration is more effective when educators and library/information specialists work in partnership to this end. Exploring the information needs and information seeking behaviour of ethnic minority adolescents can contribute to the development of policies that can be used co-operatively by educational and library services to expedite their successful integration. Findings from this study suggest that both ethnic minority and indigenous Irish adolescents have a range of information needs and information behaviours arising from membership of both the ‘small world’ of adolescence and ‘small worlds’ related to their social, cultural and/or economic circumstances.

Keywords

Ethnic minority; information needs; public libraries; social inclusion; adolescents.

Introduction

Prior to the rapid growth in information and communication technologies (ICTs), Daniel Bell hypothesised that society was on the verge of an evolution to what he termed ‘post-industrialism’ in which information and knowledge would play central roles. Describing the economic emphasis on services in a post-industrial society, Bell argues that ‘what counts is not raw muscle power, or energy, but information’ (1976: 127). In recent years, the ‘Information Society’ has become accepted as the term to characterise this societal evolution.

government and public services to the citizens of Ireland. Of late, the Information Society Policy Unit (ISPU), established by the Department of the Taoiseach, lists amongst its responsibilities the ‘development of an inclusive Knowledge Society’ (www.taoiseach.gov.ie), thus mirroring the trend in other countries for policy makers to link the ‘information society’ and ‘inclusive society’ discourses (Selwyn, 2002: 2) when developing social policies. While it is apparent that providing access to wide and varied information resources through the continuing development of ICTs can contribute to a more inclusive society, there is, alternatively, the potential for the technology to exacerbate social exclusion (Baum et al., 2004; Selwyn, 2002; Valentine et al., 2002).

Just as in today’s society, those who do not have homes and jobs are at risk of social and political exclusion, so in the future those who are unable to make effective use of information resources will also risk exclusion unless social, economic and educational policies are introduced to maximise opportunities for participation and contribution (INSINC 1997, as quoted in Valentine et al., 2002: 298).

The realisation that having access to information resources and being able to use them effectively is critical in ensuring that the ongoing development and adoption of ICTs does not further the marginalisation of particular groups within society, has led to a range of initiatives to address the ‘digital divide’. In terms of young people, the creation of the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in 1998 and Schools IT 2000 (albeit inadequately resourced) provide a framework and a mechanism to ensure that all young people leave school with the necessary literacies and skills to function in a world increasingly dependent on information technologies. Similarly the importance of developing children’s information literacy has been highlighted in the changes made by the Department of Education and Science within both the primary and secondary level curricula.

The impact and role of information in the lives of individuals and society, as well as the question of whether the Information Society will be socially inclusive or more exclusive than before, makes this a rich area for investigation. This paper will report aspects of a research study (Henefer, 2007) that explored one element of the phenomenon, that being the role of information in the lives of a particular group of young people living in Ireland. The study set out to discover and describe the information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents in Ireland.

Library and Information Science Research

The theoretical basis of the study is located in the body of Library and Information Science (LIS) research referred to as ‘User Studies’. The theoretical approach to this area has shifted fundamentally during the last thirty years from what has been described variously as a traditional, system-oriented, or bibliographic paradigm (Kuhlthau, 1991: 361) to a cognitive, constructivist, or sense-making paradigm (Morris, 1994: 21). Drawing upon consumer research based in psychology, communication, and marketing, researchers and practitioners of LIS have recognised that it is essential to assess and understand the user’s needs and satisfaction with the service provided. Thus, a growing body of research has moved away from emphasising the system and
the measurement of its use to a primary focus on the user, endeavouring to understand
the user and his or her needs and motivations in all their complexities. By making the
user the focus of the research question, it is believed that a more accurate definition of
information needs can be discovered, leading to the delivery of a better service through
improved systems.

Many researchers in User Studies have become interested in Information
information behaviour as ‘how people need, seek, manage, give, and use information
in different contexts’. Researchers in this area have investigated a range of activities
within a variety of contexts in an effort to develop theories or explanations for the
phenomenon of human information behaviour. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks
from other disciplines, including the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 1983),
the Principle of Least Effort (Zipf, 1949), and educational constructivist theory (Dewey,
1933; Kelly, 1963), IB researchers have worked towards developing a theoretical
foundation for this aspect of LIS.

This exploration of the information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents draws
upon Brenda Dervin’s Sense-Making model (Dervin, 1999). Sense-Making describes
information seeking as a pro-active response to an individual’s recognition of a gap in
their knowledge. Additionally, the theoretical foundation of the study was informed by
Elfreda Chatman’s Theory of Information Poverty (1996). Acknowledging the
relationship between information and culture, Chatman argued that the individual’s
information behaviour must be viewed from the context of their membership in a
distinct socio-cultural group or ‘small world’. Small worlds are inhabited by individuals
who share common attributes such as language, traditions, values, beliefs, and who
agree upon collective standards of behaviour within their world. Chatman’s theory
contends that individuals living small-world lives, because they are marginalised or
socially excluded from the larger world, often encounter barriers and experience gaps
in their information worlds. Chatman’s theoretical framework is useful for the
exploration of the everyday life information behaviour of groups like ethnic minority
adolescents in Ireland.

IB research has focused predominantly on adults’ information needs and
information seeking. Studies of children’s information behaviour are problematic,
because children lack a developed framework from which to recognise their needs and
often the means or tools to articulate those needs, if indeed they are aware of them. A
number of studies have been conducted on adolescent information behaviour. The
majority of these have focused on academic information seeking, retrieval and use
(Gross, 1999; Kuhlthau, 1994; Limberg, 1999; McGregor, 1994; Pitts, 1994). While
contributing to the development of theory, these studies are frequently concerned with
the creation of programmes for the teaching of information literacy skills to students.
Increasingly researchers of Youth Information Behaviour (YIB) have investigated
young people’s ‘everyday life information seeking’ (the term comes from Savolainen,
1995; see also Latrobe & Havener, 1997; Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Shenton,
2002; Todd, 1999) with a focus on the provision of more effective information services
for adolescents’ personal, non-academic needs. Within the developing body of YIB
research a few studies have been concerned with ethnicity (Chu, 1999; Walter, 1994).
For example, in her investigation of the information behaviours of immigrant children
mediators (ICMs), Chu found that the adolescent participants relied on people within their ethnic communities for their information seeking and did not engage with external, formal information systems to resolve their information needs. Chu’s findings support Chatman’s Theory of Information Poverty (1996) in that her participants did not leave their small world to find information. Studies outside LIS (Baum et al., 2004; Mossberger et al., 2006; Valentine et al., 2002; Van der Meer & Van Winden, 2003) indicate that ethnic minorities are amongst those groups most at risk of information poverty, and therefore social exclusion, in the Information Society.

**Context of the Research Study**

The Central Statistics Office reported that, between 1996 and 2002, the number of foreign-born individuals living in Ireland had increased fourfold and findings from the 2006 Census indicate that 10 per cent of the population is foreign born (420,000 compared to 224,000 in 2002). Information concerning the number of ethnic minority children in Irish schools is elusive. Ethnic minorities make up approximately three per cent of students in secondary schools (Irish Times, 25 February 2003). No such figure is available for ethnic minority pupils attending primary schools in Ireland.

In Ireland, recognition of the need to provide for the social inclusion of all young people was demonstrated by the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the drafting of the National Children’s Strategy (Dept of Health and Children, 2000), the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children, and a range of other measures dealing with social exclusion among young people, including the Youth Work Act 2001, the National Youth Work Development Plan 2003–2007 (Department of Education and Science, 2003) and various measures in the National Development Plan 2007–13. The focus of international literature regarding the integration of ethnic minority children tends to concentrate on educational issues such as the acquisition of host country languages. However it is clear in this body of work that integration is more effective when educators and library/information specialists work in partnership to this end (Champion, 1993; Skeele & Schall, 1994). Exploring the information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents can contribute to the development of policies that can be used co-operatively by educational and library services to expedite their successful integration.

This investigation of information worlds is an extension of an earlier study of the information needs of ethnic minority children (Henefer, 2001). The latter sought to identify what were the particular information needs that children in primary schools had because of their ethnic and immigrant characteristics. The subsequent study expanded the focus of investigation from information needs to individuals’ information behaviours when faced with both academic and everyday life information needs as well as their own interpretations of the role of information in their life worlds. The study set out to explore whether the participants, in addition to inhabiting the small world of adolescence, also have membership in other small worlds related to their ethnicity, socio-economic circumstances, and legal status. Once identifying membership in multiple small worlds, the study aimed to explore the impact of this phenomenon on individual information behaviours, with implications in the short term for access to information, and in the long term for social inclusion. Different facets of information behaviour were identified as critical for the investigation including the
identification and analysis of their information needs, the sources they consult and the
barriers they encounter.

While the focus of the study was information behaviour, the role of formal
information providers in the information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents was
investigated. The contribution of libraries in enabling immigrants to integrate has been
demonstrated in countries that have a longer tradition of immigration than Ireland.
Caidi and Allard (2005) argue that provision of information is an essential element of
social inclusion, defining social exclusion as an ‘information problem’ in this way:

... it has not been previously considered that social exclusion may also be
an information problem: those without adequate access to information are
socially excluded, and those who are socially excluded may also lack access
to mainstream sources of information or the proper social capital (Caidi

Internationally, the public library has enshrined the fostering of children’s learning as
integral to its role as a public service. Therefore, as public agencies, it is generally
accepted that libraries can contribute to the education and the integration of ethnic
minority children into the host society. The view that the public library service in
Ireland should address the needs of ethnic minorities was documented initially in
Branching Out: A New Public Library Service (Department of the Environment and Local
Government, 1998), and subsequently in An Chomhairle Leabharlanna’s Joining Forces:
Delivering Libraries and Information Services in the Information Age (1999). An Chomhairle
Leabharlanna has continued to address the role public libraries should play in
developing an inclusive society as reflected in its report to the National Economic and
Social Forum Project Team on Cultural Inclusion, Realising Potential: The Public Library

Research Design and Methods

In constructing a framework for the study, a multiple case study approach was selected.
In order to extend the scope and depth of the findings and to contribute to the
scientific rigor of the study, a triangulated methodological approach was developed.
Child-centred investigations of information behaviour are frequently conducted in the
participants’ schools (Cooper, 2002; Gordon, 1996; Gross, 1997; Henefer, 2001; Large,
Beheshti & Breuleux, 1998; Moore, 1995; Moore & St George, 1991; Pickard, 1998). Schools are seen as settings conducive for research because they can provide the
researcher with access to a large group of young people with varied abilities,
personalities, and resources who additionally share common characteristics. Similarly,
the school setting can provide evidence about some information needs, how
information seeking is influenced by the school itself, and it allows the researcher to
work with children who are not library users, as well as with those who do use the
library. This study was conducted in two secondary schools each with an extensive
enrolment of ethnic minority students. The two schools were approached at the
recommendation of an NGO working with immigrant groups. Data was collected in
three phases over one academic year.

The first phase of the study concentrated on gaining the insights of adults who had
professional expertise in the needs of ethnic minority adolescents. Once permission
had been received from both schools' principals, all members of staff were invited to participate in the research. Adults who volunteered to contribute to the study included nine teachers and two Home School Liaison Officers from the participating schools as well as a Senior Librarian from a public library in the schools' locality and the Health Information Officer of an NGO supporting refugees and asylum seekers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each in order to gain their ideas about the characteristics of the information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents, both from observations of their experiences with these young people as well as their professional viewpoints.

The second phase consisted of a questionnaire intended to gain a perspective on the information behaviours of young people, aged 12 through 18, both ethnic minority and indigenous Irish. Provided with a list of information needs and information sources derived from previous surveys of young people’s information needs and sources (Latrobe & Havener, 1997; Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Shenton, 2002), respondents were asked to indicate whether they had experienced any of these needs or consulted any of the sources during the past year. A total of 379 students aged 12 through 18 in the two schools completed the questionnaire. For purposes of analysis, respondents were allocated to broad categories of nationalities: thirty-five countries were identified by participants as their country of birth as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Questionnaire Respondents’ Places of Birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>257 (67.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>54 (14.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe*</td>
<td>44 (11.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>11 (2.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>6 (1.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union</td>
<td>5 (1.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>1 (0.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>1 (0.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NB: At the time of the study, these countries of origin had not yet obtained membership in the EU.

The third and final stage of the study consisted of a triangulated, qualitative exploration of the information worlds of twenty four young people in the two schools, twelve ethnic minority and, as a control group, twelve indigenous Irish students. While each school had richly diverse student populations, both schools’ senior management played a role in recommending the students who participated in the qualitative phase of the study. Nevertheless, it was anticipated that it would be possible to identify small world membership amongst the twelve ethnic minority participants as they shared common ethnic, socio-economic, and legal status characteristics. Meetings were held with the students in order to provide them with full information about the study and to obtain their own and their parent/guardian’s informed consent. By gender,
participants were equally represented in the study. The twenty four participants were
generally aged sixteen to seventeen years, two students having recently turned
eighteen at the time of the study. Amongst the ethnic minority students, five were
unaccompanied minors, without refugee status. The ethnic minority adolescents
included individuals who had lived in Ireland for up to five years as well as those who
had arrived within six months of the study.

To initiate this final phase of the research, the student participants were given
diaries in which they were asked to keep for a period of two weeks a daily record of:
1. Information needed for school
2. Information needed for life outside school
3. Sources they consulted for the information
4. Their feelings at the beginning, middle and end of the search process
5. The success of their search
6. How they might change their search strategy in future.

On completion of their diaries, semi-structured interviews were held with each of the
students in order to explore in more detail the data offered in the diaries and to
expand the investigation of their information needs and behaviours beyond the two
week timeframe. As the final stage of the interview, participants were given an A2 sheet
of paper and a range of felt tip markers. Each created a map of their personal
information worlds, reflecting the sources they consulted; relationships or linkages
between any of their information sources and the barriers they encountered in
searching for information.

Information Needs and Behaviours within Small Worlds

While data from all phases of the study revealed a rich and detailed range of
information behaviours, because of space limitations this paper will focus
predominantly on information needs. These can be broadly categorised as Scholastic
Information Needs, Survival/Safety Information Needs, Psychological/Emotional
Information Needs and Social/Cultural Information Needs.\(^2\) Table 2 presents the
range of information needs selected by the 122 ethnic minority respondents to the
questionnaire.

Comparing the selection frequencies across the range of information needs, those
related to scholastic matters feature strongly. Those needs specifically associated with
school work (assignments, tests/examinations) and future careers are dominant.
Information regarding universities/colleges is the least frequently identified of these,
perhaps because of the broad range of ages represented.

Survival/safety information needs are less evident with only health information
selected by more than fifty per cent of the respondents. While seventy two (59 per cent)
of the students identified a need for information related to personal health, only thirty
nine (32 per cent) indicated a need to find information about health services. Similarly,
two thirds (N = 81, 66.4 per cent) of the ethnic minority students did not require
information concerned with government/social services nor had information needs
related to money or part-time work (N = 80, 65.6 per cent). Of all of the survival/safety
categories, information needs concerned with drugs and/or alcohol was the most
frequently ‘not selected’ amongst ethnic minority adolescents (N = 101, 82.8 per cent),
### Table 2: Ethnic Minority Adolescents’ Information Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Need</th>
<th>Selected n (%)</th>
<th>Not selected n (%)</th>
<th>Total n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scholastic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tests/exams</td>
<td>80 (65.6%)</td>
<td>42 (34.4%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assignments</td>
<td>73 (59.8%)</td>
<td>49 (40.2%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>future careers</td>
<td>81 (66.4%)</td>
<td>41 (33.6%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>universities/colleges</td>
<td>61 (50.0%)</td>
<td>61 (50.0%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival/Safety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>money or part-time jobs</td>
<td>42 (34.4%)</td>
<td>80 (65.6%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health</td>
<td>72 (59.0%)</td>
<td>50 (41.0%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>housing</td>
<td>49 (40.2%)</td>
<td>73 (59.8%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medicine</td>
<td>55 (45.1%)</td>
<td>67 (54.9%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government/social services</td>
<td>41 (33.6%)</td>
<td>81 (66.4%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health services</td>
<td>39 (32.0%)</td>
<td>83 (68.0%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drugs and/or alcohol</td>
<td>21 (17.2%)</td>
<td>101 (82.8%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>current events</td>
<td>41 (33.6%)</td>
<td>81 (66.4%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politics</td>
<td>22 (18.0%)</td>
<td>100 (82.0%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological/Emotional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family relationships</td>
<td>62 (50.8%)</td>
<td>60 (49.2%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religion</td>
<td>64 (52.5%)</td>
<td>58 (47.5%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships with friends</td>
<td>80 (65.5%)</td>
<td>42 (34.4%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating and relationships</td>
<td>46 (37.7%)</td>
<td>76 (62.3%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Cultural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sports</td>
<td>81 (66.4%)</td>
<td>41 (33.6%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entertainment</td>
<td>83 (68.0%)</td>
<td>39 (32.0%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>travel/holidays</td>
<td>64 (52.5%)</td>
<td>58 (47.5%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extracurricular activities</td>
<td>60 (49.2%)</td>
<td>62 (50.8%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fashion/beauty</td>
<td>51 (41.8%)</td>
<td>71 (58.2%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with information about politics also selected infrequently by respondents (N=22, 18 per cent). The latter might be interpreted as supporting the findings of previous research relating to young people’s general disaffection from politics (Lalor, de Róiste & Devlin, 2007).

Amongst the information needs that were later categorised as psychological or emotional, relationships with friends was the most frequently identified (N = 80, 65 per cent) on an exact par with the number of students who had identified preparation for tests or examinations as a need. Nearly the same number of students (N = 76, 62.3 per cent) indicated that information about dating/relationships was not a need.

Social/cultural information needs feature strongly in the information worlds of the respondents. Taken as a whole, over half the respondents indicated needing information in these areas (M = 68, 55.6 per cent), with sports and entertainment on a par, or higher, than scholastic information needs. Overall the most frequent information needs identified by ethnic minority respondents were in the areas of entertainment (N = 83), future careers (N = 81), sports (N = 81), preparation for tests or examinations (N = 80), and relationships with friends (N = 80).

In addition to the questionnaire data, an analysis and comparison of the qualitative data identifying information needs was conducted from the ethnic minority students’ diaries, interviews, maps and the interviews with the adults. The qualitative data provided a rich complement to the statistical findings, in some instances supporting trends about certain information needs and behaviours, and in others offering alternative perspectives.

Both the adult and adolescent participants concurred that scholastic information needs were of utmost importance. The most critical of these were information about the education system, the need for English language skills, and having the resources to obtain educational materials. Both adults and the adolescents also emphasised the need for clear information about how the educational system in Ireland works. According to the adults, ethnic minority adolescents are often unaware that they must be enrolled in secondary school for three years prior to third level entry in order to qualify for educational grants. Many adolescents expressed concerns about obtaining necessary information in order to make plans for their futures. Despite consulting a variety of sources, they still believed that they needed additional information in this area. One adolescent described her experience at an Open Day in this way:

*It didn't give me the answers I wanted. The people there can't wait to get rid of you. If you ask too many questions they just answer a few and then ignore you. They just want to get on to the next person. They try to say as little as possible.*

In terms of scholastic information needs, all of the adults spoke of the need for English language skills, particularly in the context of functioning within the classroom. One teacher described language acting as a barrier as follows:

*They can’t verbalise what they are trying to explain because they just don’t have the words. They get frustrated and end up saying ‘Just forget about it’. If they aren’t confident they can explain what they are looking for they will just say there’s no point in even trying.*
Some students reinforced the adults’ view that while their oral English was competent, they continued to have difficulty with their written skills. Those who discussed this need indicated that they were all in mainstream classes and were not receiving language support in their schools. Another major scholastic information need was related to resources. The cost of textbooks required for the Leaving Certificate was considered excessive with examples provided of students unable to afford required materials.

In terms of seeking information to address scholastic information needs, there was a difference in perception between the adults and the adolescent participants, the female students in particular. The adults concurred that teachers were an important source in the information worlds of ethnic minority students. This view was not shared by adolescent participants, one student stating:

*I wouldn’t ask the teachers here. Some of them are not really, how can I put it, approachable … you wouldn’t go asking … they wouldn’t be my first … they would be the last resort.*

While the majority of students did not have access at home to the Internet, several participants indicated that despite feeling that they lacked adequate navigational skills, they relied exclusively on the Internet for resolving their scholastic information needs. One student explained her dependence on the Internet in this way:

*Most of the time I just go straight on to the Internet. I don’t know why but I do. The teacher was talking about abortion and I wanted to find the definition. So I went on the Internet. Maybe talking to somebody might have helped. But who would I talk to? That’s the problem. I don’t know.*

Survival/safety information needs were discussed readily by the adults including ethnic minority adolescents’ need to acclimatise themselves to their new environment, navigating their new surroundings, and locating things. The adolescents confirmed the adults’ view, especially in the first weeks after arrival, that there is a need to learn about one’s new environment. One student described his experience in this way:

*I didn’t know anybody. I would stay in my room for the whole day, I wouldn’t see the daylight. I didn’t know where to go. I was given a map, but I can’t just be going out following a map because I would get lost. I was afraid.*

Despite having lived in Ireland for some time, many of the students stated that they still had trouble navigating outside their local area. One unaccompanied minor said that during the six months he had been living in Ireland he had never gone outside of his immediate locality. He explained that he was afraid that leaving the area in which his hostel was situated would have a detrimental impact on his asylum application.

The adults discussed information needs related to the asylum seeking process including the need for straightforward information about social welfare entitlements and how the health system works. All of the unaccompanied minors spoke during their interviews about needing information about entitlements. In the absence of parents or family, they needed not only to identify what they were entitled to, but how to apply for entitlements. One participant related his ongoing difficulties obtaining his Child Benefit as follows:
I filled the form and sent it back to Social Welfare. They sent another form and I filled it out and sent it. But they never replied. I have been doing this for the past two years now. Most of the information I got was from friends I made in the hostel. But they didn’t tell me that I had to get someone to claim it for me, they just told me to get it and send it in.

Similarly, participants discussed the need for information about the asylum process, in particular the steps one should take if the initial application has been turned down. One student described his needs in this way:

I would love to continue my studies, but there is no way for me to go on unless I get Leave to Remain. I don’t really understand what it all means. I don’t know about the people making decisions. I don’t know what is going to happen.

Economic survival was identified as a need by some students when they included the need for information about part-time employment in their information worlds. Several needed information about part-time work because of their families’ economic difficulties in Ireland.

Gatekeeping emerged as an information behaviour within participants’ small worlds. Their activities ranged from finding the meaning of English words for their parents, negotiating the health system, gathering information about places in schools for themselves and younger siblings, as well as accessing legal services for asylum applicants and refugees. One participant recalled the following incident:

My dad, a few years ago he gave me the address of a kind of lawyer thing and he asked me to find information on our case. I talked to the people there. And then I brought back whatever they said to me there. Because you know his English is not very good.

Survival/safety information needs feature strongly in the information worlds of the adolescent participants and were also perceived by the adults as critical. The sources that adolescents, particularly the unaccompanied minors, consulted to resolve survival/safety information needs often seemed limited to those located within their small world. One participant summarised this trend in the following way:

It is hard to know anything but what your friends know. It’s all based around the people you are staying with. You know what they know. If they give you information, if it is right or wrong, it’s what they know, so that’s what you know as well. If the information is, like, it is the one you have to be happy with.

Despite receiving inadequate or inaccurate information from within their small world, participants continued to rely on these sources for subsequent information seeking.

In discussing ethnic minority adolescents’ psychological/emotional information needs, the adult participants tended to make distinctions about well-being associated with events in the past, present, and future. One teacher explained his concerns as follows:

I think a lot of them are damaged when they arrive and I don’t know if they get any help or are just put into the system. Some of them definitely don’t get anything. What happens at Christmas … where do they go, what’s happening, who is looking after them?
The adults described ethnic minority adolescents’ need to feel wanted and valued by the school community. This was not as evident from the students. Apart from a few participants who discussed their continued interest and involvement in extracurricular activities at school, most seemed somewhat detached from the school community. One student expressed her own feelings as follows:

*I try to keep it separate. I don’t know if that is good or not but I don’t talk a lot about my life with people at school. Not that I wouldn’t trust them, I trust probably two of them, but I have friends outside I rely on.*

Adults also spoke of information needs related to adolescence as a developmental life phase, but with particular meaning for ethnic minority young people either because they have to be overly dependent on parents in their new environment or because they must assume too much responsibility as a gatekeeper or because of their unaccompanied circumstances. Data from both the adults and adolescents suggest that psychological/emotional information needs can be exacerbated by the individual’s asylum status. It is difficult to make future plans when one’s status remains unresolved. Being left in a state of limbo, with no indication of how long the process will take, particularly for those who are unaccompanied, can have an immediate and long-term impact on their emotional well-being. Added to the sense of uncertainty and impotence inherent in the asylum process is the daily anxiety some adolescents experience over their possible deportation back to the place which represents the original source of trauma.

In terms of social and cultural information needs, the majority of adults spoke only of the latter, focusing on the issue of integration. Some viewed integration as a one-way process while others shared the following view:

*Integration for both groups … the Irish aren’t very quick to integrate either. I don’t know if that can be done within a school. They don’t see their own culture except in their own homes. They don’t see any sign of it in school.*

Only one teacher indicated that ethnic minority adolescents needed information about recreational outlets, such as sports teams, clubs and entertainment. In contrast to the adults, findings from the adolescents demonstrate that social/cultural information needs feature strongly in their information worlds. Some spoke of cultural information needs, but this was more to do with reinforcement of their own ethnic cultures than finding out about the workings of Irish culture. The majority of students, compared to the adults, identified a need for information about social and recreational activities. Because most of the adults who participated in the study were professional teachers, they may not have given full consideration of the everyday life information needs of their students and therefore did not identify social or recreational information needs.

**Contrasting Information Needs and Behaviours within Small Worlds**

*They are at a disadvantage. The Irish have grown up in the system. It’s new to the children who come in. Their needs would be very different. Development needs are the same but in terms of information needs, theirs would be much bigger (teacher).*
This study set out to investigate whether the information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents were different from those of their Irish peers. Comparing data from both ethnic minority and Irish participants suggest that while there are facets common to both groups, there are also significant differences.

A major difference between the information worlds of the two groups is in terms of the range of their information needs. For both groups these needs are prompted by both contextual determinants related to their social, cultural and/or economic circumstances as well as developmental determinants associated with their adolescence. Like their ethnic minority peers, Irish participants identified information needs related to school, future careers, recreation, and maturation. The most commonly shared information need category identified by all participants was scholastic. In describing their information seeking to fulfill scholastic information needs, many Irish participants indicated that they had limited access to information technology. Common amongst participants, regardless of ethnicity, was the identification of inadequate information literacy skills as an information barrier. The Irish participants concurred with their ethnic minority peers that they felt frustrated using electronic resources because they believed they lacked adequate navigational skills.

Apart from needs related to stages of adolescent development, there was little indication that psychological/emotional needs featured as strongly in the information worlds of the Irish participants. For example, few alluded to a need to establish plans for the future in order to have a sense of well-being as compared to all of the ethnic minority participants. Irish participants were more relaxed in their information seeking about third level education, as demonstrated by one Irish student who stated:

> I don’t see much point in worrying because I’ve got loads of time to choose. I can pick a college course later on when I do the Leaving Cert. We have been given information on it, but I just don’t listen. I suppose I am kind of lazy and I will let it flow and wait till the last three days and then panic. That’s the plan really. Some people already have their whole thing planned out, but they are a rarity in the class.

In contrast Irish participants shared with their ethnic minority peers the social/cultural need for information related to recreation. It was clear from the data that young people in Ireland, regardless of their ethnicity, are in need of activities and outlets in which they can socialise with people their own age. Similar to their ethnic minority classmates, half of the Irish participants, residing in inner city neighbourhoods, described their lack of experience with and knowledge of the world outside their own locality as an information barrier. One of the Irish students explained his small world in this way:

> I keep my private life and my school life completely separate. I am best mates with young fellas here but I don’t see them outside school. It’s a completely different world. I never would call them and ask them to go to the pictures or something. I could walk to them but I have to keep around my area. Because I have friends in my area, so if I ever wanted to go to them, they would be like ‘you are moving away from your friends … it’s not very nice’. Stuff like that.
Several of the Irish participants abandoned plans to pursue a particular career because it entailed leaving Dublin and subsequently had explored no other options. Inner city Irish participants discussed anxiety about travelling outside their locality, some adolescents expressing a fear of getting lost. In this way, they shared the same concerns of some of the unaccompanied minors who were reluctant to move outside their own small world environment.

Despite some variation in the nature and extent of their needs, those identified in this study suggest that both indigenous Irish and ethnic minority adolescents have a range of information needs arising from both membership in the small world of adolescence and small worlds related to their social, cultural and/or economic circumstances.

Discussion and Conclusion

The range of information needs identified during this study and the nature of the information seeking behaviour among ethnic minority adolescents in particular contexts, support the premise that these young people live what Chatman (1996) would characterise as small world lives. However, this study goes further in demonstrating how an individual’s membership in multiple small worlds can affect the nature of their information world. The information needs of the ethnic minority participants in this study are extensive and varied because they not only must make sense of the outside adult world from their adolescent small world, but also, equally, are required to make sense of the larger world of the host community from their ethnic minority small world. Additionally, the nature of their information seeking and their ability to construct personalised understandings are also determined by their membership in these two small worlds. In this study, the ethnic minority participants’ information needs and information behaviours are products of adolescence coupled with their personalised social contexts, in these cases determined by ethnicity, familial circumstances and legal status.

The findings demonstrate that ethnic minority adolescents limit their information seeking from human sources primarily to other members of their small worlds, whether they are fellow residents of their hostel accommodation or individuals who belong to the same ethnic network. Participants in this study avoided using human sources who would be considered members of the larger world (Chatman, 1996; Pendleton & Chatman, 1998). They continue to restrict their searching within the parameters of their small world, even though, on occasion, they have had the experience that the information they received was biased or inaccurate or insufficient. Some participants avoided approaching outsiders for information by relying on the Internet for most of their information seeking, even in situations where they knew that the information would be more accessible from an outsider. For these students information technology, while providing them privacy, acts to further isolate and marginalise them. Their reluctance to consult human sources, including other adolescents, who were not members of their ethnic small world, supports Chatman’s ‘Propositional Statement 5’ that members of a small world will not go outside that world to find information. Participants spoke of not trusting individuals outside their minority networks and their impression that outsiders were not approachable. Anecdotal data from the adults suggested that ethnic minority adolescents, particularly those who are seeking refugee status, are often reluctant to reveal needs. This secrecy,
defined by Chatman (1996) as a self-protective behaviour, in part, is related to concerns about possible consequences particularly with respect to obtaining asylum. Thus, in terms of information seeking in both academic and everyday life contexts, the participants are affected by both the social norms and self-protective behaviours of small world lives. However, many of the adolescent participants did seem willing to adopt a different strategy when they felt that the information need was critical and not one that could be resolved in their small world. A common example of this was their willingness to consult with representatives from third level institutions about future educational options. Because they are motivated to take advantage of the educational opportunities in Ireland and to build solid futures for themselves, they were able to risk going outside their small worlds to gain the information they needed to fulfil their long-term life goals. Within both the adolescent small world and the ethnic small world, this type of information was perceived by members collectively as critical and unavailable from sources within the small worlds. This finding supports elements of Chatman’s Theory of Life in the Round (Proposition 6) in that information seeking outside the small world will be deemed an acceptable behaviour when the information need is identified as essential.

By exploring how individuals inhabit their information worlds, IB research can contribute to the development of information services that more effectively address the needs of users. For example, this study illustrates that access to ICTs varies among adolescents in Ireland depending primarily on the individual’s socio-economic circumstances. Similar to earlier studies (Valentine et al., 2002), this research demonstrates that access to ICTs alone will not eradicate information poverty. Ethnic minority and Irish participants in this study stated that they were often frustrated in their electronic information seeking. This was the result of a lack of information literacy skills. Despite investment in equipping all schools in Ireland with ICTs and Broadband, there is a need for educators and LIS practitioners to work collaboratively to ensure that students are able to develop their information literacy skills.

Research into the unique information needs of diverse social groups is necessary to determine the nature and degree of information services that should be provided. However, the research can only be productive if there is the will to support the provision of appropriate services. The findings from the exploration of ethnic minority adolescents’ information worlds confirm previous research indicating that there is a lack of communication, co-ordination, and co-operation between the range of agencies that offer services to asylum-seeking and refugee children in Ireland (Whyte & Byrne, 2005). While it is important to acknowledge the work of non-formal educators in providing young people in Ireland with information (through the National Youth Information Network supported by the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education and Science), schools also have a clear responsibility not only for the education but also the integration of immigrant children and adolescents. Many schools are expected to do so without adequate funding or resources. By investigating the information resources that are freely available, for example those that can be found in public libraries, schools may find these challenges more achievable. There is clearly a need to create a more robust co-operative relationship between secondary schools and the public libraries in order to enhance the information worlds of all young people in Ireland.
Notes
1 It is recognised that ‘indigenous’ and ‘ethnic minority’ are not mutually exclusive categories. For instance it is widely accepted that the Traveller community forms a longstanding indigenous ethnic minority in Ireland. However, given the very significant recent inward migration in Ireland this research focuses specifically on the information worlds of foreign-born ethnic minority adolescents.
2 These categories emerged during the analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data once all three phases of data collection had been completed.

References


**Biographical Note**

Jean Henefer has worked as an educator, librarian, and researcher in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and North America. Since 2001 she has concentrated her research interests on the developing field of Youth Information Behaviour with a particular focus on marginalisation. This work has been based in the School of Information and Library Studies, University College Dublin. Research for her doctoral dissertation, *The Information Worlds of Ethnic Minority Adolescents in Ireland*, received the support of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Office of the Minister for Children.

**Address**

Jean Henefer,
6 Carlton Villas,
Novara Avenue,
Bray,
Co Wicklow.

Email: jean.henefer@gmail.com