



The information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents in Ireland

1. What is the study's background?

This study was the subject of a PhD thesis (2008) by Jean Henefer of the School of Information and Library Studies, University College, Dublin, with funding from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Scholarship Programme.*

2. What is the study's purpose?

The purpose of the study was to examine the information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents in Ireland. 'Information worlds' encompass the ongoing day-to-day ways in which individuals engage in a range of information behaviours. Included among these are information needs recognised as being desired or required as critically important, strategies for information-seeking, the sources that individuals typically seek for their information, the value to the individual of the various sources of information both in terms of relevant content and usability, the barriers they may encounter in their search for different categories of information and the ways in which they reciprocally gather and share information with peers, including the effect of misinformation.

The information behaviours of ethnic minority adolescents in Ireland, particularly those who contributed to this study (including a number of participants who would be, at the time of the study (Autumn 2003 – June 2004), classified as unaccompanied minors living in hostel accommodation), is important in terms of providing insights that could have practical applications for contributing to more in-depth provisions for ethnic

minorities in the educational system, a greater focus on how libraries and information professionals can collaborate more with schools (a reciprocal relationship) to address the needs and information-seeking behaviours of ethnic minority adolescents, as well as furthering the research literature and models of the information behaviour of children and adolescents.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available from the Library, University College, Dublin.

3. How was the study undertaken?

Multiple data collection and analysis methods were used in this study, which was conducted in two urban schools in Dublin:

- » Interviews were held with 13 teachers working with young people in order to gain their professional perspectives on the information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents.
- » Data were collected from students enrolled in the schools. Initially, a questionnaire on information needs and information sources was completed by 379 students, both indigenous Irish and ethnic minority. Subsequently, 24 students (aged 16-18, 12 indigenous Irish and 12 ethnic minority students in each of the two schools) agreed to participate in the research. Over a 2-week period, they completed information diaries recording daily accounts of their information needs and the sources consulted to resolve those needs. On completion of their diaries, the participants were individually interviewed to discuss information

* The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

events recorded in their diaries and to further explore their information worlds, which resulted in the construction of an ‘information horizon map’ or a graphical representation of their own view of their information world.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 Information behaviour of participants

This study of adolescents’ information worlds goes beyond the usual exploration of children’s information needs and information-seeking. While this investigation has concentrated on the nature of a particular group of young people’s information needs (i.e. ethnic minority adolescents), it also sought to explore how the young participants generally tried to resolve their information needs, why they decided to pursue strategies that may or may not have provided them with what they needed and, additionally, the barriers they encountered when trying to resolve their information needs. Emerging from the study is the finding that because of their specific contexts (e.g. being members of ethnic minority groups and, in some cases, being unaccompanied minors), individuals pursued particular information behaviours. Because of their inadequate access to social workers, they frequently consulted fellow-residents in their hostels for information, irrespective of the level of reliable information available from these sources and in some cases knowing that the information they were receiving was erroneous. In addition, the ethnic minority students who participated in this study, while often highly motivated to get the information they thought they needed, frequently were reluctant to approach human sources (e.g. teachers in their schools), which they identified as part of the larger outside world.

4.2 Information needs of participants

Regardless of the variety of patterns taken to seek information, the root of the behaviour is the need for information. The information needs of the ethnic minority participants in this study were prompted by contextual determinants, including the developmental determinants related to their current life-phase and what has been described as their membership of two small worlds, namely (a) the small world of adolescence and (b) the small world of being of ethnic minority origin in Ireland. Participants in this study revealed scholastic, survival/safety, psychological/emotional and social/cultural

information needs that were extensive and varied, not only because they must make sense of the adult world developmentally from their own adolescent small world, but also because they are required to make sense of their host community from their own ethnic minority perspective. Furthermore, the nature of their information-seeking, their recognition of information needs and their ability to construct personalised understandings are also determined equally by their being members of the two small worlds of adolescence and ethnic minority communities. In this study, the ethnic minority participants’ needs and information behaviours are products of adolescence coupled with their personalised social contexts, in these cases determined by ethnicity, familial circumstances, length of residency and legal status.

4.3 Common information needs of adolescents

The ethnic minority adolescents who participated in this study identified and described many information needs that are common to other young people regardless of their environment, ethnicity or economic circumstances. These included information needs related to school, future careers, recreation and maturation. However, in contrast to previous studies, which have focused on a variety of socio-economic settings, this investigation showed that other information needs are specific to ethnic minority adolescents who have immigrated to Ireland and may be transferable to immigrant adolescents elsewhere.

4.4 Planning for the future by participants

With respect to the findings related to third-level education and future careers, this study (in contrast to others) found that the ethnic minority participants generally had well-developed future time perspectives and actively engaged in ongoing information-seeking in order to make plans for their future education and/or careers. Similarly, those who had limited or no English on arrival in Ireland had actively acquired the skills they needed to communicate and function in their new environment.

4.5 Intermediation needs

Information-seeking for survival/safety needs was seen as critical by participants in this study because of their ‘small world’ context of being members of an ethnic minority and because they are associated

with the individual's survival in a new environment. As described in other studies of ethnic minority children and adolescents, this study identified information needs related to intermediation. Ethnic minority adolescents act as intermediaries not only for their parents, but also for a range of people both here and in their homelands. Most act as intermediaries because their English language skills are more developed than those of their parents and because their enrolment in school is perceived as a link to the larger outside world.

4.6 Maturation needs

In contrast to previous categories of information needs, the findings from this study indicate that emotional/psychological information needs may often be dormant or, if recognised, left unexpressed. Like their Irish peers, ethnic minority youths in Ireland are engaged in the developmental tasks of adolescence. However, the need for independence eludes many newly arrived young people – they are unable to sever their dependency on their parents because of the insecurity of their new environment. Therefore, needs related to maturation are either dormant or unexpressed. For unaccompanied minors, the problem is reversed – they have too much independence and are expected to do too many things for themselves.

4.7 Importance of belonging to a recognised group

Many of the adults interviewed for this study stated that the need to belong to a recognised group is particularly important for ethnic minority adolescents. According to them, newly arrived adolescents perceive school as a bridge to their new environment. For many adolescents, particularly those living in hostel accommodation, school becomes a haven and a home. The school population assumes the role of surrogate family.

5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

1. **The study of human information behaviour is driven not only by interest in exploring the nature of people's experience with and use of information, but also with the motivations underlying individuals' information activities.**

Of late, researchers have been developing frameworks that explore both the psychological

and social dimensions of information behaviour in order to uncover its intricate complexity. By investigating the range of dimensions that contribute to the life story of a particular information event, researchers in information behaviour hope that their findings will contribute to the creation of improved information services and systems for all members of society. The design of services and systems, based on findings from this multidimensional research approach, will ideally address more acutely the complex nature of human information behaviour.

2. **In terms of this study, as well as contributing to theoretical understanding of human information behaviour, the model developed (called 'A developmental model of human information behaviour') can be used to enhance information services for young people inhabiting the 'small world' of adolescence and also for those individuals who inhabit an additional 'small world', such as the ethnic minority participants in this study.**

Compared with many other nations, Ireland is in its early days as a multicultural society. The Government and public and private sector organisations and communities throughout Ireland are all responsible for ensuring that society is inclusive. In supporting this study, the OMCYA has confirmed that the Government views this type of research as critical to informing and constructing a foundation for policy-making in the area of social inclusion and, in particular, acknowledges the importance of including the voices of children and young people in this area of research.

3. **Research into the unique information needs of all members of society, whether indigenous or ethnic, is necessary to determine the nature and degree of information services that should be provided.**
- In Ireland, this type of research is essential. However, as seen in other nations, the research can only be relevant if there is the will and resources to support the fulfilment of appropriate services. The findings from this research confirm previous studies that indicate there has been a lack of communication, coordination and cooperation between the range of agencies that offer services to asylum-seeking and refugee children in Ireland. As in other countries, schools



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in Ireland have been given the responsibility not only of educating but also of integrating immigrant children and adolescents. As seen in this study, many schools are expected to do so without adequate funding, resources or staff. However, by investigating the information resources that are freely available (e.g. those in public libraries), schools may find these challenges more achievable. There is clearly a need to explore the possibility of creating a more robust cooperative relationship between secondary schools and the public library system in Ireland.

6. What are the recommendations?

This section presents the recommendations emerging from the study.

1. Academic support

Although the information worlds of ethnic minority adolescents in Ireland are distinctive in some ways, they share many common features with the information worlds of indigenous Irish adolescents. While the need for academic support was identified by the adult participants most specifically with regard to their unaccompanied minor students, it was clear that this type of support would be welcomed by most of the student participants. Homework clubs, for example, would provide students with support for their studies and could encourage communication between ethnic minority adolescents and their Irish peers. With increasing pressure on teachers to cover extensive examination syllabi, students have little opportunity to engage in constructive learning. This trend affects those students who proceed to third-level education and has repercussions for all students in terms of their potential to be 'lifelong learners'.

2. Developing information literacy skills

This study has shown that there is a developmental element to human information behaviour and that like other identity development domains, information behaviour evolves as the individual proceeds from childhood to adulthood. From this it follows that young people can be helped by information specialists to develop their information behaviour domain more effectively by providing, early on, interventions that enable them to build their skills in critical thinking and information literacy. In the absence of professionally managed school libraries, schools in Ireland could further develop partnerships with their local public libraries to offer information literacy for all students. In terms of the financial investment for this type of initiative, in the long-term, providing all young people in Ireland with opportunities to develop their information literacy skills is as important as equipping all secondary schools with PCs and broadband.

7. What are the benefits of the study?

The findings of this study will contribute to the developing research field of human information behaviour, specifically with regard to young people and minority groups. With the recent changes in Ireland's socio-economic circumstances, the emphasis on immigration has also changed. When the study commenced in 2002 (prior to funding from the OMCYA), the issue of immigration and associated implications for housing, education, social welfare and health were at the forefront of public and political discourse. Having completed the data collection in 2004, it is difficult to know the extent to which the information needs of ethnic minority adolescents at present are being effectively met. However, it is hoped that this research will contribute to the knowledge base in Ireland that informs and helps those who work to educate and empower young people, whatever nationality, to achieve their full potential.