"They'll remember how you made them feel":
Are public libraries in Ireland meeting the needs of Irish Travellers?

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My background

- Undergraduate BA in English & Celtic Civilisation, UCC

- Masters in Library and Information Studies, School of Information and Communication Studies, UCD (2021-2022)

- Library Assistant, UCD James Joyce Library (2021-2022)

- Library Assistant, NCI Norma Smurfit Library (September 2022-October 2023)

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Literature Review

- Findings from education, medicine, anthropology & linguistics periodicals
- Search included materials relating to other nomadic populations incl. Roma
- Themes: social inclusion; culture; literacy; family; relationships with service providers

Document Analysis

- Strategic plans & policies from libraries representing the 31 local authorities in ROI
- Examined for any inclusion of Irish Traveller community
- Internet search for blog posts/news coverage re: library events incl. Travellers

The Project

- March-August 2022
- Qualitative
- Thematic analysis

Interviews

- Semi-structured
- Questions based on themes generated from literature review
- 5 Irish Travellers, 3 female & 2 male, all in the 18-65 age bracket
- 2 settled individuals working with Traveller organisations
- 1 public library professional

Information science/ Information needs

- The way people behave around, use, and store information

- Information-seeking behaviour: how people behave when faced with an information need

- IN and ISB differ based on socio-economic background; "small-world" and "information poor" theories (Chatman, 1985; 1999)

Top: National Library of Ireland, 1954
Bottom: Whelan, 1958

Mincéirí: Ireland's indigenous ethnic minority

- **Culture distinctive from settled Irish majority incl. a focus on orality, nomadism, Cant, traditional trades, families**

- **State building on traditional Traveller campgrounds began in the 1930s; conflicts over land usage continue today**

- **1960s Commission on Itinerancy**

- **2017 ethnic minority status**

- **Material deprivation, poor health outcomes, low educational attainment**

- **The last "respectable" form of racism (Francis, 2013, p. 73) and "the single biggest human rights challenge" in the EU (Holland, 2021).**

Participant recruitment

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- Community described as "hard to reach" (Cavaliero, 2020; Greenfields, 2017); distrust of outsiders felt by many due to the trauma of abuses at the hands of public/state bodies (Thompson, 2022; Cavaliero, 2020; Yin-Har Lau & Ridge, 2011)

- Traveller support & resource organisations

- Twitter

- Low literacy levels problematised the use of written information & consent forms – consideration in ethics application

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Main Findings

Misperceptions

Lack of awareness of most of the services offered, e.g. access to tech, events, courses, community space – perception of libraries tied to education

Initial lack of trust of any kind of public/state institution. Lack of Traveller representation in staff/programming contributes to distrust.

Many Travellers may feel that they will be discriminated against in the library

Culture

Preservation of traditional culture a huge area of concern – language, traditional stories and histories, crafts

No participants report inclusion of materials representing or relating to Irish Travellers

This representation is strongly desired not just for its own sake, but so settled people can learn about Travellers, that they will be disciminated against less

Literacies

Term has come to encompass digital, health, media, finance, and workplace literacies (NALA, 2020); Travellers suffer disadvantage in relation to all of these (digital divide; low employment & lower life expectancy)

Right to Read, Healthy Ireland at Your Library, Work Matters (DRCD, 2019) – lack of info/marketing is a barrier to uptake

Interview findings show anecdotally that many Travellers who do use libraries use them for digital technologies

This is Maggie May....

And this is her day...

100 Books with a Difference

Left: Burke, 2023   Right: Cavan County Council's Library Service, 2013

How can I bring this work to NCI Library?

- ◈ **Assistive Technology room; C-Pen; Low-distraction desks**
- ◈ **UDL; Plain English**
- ◈ **Library Academic Support Centre**
- ◈ **Institution-wide initiatives: HEAR, Discover University, ELI, CELL, International Dept.**

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Thank you!

Any questions?

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Image credit: Whelan, 1958