Learning in Focus

Wellbeing and School Experiences among 9- and 13-Year-Olds: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study

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July 2015

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Executive Summary

There has been an increasing focus on the importance of taking account of child wellbeing in policy development in Ireland. However, there has been relatively little research on the factors, especially school experiences, which influence child wellbeing. This study uses rich data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study to look at children's wellbeing from their own perspective. In doing so, the study uses measures of self-image across a range of domains, namely, behaviour, academic self-image, anxiety, self-reported popularity, body image and happiness. It analyses the individual, classroom and school factors which shape these aspects of self-image at nine and 13 years of age, highlighting implications for educational policy at primary and post-primary level.

Methodology

The *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study is a longitudinal study of two cohorts of children: a nine-month-old cohort and a nine-year-old cohort. This report draws on data on the 8,568 nine-year-old children who, along with their parents, class teachers and principals, were surveyed in 2007/2008. The children were sampled from within primary schools so that we can compare the experiences of nine-year-olds in the same class and school. The cohort of children was followed up four years later, at the age of 13, at which stage almost all had made the transition to second-level education. At both time-points, children were asked to complete the Piers-Harris questionnaire, an internationally validated scale, which taps into six aspects of how children perceive themselves: behaviour, academic self-image, anxiety, popularity, body image and happiness. Multilevel analyses are used to disentangle the individual, class and school factors which influence self-image at the ages of nine and 13.

Main Findings for Nine-Year-Olds

Child self-image is not as strongly influenced by social background as academic achievement but middle-class children are more confident about their behaviour, feel somewhat happier and are less anxious than their peers from working-class or non-employed households. Girls are more positive about their behaviour and are somewhat more confident as learners, but report higher anxiety levels, than boys. Children from immigrant families are less confident across all domains than those from Irish families; in other words, they see themselves as less popular, are less happy and more anxious, report poorer behaviour, and are more self-critical of their academic abilities and their body image. The most striking influence of individual background relates to having a special educational need (SEN). Children

with a SEN, especially those with emotional-behavioural or learning difficulties, are significantly more negative about themselves than their peers.

Significant variation is found in child self-image across schools and, to some extent, across classrooms within schools but, not surprisingly, this variation is not as marked as for academic achievement. The gender mix of the school makes little difference to self-image. In contrast to significant variation in achievement, there are few differences between DEIS (disadvantaged status) and non-DEIS schools in child self-image but anxiety levels are somewhat higher in urban Band 1 schools, the most disadvantaged group of schools. Somewhat surprisingly, child self-image is found to be less positive in smaller schools compared with larger schools (those with more than 100-200 students) across all domains, except anxiety. This appears to reflect the greater use of multi-grade settings and a greater emphasis on teacher monitoring of behaviour in smaller schools along with the location of larger schools in urban areas, where child self-image tends to be more positive.

A third of nine-year-olds are taught in multi-grade settings, that is, where more than one year group are taught within the same classroom. Despite its prevalence in Ireland, there has been a lack of research on the impact of multi-grade teaching on student outcomes. Girls appear to be more sensitive to being taught in a multi-grade class than are boys; they report poorer behaviour, are less confident as learners, see themselves as less popular and are more negative about their physical appearance. It appears that they are comparing themselves to their, often older, peers and making negative self-evaluations. The only significant impact for boys is that they are more negative about their physical appearance in multi-grade settings. Class size is found to play a less important role than the structure of the class (that is, whether it is single- or multi-grade), but there is some evidence that girls in larger classes (those with 30 or more students) are somewhat less self-confident as learners and have somewhat higher levels of anxiety than girls in smaller classes.

Social relationships with teachers emerge as an important influence on child self-image, with more negative self-evaluations among students who 'never like' their teacher and who are reported to have discipline problems. Negative relations with peers in the form of bullying are associated with poorer self-image across all of the dimensions. Furthermore, girls who never see their friends outside school are less happy and see themselves as less popular. Frequent involvement in sport is associated with more positive self-image across all of the different dimensions.

Main Findings for 13-Year-Olds

The analyses explored whether self-image is stable between the ages of nine and 13, and the extent to which primary and second-level school experiences influence (changes in) self-image at 13 years of age. Some aspects of self-image are found to become more positive over the transition to second-level education; for example, young people report more positive behaviour and see themselves as more popular at 13 than they had at nine years of age. In contrast, academic self-image becomes more negative over the transition, especially for girls, as young people come to terms with the academic demands of the new school setting. Gender differences widen in terms of academic self-image, body image and freedom from anxiety between the ages of nine and 13. There is some stability in self-image between nine and 13 but many young people experience changes in how they view themselves over this four-year period. Primary school experiences, especially attitudes to their teacher, school and school subjects, have a longer term impact on self-image at the age of 13. Second-level experiences also make a difference, with poorer self-image emerging among young people who have experienced difficulties settling into the new school setting. All else being equal, second year students report poorer self-image than those in first year, with a particular gap in terms of academic self-image which appears to reflect the greater demands of schoolwork faced by young people as they move through junior cycle. Relations with second-level teachers are significantly associated with self-image; those who have more positive relations in the form of frequent praise and positive feedback have enhanced self-images while those who have frequently been reprimanded by their teachers have poorer evaluations of themselves.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study findings indicate that schools and classrooms can make a difference to children's view of themselves across a range of domains. At the same time, even children in the same class group have different experiences of school and react to it in different ways. This diversity poses challenges for teacher practice in accommodating children with differing self-images as well as abilities. This challenge is particularly evident for teachers of multi-grade classes, and hence for smaller schools, where girls in particular appear to make negative evaluations of themselves in relation to (older) peers. The findings point to the importance of supporting teachers through initial teacher education and continuous professional development in using approaches which engage students and provide feedback in such a way as to minimise potentially negative effects on students' self-image.

Sports participation emerges as a crucial ingredient in fostering a positive self-image among children. This poses challenges for schools in a context where an average of one hour a week is devoted to physical education, schools vary in their access to sports facilities and in their provision of extra-curricular sport, and children differ in their access to team-based sports outside the school setting.

The nature of the school and classroom climate, especially the quality of relationships with teachers, emerges as a crucial influence on children's self-image. Children who have negative relations with their teacher tend to be more negative about themselves as learners at primary level and become even more negative about their abilities over the transition to second-level education. Discipline issues emerge as both a symptom and a driver of poor self-image, highlighting the way in which school and class behaviour policy can be an important lever for school climate. More punitive measures and too close a monitoring of behaviour may impact negatively on teacher-student relations and contribute to poorer self-image among children and young people. It is therefore vital that the creation of a positive climate be seen as a central component of school development planning. Investment in continuous professional development for principals and teachers is likely to facilitate change; initial teacher education should also emphasise school and classroom climate as many new teachers may not realise the impact they actually have on their students.

Primary school experiences matter in shaping how children currently view themselves as learners and in other aspects of their self-image. They matter too in influencing longer-term self-image and engagement with school. The findings indicate that any reform of the curriculum must be embedded in broader policy and practice which fosters a positive school climate and enhances student wellbeing.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Child wellbeing has been afforded increasing attention in policy development and analysis, especially in the educational sphere. Increasingly too the emphasis has shifted from a focus on objective measures of wellbeing, such as educational participation, to take account of the feelings and attitudes of children themselves. To date, much of the empirical research on the influences on wellbeing has focused on adolescents, with fewer studies of the experiences of younger children, especially in the school setting. This study uses rich data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study to look at nine-year-old children's own perceptions of their wellbeing, relating their perceptions to differences in individual characteristics, family background, peer group, classroom and school factors. The study follows the cohort's progress over the transition to second-level education, tracing how their self-image changes over time. The remainder of this chapter places the current study in the context of previous international and Irish research on child wellbeing and describes the methodology used in the study.

1.2 RESEARCH ON CHILD WELLBEING

Wellbeing is a multidimensional construct and has been operationalised by researchers in many different ways (see, for example, Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; O'Brien, 2008). Initially, many studies of child wellbeing focused on objective measures of child outcomes, especially those relating to economic circumstances and health status. This approach remains prevalent, especially in comparative analyses (see, for example, UNICEF, 2010). However, over time, the importance of taking account of children's own perspective on their wellbeing has been increasingly recognised, especially in the context of social and emotional relationships (McAuley et al., 2010). In Ireland, the *State of the Nation's Children* reports, published on a biennial basis, describe how children in Ireland are faring based on a set of indicators which include socio-demographic characteristics, children's relationships, education, health, social, emotional and behavioural outcomes, and formal and informal supports (DCYA, 2012). A further shift in emphasis has involved a move from a concern with 'well-becoming', that is, the implications of children's wellbeing for their outcomes as adults (for example, the effects of chronic illness in children on adult health status), to a focus on wellbeing in the here and now (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014).

Research in Britain and Ireland has indicated that children and adults emphasise similar dimensions of wellbeing but talking to children about their views on wellbeing highlights important factors, such as pets and animals, which are not recognised by adults (Hanafin and Brooks, 2005; Munn, 2010). The centrality of interpersonal relationships with family and friends emerges strongly from Irish research with children as does the value of 'things to do' (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2005). Relationships with people and animals, and activities in the context of these relationships, made children feel a sense of belonging and safety, loved, valued and cared for (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2005).

In spite of the increasing recognition of the importance of taking account of children's subjective wellbeing, studies of the factors which influence child subjective wellbeing have been sparse (Holder, 2012). Empirical studies have mainly focused on the experiences of adolescents rather than younger children and studies of younger children have generally explored their perceptions within the family context rather than considering the broader domains of school, neighbourhood and peer group (Huebner et al., 2014). The neglect of the potential impact of school experiences on child wellbeing is all the more striking in a context where educational policy is increasingly taking account of the concept of wellbeing. In the Irish context, the theme of wellbeing is central to the Aistear early years curriculum[1] which frames this in terms of 'children being confident, happy and healthy' (NCCA, 2009, p.16). Wellbeing is also a core principle within current junior cycle reform which envisages a situation in which the student experience 'contributes directly to their physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing and resilience' (DES, 2012, p.4). The role of schools in promoting positive mental health among children was recently recognised in the issuing of guidelines to primary schools in 2015 (DES, 2015).

The extent to which social and economic circumstances influence child wellbeing depends on the measure of wellbeing used. In a comparative study of European countries, Bradshaw et al. (2011) measured wellbeing in terms of three subjective domains: personal wellbeing, relational wellbeing and school wellbeing (the latter being similar to measures characterised as 'school engagement' in other research). At the country level, material and housing factors were often found to influence personal wellbeing but not school wellbeing. In keeping with other research, this study explained only a small proportion of inter-child differences in

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[1] Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. Aistear is based on twelve principles of learning and development, grouped under three headings: children and their lives in early childhood; children's connections with others; and how children learn and develop. The four themes of Aistear centre on wellbeing, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking.

wellbeing. At the individual level, girls, children from non-poor households, from two-parent families, and who did not have difficulties in learning were happier at school. However, in an English study spanning students in primary and secondary schools, life satisfaction was found to be lower for older students, those with disabilities, girls and those whose families experienced material deprivation (Goswami, 2014). In contrast, other studies have found that overall happiness or life satisfaction among children is often only weakly related to demographic characteristics, while social relationships emerge as a key influence on child wellbeing (Holder, 2012). Knies (2012) found a more complex relationship between material circumstances and life satisfaction among teenagers in the British context. She found that family income and income-based measures of poverty were not associated with life satisfaction. In contrast, markers of material deprivation (that is, not having access to certain activities or possessions) showed some association with child life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was lower the higher the level of material deprivation among adult members of the household, and the association was even more marked if the children themselves were deprived of things other children enjoyed.

It has been argued that the affective domain has often been neglected in educational research (Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Noddings, 2003). More recently, however, emerging work, especially in the United States, has begun to recognise the important relationship between emotions and education (Roorda and Koomen, 2011; Martin et al., 2009). There is now a large body of international research from a number of countries (including the United States, Britain and Australia) showing a strong association between the quality of relationships between teacher and students and a number of student outcomes, including socio-emotional wellbeing, engagement in schoolwork, feeling a sense of belonging in the school, levels of disciplinary problems, and academic achievement (see, for example, Eccles and Roeser, 2011; Cohen et al., 2009; Martin and Dowson, 2009; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Murray-Harvey, 2010). Learning relationships are seen as deeply rooted in interpersonal relationships within the school community (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013). In research on Irish second-level schools, negative interaction with teachers has been found to be strongly predictive of early school leaving, educational aspirations, and grades at Junior and Leaving Certificate levels (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Smyth et al., 2011).

Recent research drawing on child cohort studies highlights the complexity of the factors influencing child wellbeing. In research based on the *Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children* (ALSPAC) in England, Gutman and Feinstein (2008) examined four dimensions of child wellbeing: mental health, pro-social behaviour, antisocial behaviour and academic achievement. They found that

most children experienced positive wellbeing at primary school but as they moved through the school low-achieving, working-class boys experienced a greater decline in their wellbeing. School type was found to be much less important than children's individual experiences in relation to bullying and friendships as well as their beliefs about themselves and their environment; children experience a very different environment, even within the same school, based on their own individual interactions with peers and teachers (Gutman and Feinstein, 2008, p. ii).

The influence of school factors on mental health and behaviour was found to be relatively small (around 3 per cent of the variance) but nonetheless significant. In particular, the concentration of disadvantaged students in a school was associated with poorer mental health and behaviour. Using the ALSPAC study data, Gutman and Vorhaus (2012) found a significant relationship between these dimensions of child wellbeing at primary level and outcomes between the ages of 11 and 16. Children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social and school wellbeing had higher levels of academic achievement subsequently (at ages 11, 14 and 16). In addition, being bullied was a significant predictor of lower school engagement while having positive friendships enhanced engagement in school.

In research based on the *Growing Up in Scotland* study, Parkes et al. (2014) analysed the influence of family and school factors on self-reported life satisfaction among seven-year-old children. A quarter of the children surveyed were characterised as having low life satisfaction. Life satisfaction levels were lower among boys, second or subsequent born children, and those who had experienced traumatic life events (such as death of a family member). Family factors mattered with lower life satisfaction levels in families with greater parent-child conflict and less positive parenting. Relationships with peers were also crucial, with those with poorer friendships significantly less satisfied with their lives. Finding schoolwork hard and being less engaged with school (not liking school) were significantly related to lower life satisfaction among these seven-year-old children.

This study aims to contribute to the emerging body of work based on child longitudinal studies to explore the way in which school factors influence child wellbeing, over and above the effects of individual and family background. The following section describes the approach taken in the study.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

The *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study was commissioned by the Department of Health and Children through the (then) Office of the Minister for Children, in association with the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office. The study has been carried out by a consortium of researchers led by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD). The study focuses on two cohorts of children: a nine-month cohort and a nine-year-old cohort. The analyses presented in this report are based on the data collected from the child cohort at nine years of age with an additional chapter on changes in experiences between nine and 13 years of age.

The nine-year-old sample contains information in respect of 8,568 study children, their primary and secondary caregivers, their school principals and teachers. The sample was generated through the primary school system in 2007 and early 2008, when the children involved were nine years of age. A nationally representative sample of 1,105 schools was selected from the total of 3,326 primary schools in Ireland at that time. Just over 82 per cent of these (910 schools) were successfully recruited into the survey. The sample of children and their families were then randomly generated from within those schools. The response rate at the family level was 57 per cent. The data used throughout the report are re-weighted or statistically adjusted in line with the sample design to ensure that the information is representative of the population of nine-year-olds in Ireland.[2]

There were two main components to the fieldwork: school-based and household-based. School-based fieldwork involved a self-completion questionnaire for the school principal and two self-completion questionnaires for the child's teacher. The principal's questionnaire recorded details on school characteristics including size, challenges, ethos etc., along with some personal details about the principal. The teacher-on-self questionnaire recorded class-level details such as class size, curriculum, teaching methods etc. and some personal details about teachers themselves. The teacher-on-child questionnaire recorded child-level details on the child's temperament, academic performance, school preparedness and peer relationships. Teachers were asked to complete one teacher-on-child questionnaire for each sample child that they taught. The final parts of the school-based fieldwork were the academic assessment tests and a short self-image questionnaire that all children were asked to complete in a group setting facilitated by an interviewer.

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[2] The data were reweighted using a minimum information loss algorithm based on the fitting of column marginals to external totals. For a discussion of sample design, recruitment, response and reweighting of the data, see Murray et al., 2011.

The target sample for the second wave (when the young people were 13 years old) included all study children who participated in the first round of interviewing and who were still resident in Ireland four years later in 2011/2012. A total of 7,423 of these young people and their families participated at Wave 2, representing a response rate of 87.7 per cent, or 90 per cent if only those with valid addresses are taken into account. To account for differential response or attrition at Wave 2, the data were reweighted to ensure that they were representative of the population of young people who were resident in Ireland at nine years of age and who were still living in Ireland at 13 years (see Williams et al., forthcoming).

The *Growing Up in Ireland* study was designed to capture the major domains of a child's life, thus yielding a holistic picture, in keeping with the ecological perspective of Bronfenbrenner (1989). Capturing the child's own perspective was crucial to the study, with children completing questionnaires on their family relationships, experiences of school, activities outside school and friendships. The study therefore made it possible to look at wellbeing from the child's own perspective rather than relying solely on the accounts of their parents or teachers. For the purposes of this report, child wellbeing is measured in terms of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, 2nd Edition (Piers, 1963), which has been widely used internationally since its development. This measure has a number of advantages in that it is based on children's own reports and it captures several dimensions (subscales) of children's self-image. The multidimensionality of the measure has an advantage over a single measure, such as happiness, as it allows us to examine the extent to which children's satisfaction may vary across different domains of their lives. Thus, a child may feel they are struggling at school but report that they are good at sport and are popular with their peers.

TABLE 1.1   Domain Scales of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale

Domain	Description
Behavioural Adjustment	A subscale of 14 items measuring admission or denial of problematic behaviours (e.g. 'I am well-behaved in school')
Intellectual and School Status	A subscale of 16 items reflecting the child's assessment of his/her abilities with respect to intellectual and academic tasks, general satisfaction with school and perceptions of future achievements (e.g. 'I am smart', 'I am slow in finishing my schoolwork')
Physical Appearance and Attributes	A subscale of 11 items about perceptions of physical appearance and other attributes such as leadership and ability to express ideas (e.g. 'I am good-looking', 'I am strong')
Freedom From Anxiety	A subscale of 14 items exploring a variety of feelings including fear, unhappiness, nervousness, shyness and feeling left out of things (e.g. 'I worry a lot')
Popularity	A subscale of 12 items exploring the child's evaluation of his or her social functioning (e.g. 'I am among the last to be chosen for games and sports')
Happiness and Satisfaction	A subscale of 10 items reflecting feelings of happiness and satisfaction with life (e.g. 'I am a happy person').

Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale 2nd Edition is a 60-item self-report instrument for the assessment of self-image in children and adolescents between the ages of seven and 18. The items in the Piers-Harris 2 are statements that express how people feel about themselves, each with a yes/no answer option. Thus, Piers-Harris has been described as both a measure of self-concept and as a reflection of self-image; for clarity, the term 'self-image' is used in the remainder of the report. The domain scales are outlined in Table 1.1. The scales are scored so that a higher score indicates a more positive self-evaluation in the domain being measured.

Children's self-image is influenced by a range of factors, including their family background and relationships, their peer group, their school characteristics and classroom experiences (see Figure 1.1). Research has increasingly emphasised the role of children as active agents in interacting with different domains of their lives (see above); thus, influences should be regarded as bi-directional in nature. While recognising the multiplicity of factors that influence children's self-image, this study focuses on the *horizontal part of Figure 1.1*, namely, school and classroom experiences. The analyses presented in the remainder of the report take account of family background characteristics and peer influences in order to examine the *net effect* of school and classroom factors. A full treatment of broader influences such as family relationships and dynamics lies outside the scope of the current study but would form a useful avenue for future research.

FIGURE 1.1   Influences on Children's Self-Concept
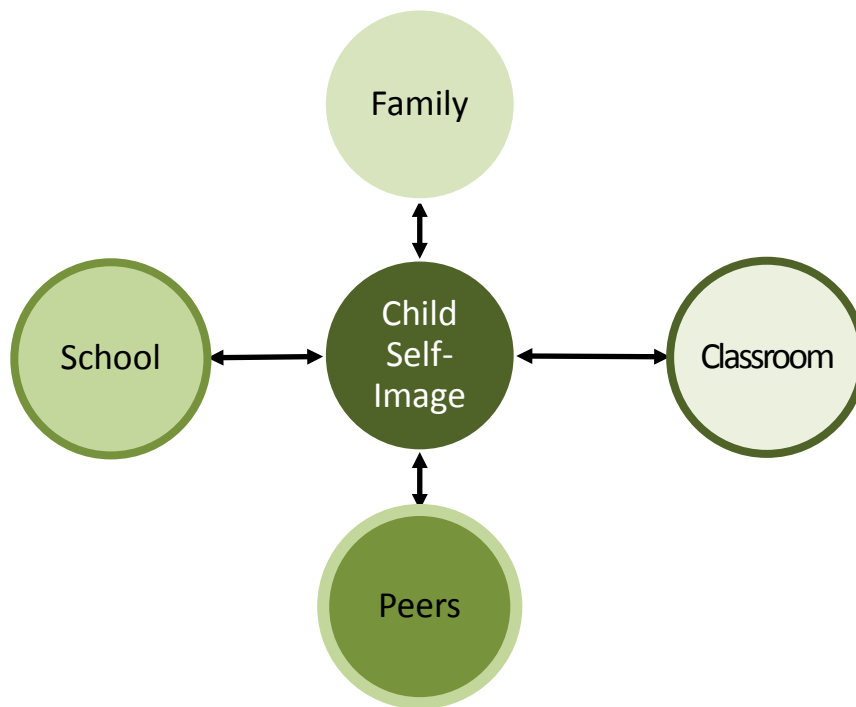
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

Growing Up in Ireland provides very rich background information on the socio-economic circumstances of the children and their families. The detailed information gathered on several dimensions of family background allows us to explore potential differences in self-image by social class, income, parental education and other socio-demographic characteristics. The family background variables used for analysis throughout this report include the following:

- Family social class: A social class classification, based on the Irish Census of Population measure, was assigned to both mother and father (where the latter was resident) based on their respective occupations. In line with standard procedures, a dominance approach (see Erikson, 1984) was used, whereby in two-parent families in which both partners were economically active outside the home, the family's social class group was assigned on the basis of the higher of the two. A seven-fold classification of family social class is used throughout this report: Professional, Managerial, Non-Manual, Skilled-Manual, Semi-Skilled Manual, Unskilled Manual and Economically Inactive. The latter group refers to families where neither the mother nor father has ever held a job from which social class can be classified. These tend to be a highly disadvantaged group.

- Family Income: In order to make meaningful comparisons across families in terms of their total disposable income, it is necessary to take household size

and composition (number of adults and children) into account to create what is known as the 'equivalised' family income.[3] The nine-year-old's family is then assigned to one of five income groups from lowest to highest. Each group (quintile) contains 20 per cent of families. Thus, throughout the report the lowest family income group refers to the 20 per cent of families at the bottom of the income distribution (based on 'equivalised' family income or income adjusted to account for the size and composition of the family). The second lowest income group includes the families in the next 20 per cent of the income distribution, and so on.

- Parental education: Throughout the report, a five-fold classification of the educational attainment of the nine-year-old's mother is used. This is based on the classification used in the Irish Census of Population. The groups are: Lower Secondary or less, Leaving Certificate, Post-Secondary, Primary Degree and Post-Graduate Degree.

- Family structure: A two-fold classification of family structure is used: one-parent or two-parent. As used throughout the report, one- and two-parent families refer only to the number of resident caregivers/guardians. The terms do not refer to the relationship of the caregiver to the study child. Biological parents and others are included in the definition of one- or two-parent families, although mothers and fathers are overwhelmingly the caregivers of the children.

- Educational resources in the home: Number of books in the home is taken as a measure of the educational resources available to the child in the home. Parents were asked to select from four categories: less than ten, ten to 20, 20 to 30 or more than 30.

- Immigrant status: A family was defined as being an immigrant family if both parents had been born outside Ireland, and a non-immigrant family if at least one parent had been born in Ireland.

In addition to the family background characteristics, a number of child-level individual characteristics were used in the analysis. These included child gender and whether the child has a special educational need (as reported by their class teacher). The teacher was also asked to indicate whether the child exhibited discipline problems. Information was also collected on:

- The child's attitude to their school and their teacher as well as their attitudes to reading and Mathematics as school subjects;

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[3] To do this the number of 'equivalised' adult members resident in the household is calculated. This is done by assigning a weight of '1' to the first adult, '0.66' to all subsequent adults, and '0.33' to each child (14 years or less). The total number of adult equivalents is then divided into the household's total disposable income to give the household's equivalised income. It is this measure of equivalised income which is used throughout the report.

- The child's performance in the Drumcondra standardised test of achievement in reading and Mathematics;

- The number of close friends a child has;

- The frequency of seeing friends outside school;

- Whether the child reported having been bullied in the previous year;

- Frequency of participation in sports;

- Amount of time spent on homework;

- Frequency of family help with homework.

At the school level, the following factors are considered:

- School social mix: The *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) programme was introduced in 2005; its focus is on targeting additional resources towards schools with higher concentrations of disadvantage. Schools are identified for inclusion based on a range of indicators, including prevalence of unemployment, local authority (public) housing and eligibility for the free book grant scheme. Three groups of schools are targeted for additional support: urban Band 1 (the most disadvantaged), urban Band 2 and rural DEIS schools. In total, around 21 per cent of primary schools in Ireland have DEIS status. In this report, we use DEIS status as a proxy for school social mix, adding a fourth category of 'non-disadvantaged' schools. In addition, children attending private primary schools are identified using a dummy variable;

- School gender mix: single-sex education remains an important part of the educational landscape in Ireland, making up 11 per cent of all primary schools;

- School size;

- School language medium;

- Religious denomination of the school;

- The emphasis of school ethos and curricular activities along a number of dimensions, as reported by the principal;

- The concentration of literacy, numeracy and behavioural differences in the school, as reported by the principal.

At the classroom level, the following factors were analysed:

- The structure of the class, that is, whether the class was multi-grade (e.g. combining fourth and fifth class) or single-grade in structure;

- The number of students in the class;

- The number of years teaching experience of the classroom teacher;

- The frequency of use of a range of teaching methods, including ICT, as reported by the classroom teacher;

- The time spent on different subject areas, as reported by the classroom teacher.

In order to examine whether second-level school experiences influenced young people's wellbeing at the age of 13, information on four aspects of their experiences was analysed:

- Their year group within second-level education;

- The extent to which they had experienced difficulties over the transition to second-level education, as reported by their primary care-giver;

- The frequency of positive interaction (e.g. praise or positive feedback) with their teachers, as reported by the young person;

- The frequency of negative interaction (e.g. reprimand) with their teachers, as reported by the young person.

For the *Growing Up in Ireland* study, nine-year-old children were sampled within a set of schools selected to be representative of the total population of primary schools (see above). Traditional regression techniques have involved the assumption that there is no auto-correlation within the data; that is, that pupils represent independent observations, rather than being clustered within schools. However, it cannot be assumed that pupils in the same school are completely 'independent' of each other in this way. Groups rarely form at random and, once formed, the members of a group interact with each other to create even greater homogeneity (Jones, 1992). Using traditional regression procedures will therefore increase the risks of finding differences and relationships where none exist (Goldstein, 2003).

In contrast to regression procedures, multilevel modelling techniques take the clustering of individuals within groups into account (Goldstein, 2003). Such models provide more precise estimates of the effects of school (and teacher) characteristics. In this report, a three-level model is estimated, with children grouped within classes within schools. For all models, dummy variables have been included to indicate missing values. This approach has the advantage of using the total sample and thus providing more precise estimates. These dummy variables are not of substantive interest so are not reported in the tables.

Analyses presented in this report were carried out using the MLWin computer package developed in the Institute of Education, University of London (see Rasbash et al., 2012).

The analyses presented in this report mainly focus on the impact of school experiences on child wellbeing at nine years of age, net of the influence of individual and family background factors. In other words, the discussion seeks to compare like with like in assessing the extent to which school and classroom factors make a difference to how children view themselves in important domains of their lives. A range of different factors (see above) were analysed in relation to the six dimensions of self-image. For simplicity, factors that were not significantly associated with wellbeing are not generally presented in the models shown. Where relevant, factors, such as interaction with peers and involvement in sport, which span the domains of school and home are included in the results shown. In modelling self-image at 13 years of age, the analyses control for self-image at the age of nine. Thus, these models seek to explore the factors influencing *change* in self-image rather than absolute levels of self-image. Young people experience a good deal of change in social relationships and activities over the transition to second-level education (see Smyth, forthcoming). Rather than attempt to capture this complexity, in these analyses we focus on school experiences from two perspectives: the extent to which primary experiences (such as attitudes to school, and the development of reading and mathematical skills) influence how young people view themselves in the longer term; and, the extent to which experiences during the early phases of second-level education shape self-image during adolescence.

1.4 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

Chapter 2 looks at the extent to which nine-year-old children's self-image varies by gender, having a special need, and family background. Chapter 3 looks at the degree of variation across schools and classrooms in child self-image and identifies the school and class factors associated with enhanced wellbeing. Chapter 4 uses information on the second wave of the child cohort study, collected at 13 years of age, to look at whether child self-image changes over time and the factors associated with maintaining positive self-image. The main findings of the study and the implications for policy development are presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2

Individual and Social Background Influences on Self-Image Among Nine-Year-Olds

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at the extent to which different dimensions of children's self-image vary by individual factors, such as gender and having a special educational need, and social background factors, including social class, parental education, household income and family structure. The chapter presents descriptive analyses of this variation followed by multilevel models which look at the simultaneous impact of these individual and background factors on children's self-image.

2.2 VARIATION IN SELF-IMAGE

Chapter 1 has described the Piers-Harris measure of child self-image and the subscales of which the total self-image measure is composed. Table 2.1 shows the relationship between the different dimensions of child self-image, using Pearson's correlation coefficients. These coefficients range from zero, meaning there is no relationship between two measures, and one, indicating that two measures are perfectly interrelated. All of the dimensions of self-image are significantly intercorrelated, indicating that nine-year-old children who are more positive about one aspect of themselves tend to be positive about other aspects of themselves. That said, the measures are not perfectly correlated so a child may be confident as a learner but critical of their physical appearance, for example. Although the different aspects of self-image are interrelated, it is possible that some individual and background factors may affect one dimension but not another. The extent to which individual and social background factors have differential effects on different aspects of child self-image is explored in the remainder of this chapter.

TABLE 2.1 Correlations Among Different Subscales of The Piers-Harris Measure of Self-Image, Nine-Year-Old Children

	Anxiety	Happiness	Intellectual	Physical	Popularity
Behaviour	0.457***	0.541***	0.571***	0.314***	0.403***
Freedom from anxiety		0.575***	0.531***	0.434***	0.655***
Happiness			0.558***	0.604***	0.533***
Intellectual/ school status				0.650***	0.558***
Physical appearance					0.604***

Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.
Note: *** significant at the p<.001 level.

Figure 2.1 highlights gender differences in self-image among children at nine years of age. Girls are significantly more positive about their own behaviour than boys and report slightly higher happiness levels and greater self-confidence in themselves as learners than their male peers. However, in spite of their happiness levels, girls report higher levels of anxiety than boys (that is, they are less likely to be 'free from anxiety'). There are no marked gender differences in body image or perceived popularity at this age.

FIGURE 2.1   Self-Image at Nine Years of Age by Gender
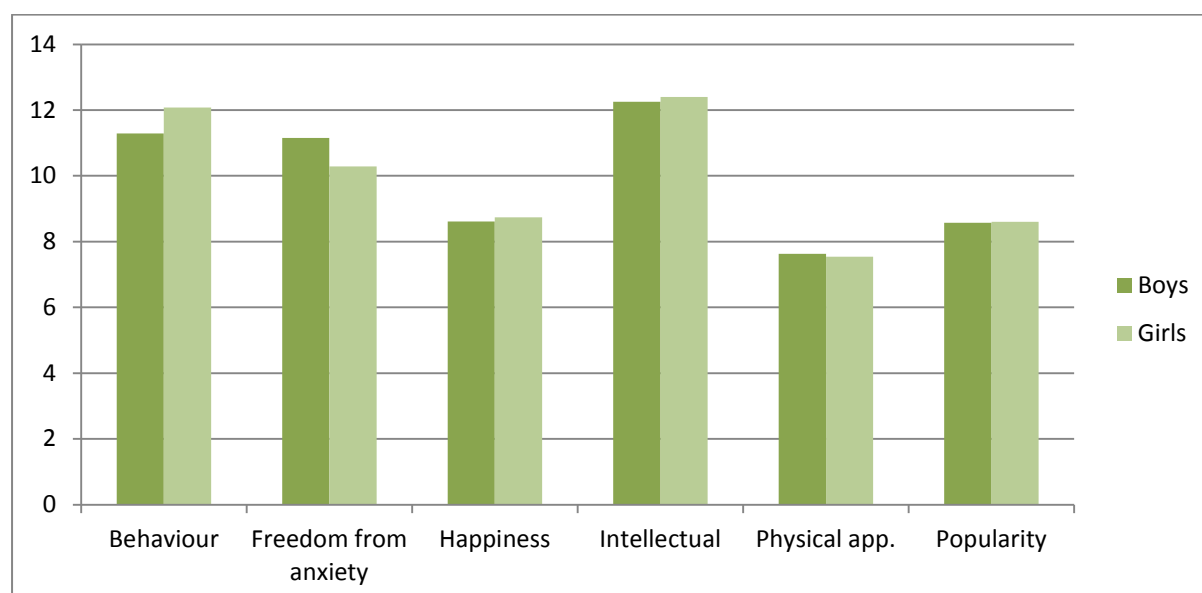
Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

The *Growing Up in Ireland* study has collected rich information on the socio-economic circumstances of children and their families (see Chapter 1). Significant variation in children's self-image is evident across the different dimensions of

social background. Children from professional/managerial households have more positive self-images across all of the dimensions of the Piers-Harris scale while those from economically inactive households have the poorest self-images; in other words, middle-class children are significantly more positive about their behaviour, are more confident as learners, are happier, are less anxious, feel they are more popular and have a more positive body image than those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Patterns for the non-manual/skilled manual and semi/unskilled manual groups fall in between these two extremes, with a linear relationship between self-image and social class. The patterns by mother's education are broadly similar to those for social class background. Children with graduate (degree or post-graduate degree) mothers have significantly more positive self-image across all dimensions, except physical appearance where group differences are not significant.

FIGURE 2.2   Self-Image at Nine Years of Age by Social Class Background
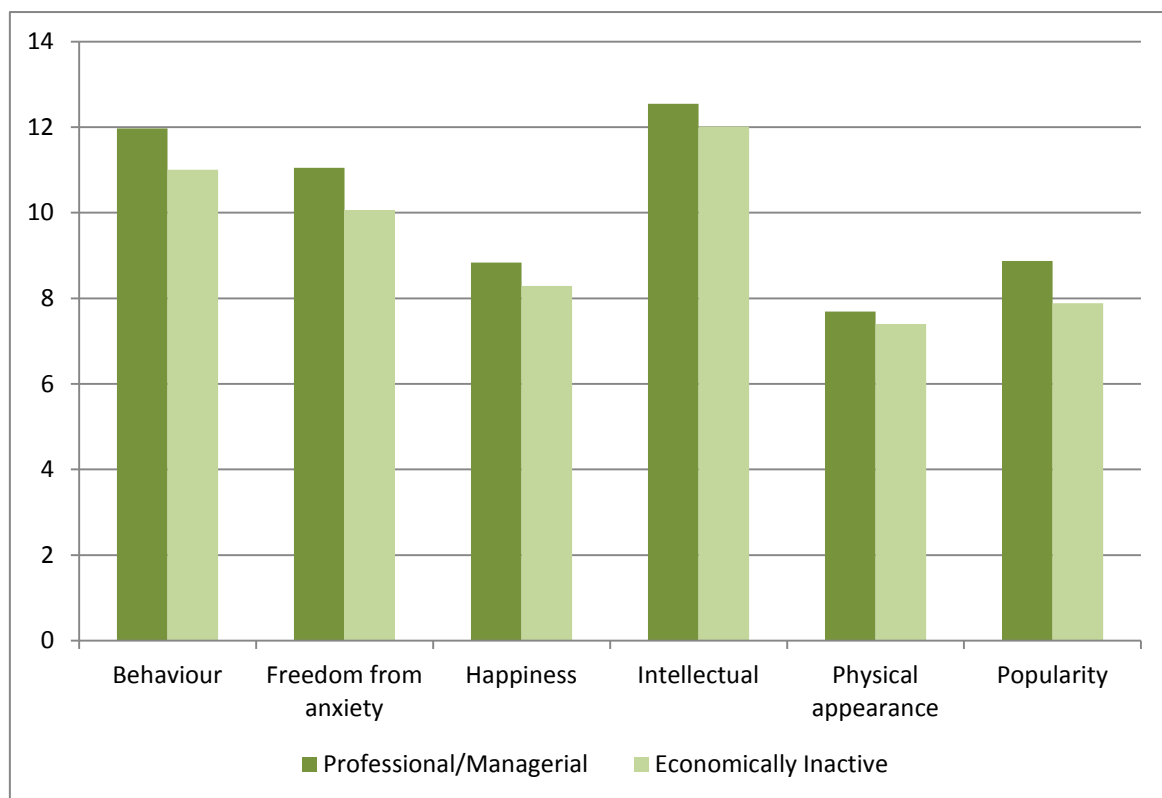
Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

Figure 2.4 distinguishes between children who live in two-parent families and those who live in lone parent households. Children living in two-parent families tend to have more positive self-images than those in lone parent families. The

extent to which these patterns reflect broader socio-economic circumstances rather than family type per se will be explored below.

FIGURE 2.3   Self-Image at Nine Years of Age by Mother's Education
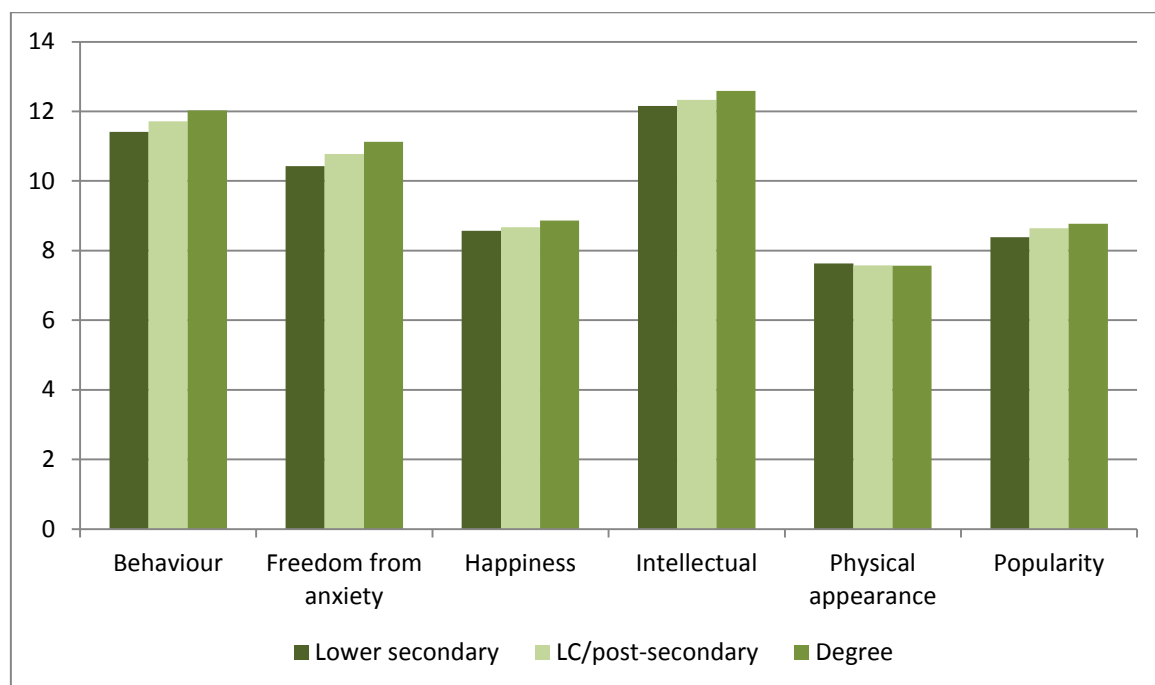
Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

FIGURE 2.4   Self-Image at Nine Years of Age by Household Structure
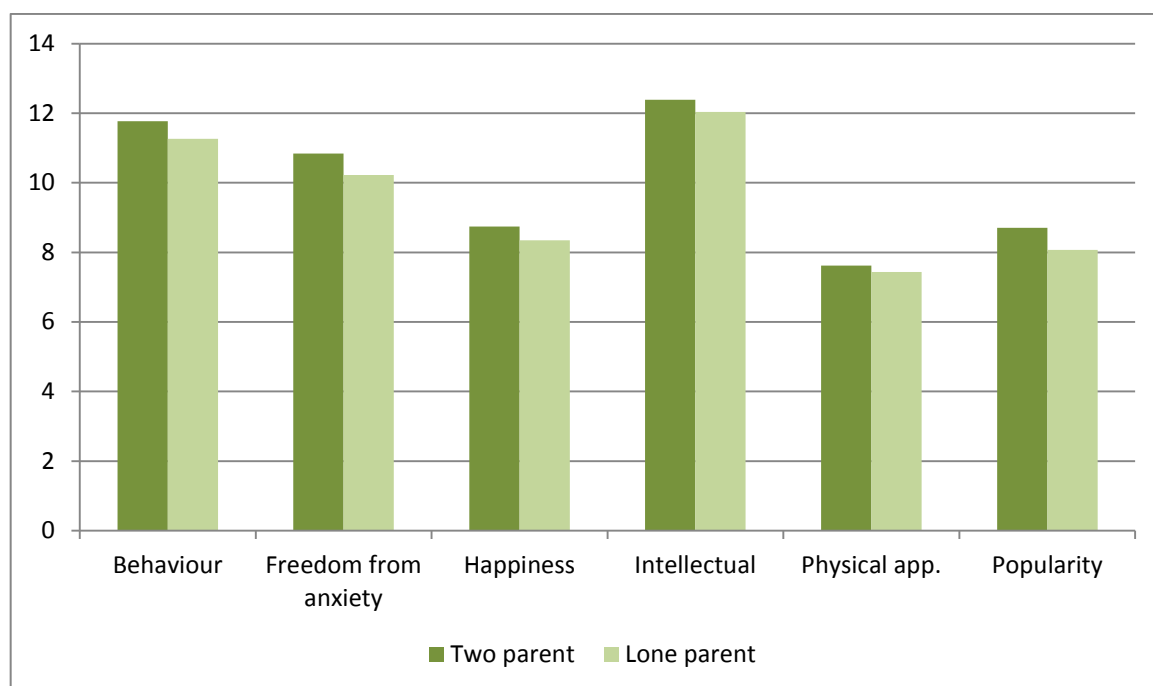
Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

The large sample size within the *Growing Up in Ireland* study means that we can explore two groups of children that have often been neglected in previous survey research, those from immigrant backgrounds and those with special educational needs. Significant differences are found between Irish and immigrant children across all of the dimensions analysed. In other words, immigrant children are more likely to see themselves as having poor behaviour, are more anxious, are less happy, are less confident about themselves as learners, feel less popular and are more critical of their physical appearance.

FIGURE 2.5 Self-Image at Nine Years of Age by Immigrant Background
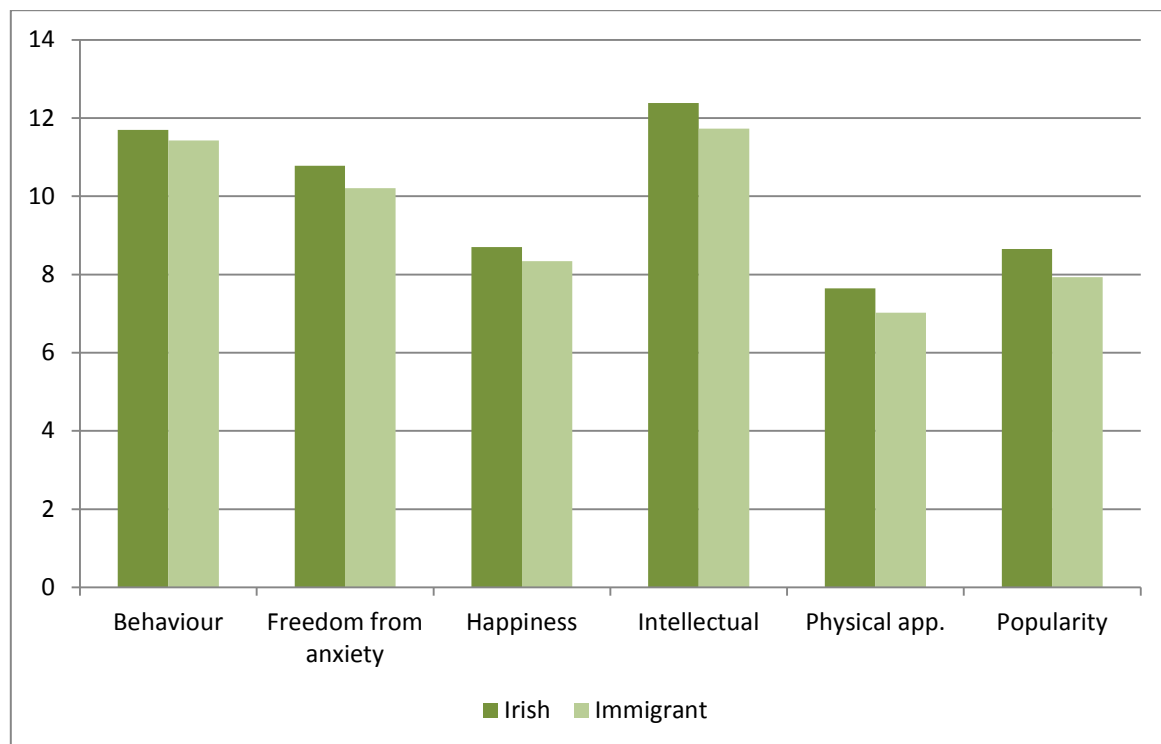
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

Figure 2.6 compares children identified by their teacher as having a special educational need and those without such a need. Children with SEN have significantly poorer outcomes across all of the dimensions; they are less happy, less confident about themselves as learners, report poorer behaviour and feel more anxious. They also see themselves as less popular with their peers and are more critical of their appearance. The extent to which self-image varies according to the type of special educational need will be discussed further below.

FIGURE 2.6   Self-Image at Nine Years of Age by Having a Special Educational Need
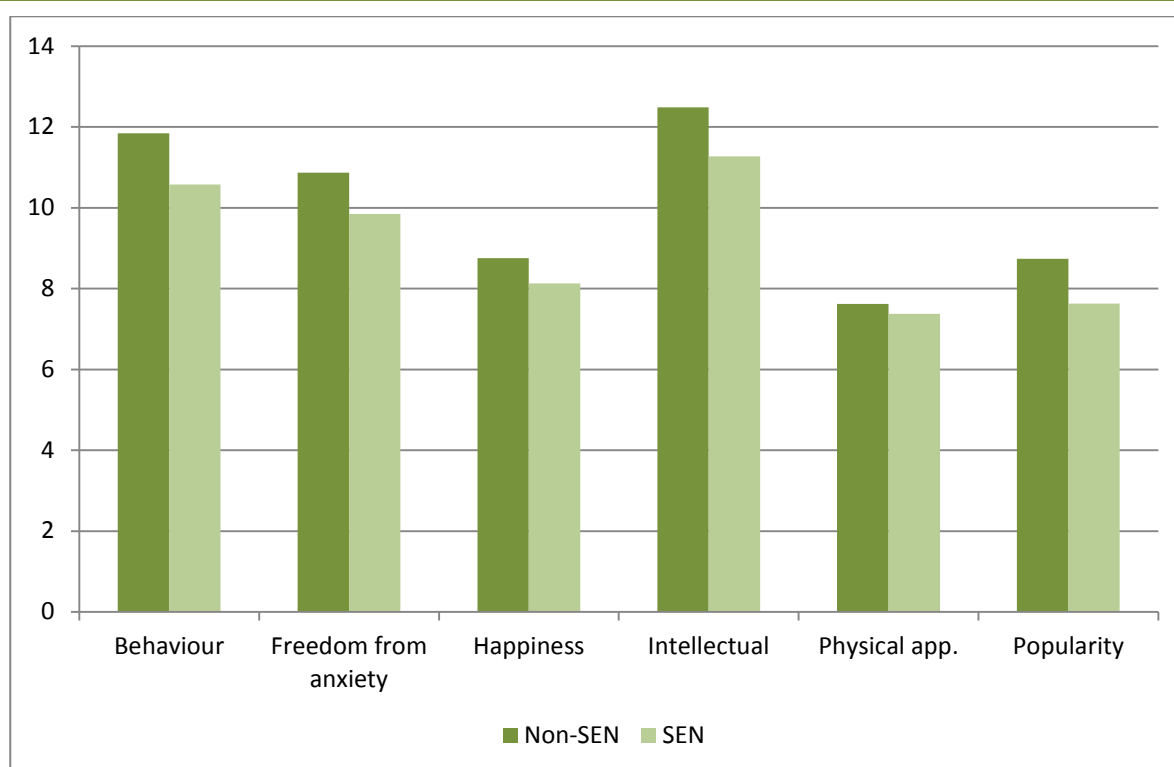
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

2.3   MODELLING INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND INFLUENCES ON SELF-IMAGE

The analyses so far have looked at the relationship between children's self-image and separate dimensions of their social background. However, in practice, family characteristics like social class, parental education and household income are interrelated. In this section, analyses look at the impact of individual and social background factors individually, allowing us to distinguish the factors which are having the biggest impact. In order to compare patterns across different dimensions of self-image, each of the subscales has been standardised to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Thus, coefficients are to be interpreted as fractions of the standard deviation and we can compare the relative impact of characteristics across the different outcomes.

Even controlling for social background, significant gender differences are evident in relation to some aspects of children's self-image (Table 2.2). Girls rate their behaviour more positively than boys; this difference is sizable, amounting to over a quarter of a standard deviation. They report slightly higher happiness levels than boys, but the gender gap is modest in size. There is also a sizable gender gap in levels of freedom from anxiety; girls thus report more anxiety than boys, with a

difference of almost a third of a standard deviation. The gender difference in academic self-image shown in Figure 2.1 is no longer significant when other factors are taken into account. This is largely due to the fact that boys are more likely to have special educational needs than girls (McCoy and Banks, 2011) and this group of children have particularly negative academic self-images.

TABLE 2.2 Multilevel Models of Individual and Social Background Influences on Self-Image at Nine Years of Age

	Behaviour	Freedom from anxiety	Happiness	Intellectual and school status	Physical appearance	Popularity
Constant	-0.333	0.017	-0.153	-0.082	0.067	-0.051
Female	0.295***	-0.309***	0.059*	0.025	-0.040	0.006
Social class: **Professional**	0.112*	0.111*	0.141**	0.136**	0.099±	0.087
Managerial	0.097*	0.091*	0.127**	0.100*	0.079	0.076
Non-manual	0.054	0.074	0.096*	0.069	0.046	0.052
Skilled manual	0.003	0.030	0.088±	0.032	0.042	0.005
Economically inactive	-0.020	0.050	0.028	0.132*	-0.016	-0.034
Household income: **Quintile 2**	0.143*	0.071	0.081*	0.059	0.043	0.078
Quintile 3	0.087*	0.101*	0.121**	0.073	0.102*	0.118*
Quintile 4	0.102*	0.089*	0.120**	0.043	0.079	0.104*
Quintile 5	0.107*	0.093*	0.067	0.035	0.038	0.078
Lone parent	-0.051	-0.050	-0.066±	-0.043	0.034	-0.042
Mother's education: **Leaving Cert.**	0.044	0.040	-0.029	0.005	-0.018	0.038
Post-secondary	0.036	0.062	-0.032	0.000	-0.064	0.017
Degree	0.075	0.104*	0.025	0.063	-0.039	0.044
Postgraduate degree	0.054	0.089	0.030	0.055	-0.019	0.057
No. of books: **20**	0.128**	0.063	0.031	0.084	-0.064	0.049
20-30	0.132**	0.103*	0.094*	0.062	-0.092±	0.075
30+	0.140***	0.071	0.107*	0.064	-0.063	0.041
Immigrant	-0.071±	-0.213***	-0.167***	-0.157***	-0.203***	-0.283***
SEN	-0.387***	-0.328***	-0.294***	-0.442***	-0.172***	-0.358***
Between-school variation	0.047***	0.021***	0.027***	0.047***	0.022**	0.035***
Between-class variation	0.022*	0.011	0.028**	0.024**	0.049***	0.021*
Between-individual variation	0.762***	0.872***	0.801***	0.839***	0.869***	0.827***

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

Social class differences are evident in the self-image of nine-year-old children.[4] Those from professional and managerial backgrounds are more positive about their behaviour, are less anxious, are happier and are more self-confident as learners. They are also slightly more positive about their physical appearance. Curiously, the most disadvantaged group, those whose parents are economically inactive, have academic self-images which are comparable to those in the professional classes. This may reflect the composition of the schools or classes within which they are taught, an issue which is explored in Chapter 3. Over and above the effect of social class, family income is predictive of children's self-image. All else being equal, children whose families are in the lowest income quintile (fifth) report the poorest behaviour. Furthermore, children in the bottom two income groups display the highest levels of anxiety. The pattern for happiness is more complex, with those at the bottom and the top of the income distribution reporting slightly but significantly lower happiness levels than others. Middle-income groups also appear to report slightly higher levels of popularity than other children. Academic self-image does not vary significantly by income level, once other factors are taken into account. Any additional effects of parental education over and above social class and income are largely mediated by the effect of educational resources (number of books) in the home; in other words, children with graduate mothers are more positive about themselves because they experience a more stimulating learning environment at home. Children with very few books at home report the poorest behaviour levels and are less likely to describe themselves as happy. Figure 2.4 showed significant differences between children from lone parent and two-parent families in relation to self-image. These differences are almost wholly driven by the more disadvantaged circumstances of lone parent families in terms of class, income and education.

Figure 2.5 had shown sizable differences between immigrant and Irish children in their self-image. These differences persist when other factors such as social class, income, education and educational resources are taken into account. The difference in perceived behaviour is marginally significant and modest but the other differences are large – in the order of a sixth to over a quarter of a standard deviation. The greatest differences by immigrant background are evident in relation to perceived popularity along with anxiety and physical appearance. Further analyses (not shown here) indicate that the gap is evident both for native English speakers and those who do not speak English at home. The gap is only slightly larger for the non-English speaking group, indicating that differences in self-image are not driven by language competency to any great extent.

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[4] The different dimensions of social background were also tested singly in case of multi-collinearity. The effects are broadly similar to those shown in Table 2.2.

The most marked differences in children's self-image are found between children with special educational needs and those without. Even controlling for social background (and SEN is much more prevalent among disadvantaged groups; see McCoy and Banks, 2012), children with SEN see themselves as more poorly behaved, more anxious, less happy, less confident as learners, more critical of their physical appearance and less popular with their peers. These differences are sizable, ranging from one sixth to almost half of a standard deviation. Differences are particularly large in relation to academic self-image but are also large in relation to reported behaviour and perceived popularity. The term 'special educational needs' covers a broad range of children with different needs, interests and abilities. Table 2.3 distinguishes between four main groups of children with SEN: those with physical disabilities, those with speech, language and communication difficulties, those with learning disabilities and those with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). There are very clear differences in self-image according to type of SEN. Children with physical disabilities, on average, do not differ from their peers without SEN in their self-image. Those with speech, language and communication difficulties see themselves as less popular, are more anxious, less happy and less confident in coping with schoolwork. The groups of children with SEN who have the most negative self-images are those with learning disabilities and those with emotional-behavioural difficulties. Both groups see themselves as less well behaved, more anxious, less happy, less confident as learners, more critical of their physical appearance and less popular with their peers.

TABLE 2.3   Models of SEN and Children's Self-Image, Distinguishing by Type of SEN

	Physical Disabilities	Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties	Learning Disabilities	Emotional Behavioural Difficulties
Behaviour	-0.042	-0.103	-0.327***	-0.624***
Freedom from anxiety	-0.004	-0.204*	-0.326***	-0.405***
Happiness	-0.078	-0.172*	-0.248***	-0.480***
Intellectual and school status	0.014	-0.179*	-0.463***	-0.267***
Physical appearance	0.048	-0.004	-0.153**	-0.148*
Popularity	-0.055	-0.242**	-0.291**	-0.413***

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10. These models control for all of the individual and background factors included in Table 2.1.

2.4   SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has looked at the extent to which how children view themselves varies by individual and social background factors. A major driving factor in more negative self-image among nine-year-olds is the presence of a special educational

need. Children with SEN, especially those with learning disabilities or emotional-behavioural difficulties, are negative about themselves across all of the sub-scales of self-image. Children from immigrant families are also more negative about themselves across all of the dimensions of self-image, though the differences are not as large as for children with SEN. Gender is a key influence on certain aspects of self-image, especially anxiety and behaviour, but not on others. Social background differences in self-image are generally less pronounced than for SEN, immigrant status and gender. However, children from professional and managerial backgrounds have more positive self-images in terms of behaviour, freedom from anxiety and happiness. In general, it appears to be children from the most disadvantaged homes, in terms of financial and educational resources, that have the worst outcomes in terms of behaviour, happiness and anxiety.

Chapter 3

School and Classroom Influences on Child Self-Image

3.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at the extent to which school and classroom factors influence children's self-image at nine years of age. The second section looks at the scale of variation in self-image between schools and between classes within schools. The third section then explores the extent to which the type of school attended and the objective characteristics of the classroom, in particular its grade structure, size and teacher experience, influence self-image. Section four extends the analyses to include aspects of school ethos, types of teaching methods used, student attitudes to school and to teachers, participation in sport, and the nature of peer interaction. Because previous research using GUI data had indicated differential effects on self-image for girls and boys (Quail and Smyth, 2014), the analyses in section four are presented separately for girls and boys.

3.2   DO SCHOOLS AND CLASSES MATTER?

Chapter 2 presented the results of multilevel models of the individual and social background factors predicting self-image. These models took account of the fact that children in the same classes and schools were likely to share similar characteristics. The models provide explicit measures of the extent to which outcomes vary across schools and between classes within schools. Figure 3.1 depicts the scale of this variation without any controls for child or family characteristics. Not surprisingly, most of the variation is at the individual child level; in other words, most of the difference in self-image is among children within the same class or school. However, significant differences are found at the school and class level; together these explain between 4.6 per cent and 8.8 per cent of the variation in child self-image. For most outcomes, more variation is evident between schools than between individual class groups. However, the school and classroom contexts account for equal proportions of happiness and life satisfaction while there is more variation in perceptions of physical appearance at the classroom than school levels. Variation by school and classroom context is greatest for behavioural adjustment and least evident for freedom from anxiety. These patterns would appear to reflect relatively low levels of between-school and between-class variation but they are similar in magnitude to previous international and Irish studies on non-cognitive or personal/social developmental outcomes (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000; Smyth, 1999). In general, and not surprisingly given their explicit focus, schools make

more of a difference for cognitive outcomes (such as academic achievement) than for non-cognitive outcomes (such as self-image). Even for cognitive outcomes, however, most of the variation is at the individual level. If we look at reading scores for the same group of children, we find that 80 per cent of the variation in test scores is at the individual level, with 10 per cent of the variation at the school level and 10 per cent at the classroom level (Smyth et al., 2010). Schools and classes explain more of the variation in Mathematics than reading achievement, with 13 per cent of the variation at the school level and 18 per cent of the variation at the classroom level.

FIGURE 3.1   Proportion of Variation in Child Self-Image Attributable to the School and Classroom Levels
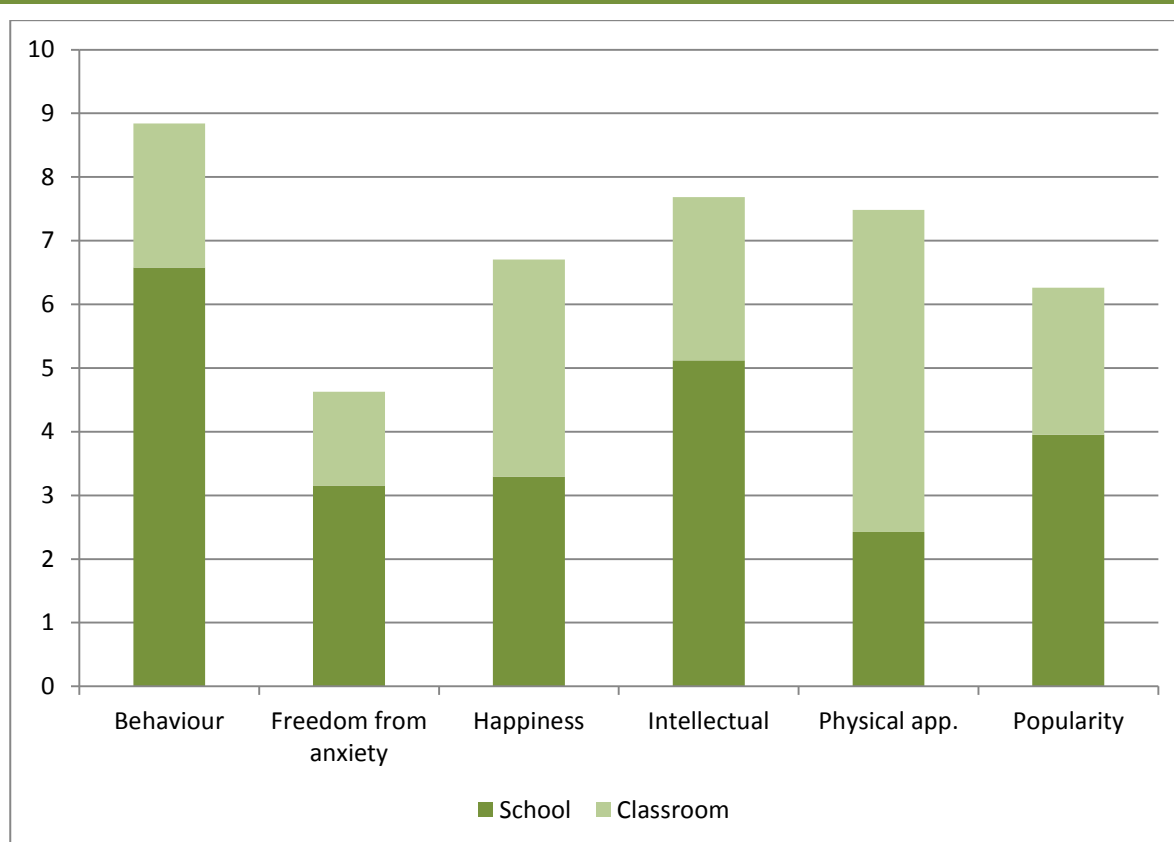
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: Derived from null models, that is, models without any controls for individual, family or school characteristics.

Chapter 2 has shown that child self-image varies by gender, immigrant status, having a special educational need and some dimensions of social background. Schools vary in the profile of their student intake along these dimensions. So to what extent is the school and classroom variation depicted in Figure 3.1 accounted for by the composition of these schools and classes, that is, the kinds of students they contain? Table 3.1 shows the proportion of variance at the school, class and student level, controlling for differences in gender, immigrant

status, having a SEN, social class, mother's education, household income and educational resources in the home. Between-school and between-classroom variation reduces only slightly, indicating that there are differences between schools and classes which are not merely due to the kinds of student intake. The differences between schools in student self-image are significant, even taking account of a broad range of individual and social background characteristics. Differences between classes in self-image are also significant, with the exception of freedom from anxiety.

TABLE 3.1 Proportion of Variation at the School, Classroom and Student Level, Controlling for Variation in Student Background

	Behaviour	Free from anxiety	Happiness	Intellectual status	Physical appearance	Popularity
School	5.66***	2.32***	3.15***	5.16***	2.34**	3.96***
Classroom	2.65*	1.22	3.27**	2.64**	5.21***	2.38*
Individual	91.69***	96.46***	93.58***	92.20***	92.45***	93.66***

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: Derived from Table 2.2; *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05.

3.3   SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM FACTORS AND CHILDREN'S SELF-IMAGE

Children in the GUI sample differ in the type of primary schools they attend in terms of the school's gender mix, social mix (DEIS status), its language medium and religious denomination. There is a large body of research on the influences of single-sex schooling on self-image but the findings have been inconsistent and largely relate to second-level students rather than those at the primary school level (Smyth et al., 2011). Figure 3.2 shows child self-image by gender of the child and the gender mix of the school they attend. Some differences by school gender mix are evident but for most dimensions of self-image, the individual gender gap is larger than any difference between coeducational and single-sex schools. Children in single-sex schools tend to be more positive about their behaviour, their capacity to cope with schoolwork and their physical appearance than those in coeducational schools. Girls in coeducational schools have slightly lower anxiety levels than single-sex girls but there is no difference between the two settings for boys. Girls in coeducational schools have slightly higher happiness levels than girls in single-sex schools but the pattern is reversed for boys, with slightly higher happiness levels in single-sex schools. It should be noted that single-sex and coeducational schools differ in the profile of students who attend them. The extent to which self-image is influenced by the gender mix of the school, taking account of student composition, will be assessed later in this section.

FIGURE 3.2   Child Self-Image by Child Gender and School Gender Mix
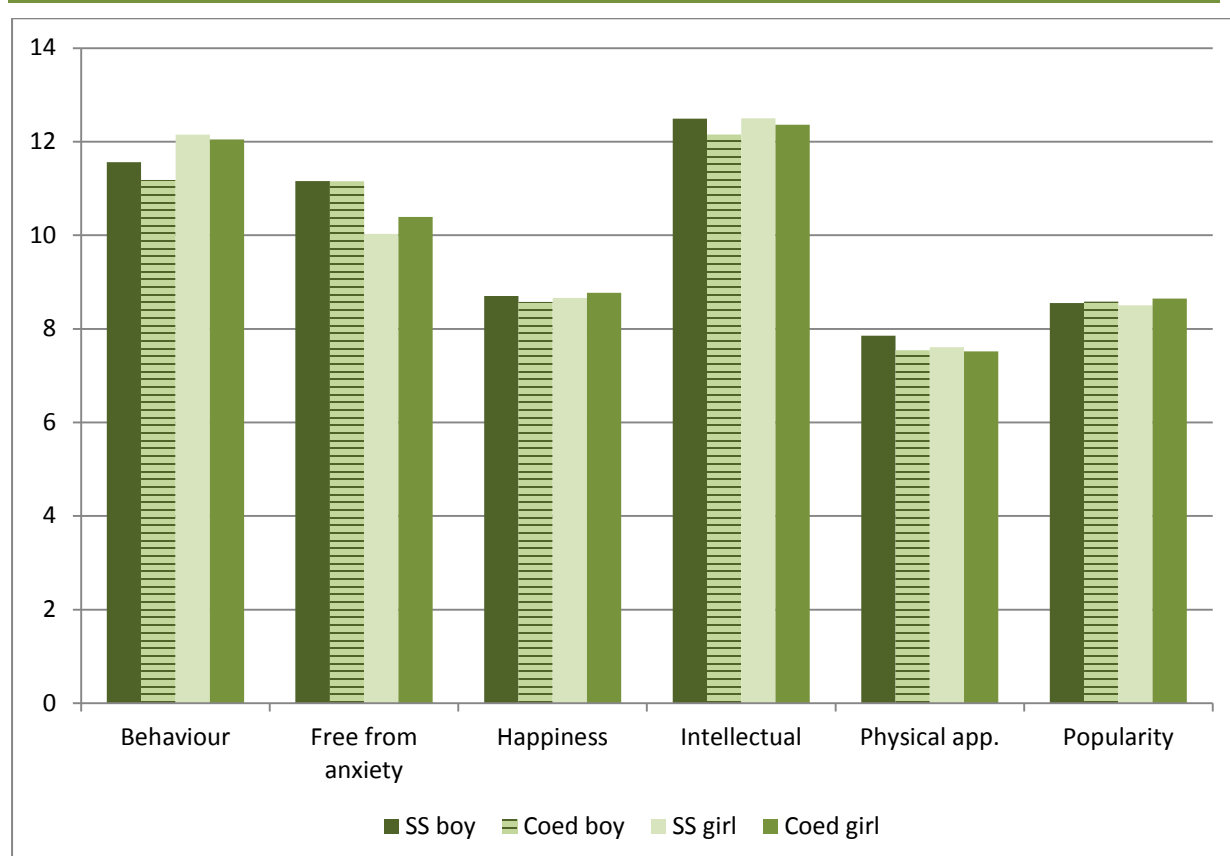
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: SS: single-sex; Coed: coeducational.

Previous research using GUI data has shown significant differences in reading and Mathematics achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, with lower levels of achievement found in urban Band 1 schools, even taking account of individual social background (McCoy et al., 2014). Figure 3.3 presents new information on the extent to which child self-image varies by the social mix of the school. The pattern found is by no means clear-cut and differs according to the aspect of self-image considered. Children in non-disadvantaged settings have the lowest anxiety levels while levels of anxiety are highest among children in the most deprived, urban Band 1 schools. Happiness levels are slightly higher among those in non-disadvantaged schools but the differences are not marked. Children attending rural DEIS schools have the most negative self-images across a number of domains, namely, behavioural adjustment, happiness, intellectual status and perceptions of physical appearance. The extent to which these differences reflect the influence of attending a rural DEIS school or other school characteristics will be discussed below.

FIGURE 3.3   Child Self-Image by School Social Mix
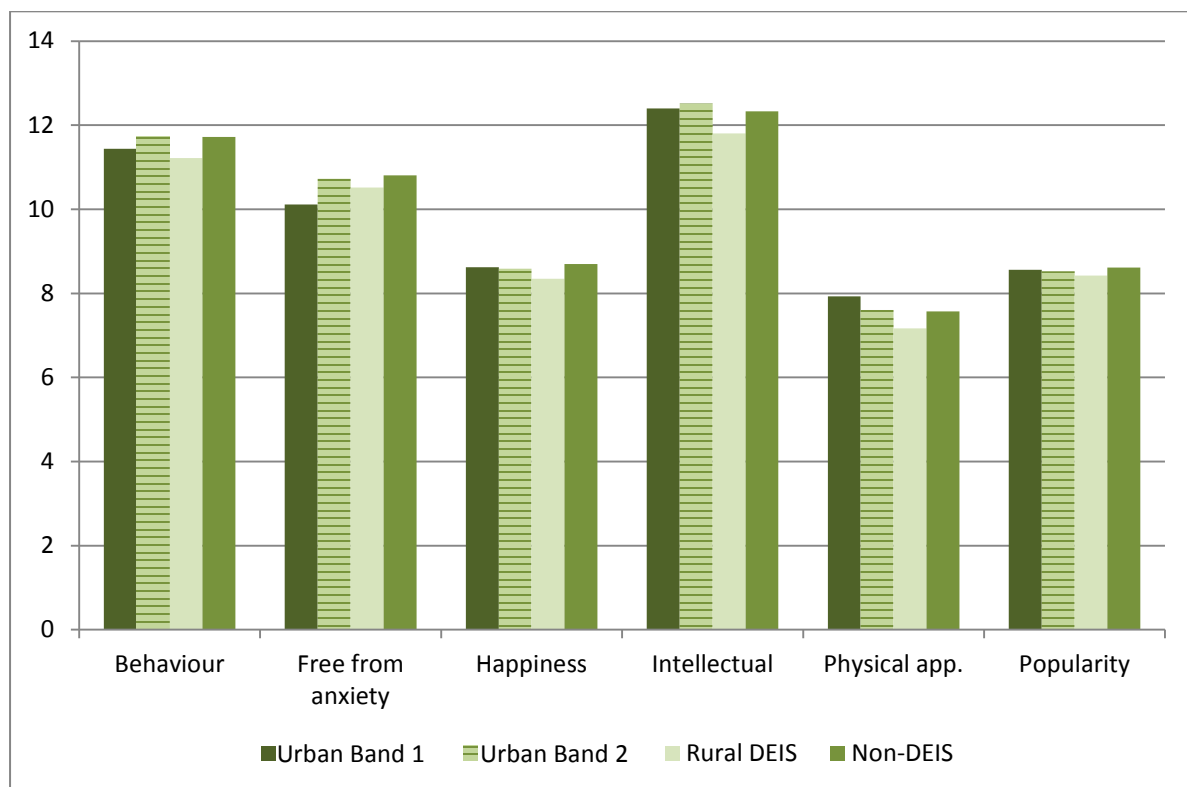
Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

Table 3.2 looks at the impact of various dimensions of type of school on child self-image, net of individual and social background factors. The analyses focus on three aspects of school type: social mix (DEIS status[5]), gender mix and size. Additional analyses (not reported here) were conducted to assess the potential impact of school language medium and religious profile.[6] No significant differences in self-image were found by school language medium or religion so these dimensions are not included in the final model. Overall, the influence of school type on child self-image is not sizeable. All else being equal, boys in single-sex schools are somewhat more positive about their behaviour and physical appearance than boys in coeducational schools but no such difference is found for girls. There are few differences in self-image by social mix of the school attended. The exceptions relate to somewhat higher anxiety levels but more positive perceptions of physical appearance among children attending urban Band 1 schools, the most disadvantaged group of schools. The poorer self-images

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[5]   Additional analyses (not shown here) explored whether there were differences in self-image between the small number of children attending private schools and the remainder. No significant differences are found between private and other schools.

[6]   In addition, the impact of attending a special school was examined. No significant difference was found between children in special and mainstream schools but this should be interpreted with a good deal of caution given the small number of children attending special schools in the sample.

among children in rural DEIS schools depicted in Figure 3.3 are found to be due to the smaller average size of these schools rather than to the social mix effect per se.

TABLE 3.2   School-Type Factors and Child Self-Image

	Behaviour	Freedom From Anxiety	Happiness	Intellectual and School Status	Physical Appearance	Popularity
Gender mix: (Base: Coed boy)						
Coed girl	0.303***	-0.311***	-0.005	-0.031	-0.036	-0.007
Single-sex boy	0.090*	-0.051	0.030	0.069	0.067	-0.083
Single-sex girl	0.330***	-0.344***	0.068	0.069	-0.008	-0.019
Social mix: (Base: non-DEIS non-private)						
Urban Band 1	-0.032	-0.100±	0.013	0.100	0.149**	0.001
Urban Band 2	0.048	0.053	0.006	0.092	-0.046	0.062
Rural DEIS	-0.057	-0.043	-0.112	-0.110	-0.033	0.024
School size: (Base:<50 students)						
50-99	0.151*	-0.006	0.084	0.096	0.169*	0.169*
100-199	0.151*	-0.046	0.099	0.128±	0.221**	0.184*
200-299	0.235**	-0.030	0.148*	0.189**	0.293**	0.242**
300-399	0.238**	-0.070	0.092	0.131	0.232**	0.208*
400-499	0.308**	0.021	0.156*	0.255**	0.361***	0.250**
500+	0.262**	0.040	0.164*	0.215**	0.307***	0.236**

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; ± $p < .10$. These models control for all of the individual and social background factors included in Table 2.2.

TABLE 3.3   Classroom Factors and Child Self-Image

	Behaviour	Freedom From Anxiety	Happiness	Intellectual and School Status	Physical Appearance	Popularity
Multi-grade class	0.017	0.028	0.021	-0.041	-0.078*	-0.056
Class size: (Base: <20)						
20-24	-0.064	-0.065	-0.072	-0.064	-0.045	-0.039
25-29	-0.040	-0.107*	-0.076	-0.054	-0.042	-0.026
30 or more	-0.045	-0.093	-0.06	-0.107*	-0.057	-0.061
Teacher experience: (Base: <2 years)						
3-5 years	-0.016	0.006	0.051	0.04	0.057	0.037
6-10 years	0.003	-0.022	0.046	0.027	0.025	-0.019
11-20 years	-0.037	-0.019	0.047	-0.01	0.022	-0.015
21-30 years	-0.034	0.031	0.041	-0.022	0.022	0.056
30+ years	0.020	0.026	0.05	0.003	0.053	0.031

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10. These models control for all of the individual and social background factors included in Table 2.2 and the school type factors included in Table 3.2.

Clearer differences in self-image are found when we consider the size of the school. The relationship between school size and self-image is not linear; rather there appears to be a difference between smaller schools and all others, though the salient cut-off in size varies somewhat across outcomes. Thus, children attending small schools (with fewer than 50 students) are more critical of their own behaviour and physical appearance and see themselves as less popular than their peers in larger schools. Children in larger schools (with more than 100 students) tend to be more self-confident as learners while happiness levels are somewhat higher in schools with more than 200 students. There is no variation in anxiety levels by school size. These differences are somewhat surprising given that international research tends to highlight small to medium-sized schools as having better academic and social outcomes (Darmody et al., 2008) and there has been no consistent evidence of school size effects on academic outcomes, at least within Irish second-level education (Smyth, 1999).

Further analyses indicate three sets of factors which help to explain the effect of school size. Firstly, class structure, that is, whether the class is single- or multi-grade, varies markedly by school size. Thus, almost all (93 per cent) of schools with fewer than 100 students have multi-grade classes, compared with 60 per cent of schools with 100-199 students and only 10 per cent of those schools with more than 200 students. Given that multi-grade settings are found to influence self-image, especially among girls (see below), these structures will account for part of the difference in self-image by school size. Secondly, there appears to be a

difference between smaller (<100 students) and larger schools in the assessment of student behaviour. Both classroom teachers and mothers were asked to complete a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) in respect of the study child. This measure assesses the extent of problematic behaviour and peer relations. Not surprisingly, mothers' and teachers' assessments are highly correlated, that is, teachers tend to identify difficulties where mothers do so. However, some discrepancies between the perspectives of two parties are evident. Multilevel analyses (not shown here) indicate that, taking account of gender and other social background differences, teachers in smaller schools (<100 students) are more critical of the nine-year-old's behaviour than are mothers. Figure 3.4 depicts the relationship between mothers' and teachers' assessment, distinguishing between smaller and larger schools. These more critical teacher perspectives appear to influence the quality of relationship between teacher and student, with students in smaller schools less likely to report that they 'always' like their teacher (Figure 3.5). Thirdly, larger schools tend to be located in urban areas, where some positive differences in self-image are evident (see below).

FIGURE 3.4   Predicted Levels of Mothers' and Teachers' SDQ Scores by School Size
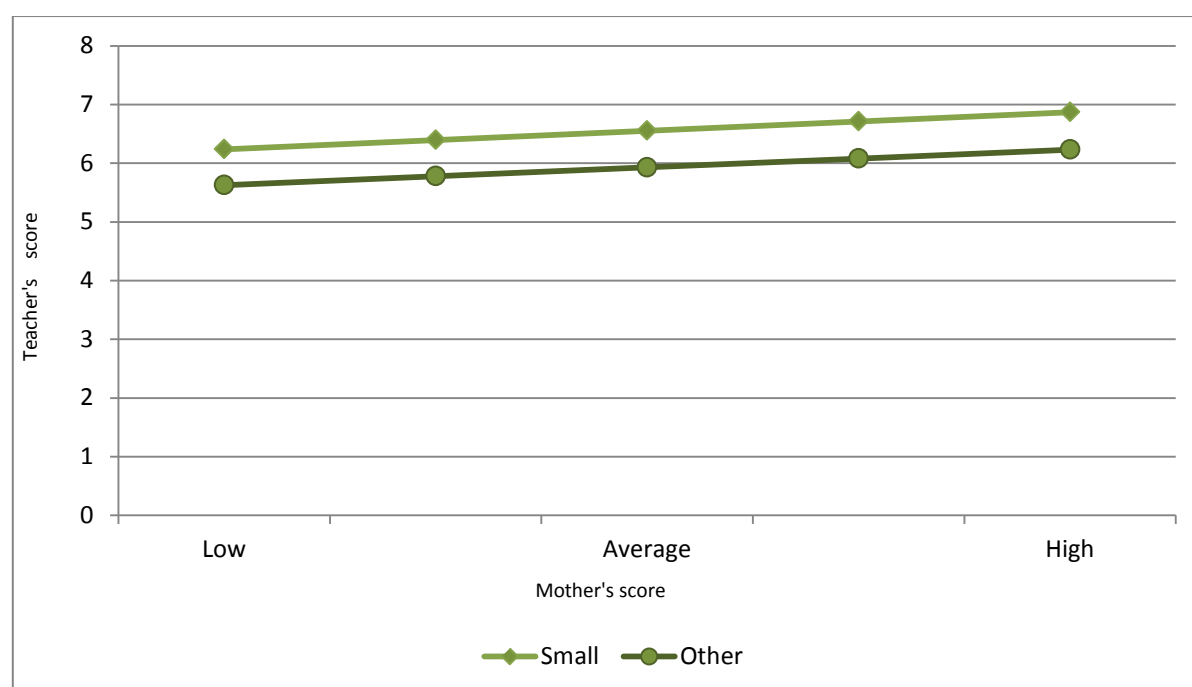
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: These estimates control for gender, social class, household income, family type, immigrant status, SEN, DEIS status, class size and being in a rural or urban location.

FIGURE 3.5 Proportion of Nine-Year-Olds Who 'Always Like' Their Teacher by School Size
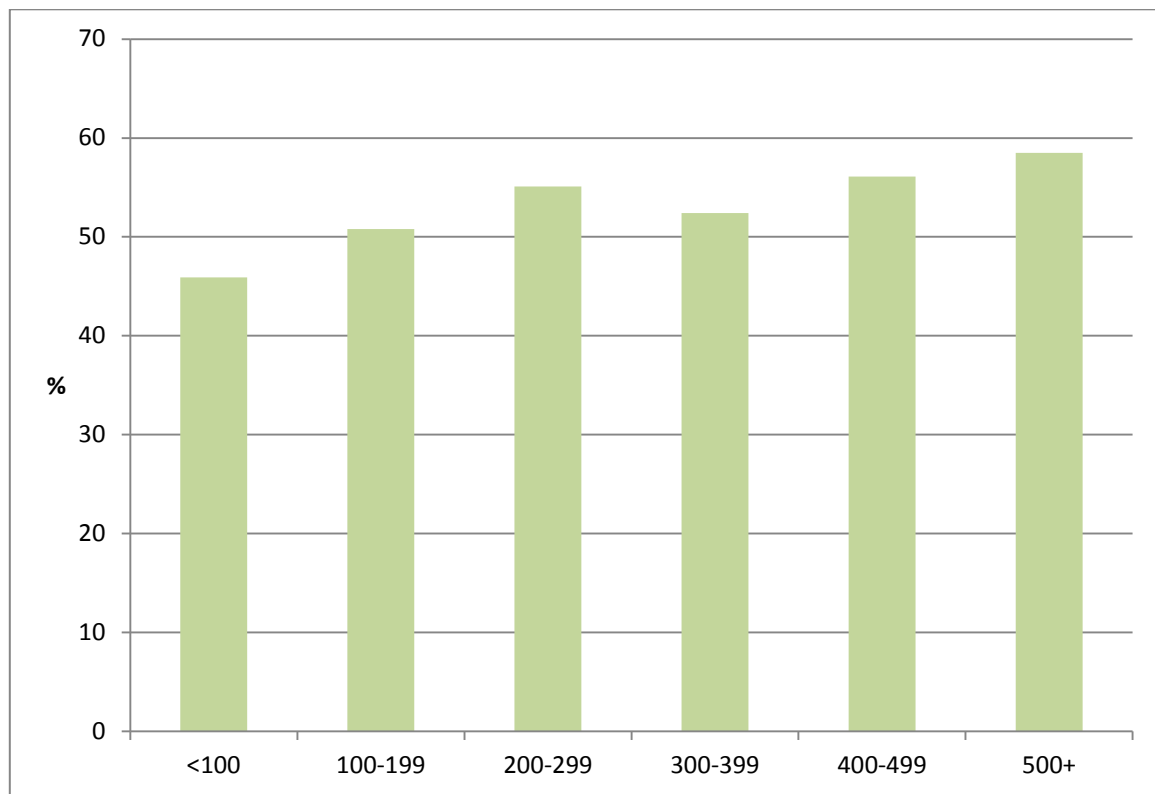
Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

Table 3.3 adds three characteristics of classroom contexts to the model: whether the class is multi-grade or single-grade, the size of the class and the years of experience of the classroom teacher. Few consistent differences are found by these class characteristics. Being in a multi-grade class is associated with more negative body image but no overall differences are found in relation to the other dimensions of self-image. Analyses presented below will indicate that this conceals a more complex interaction between grade structure and gender, with significant differences found among girls. There are no consistent differences by class size but there is tentative evidence that children in very large classes (with 30 or more students) are somewhat less confident as learners; later analyses indicate that this pattern applies to girls but not to boys. There are no consistent patterns in child self-image by the number of years their classroom teacher has been teaching.[7]

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[7]   Teacher experience has been grouped into six categories to allow for potential non-linearity in any effects found.

TABLE 3.4   Density of Residential Area and Child Self-Image

	Behaviour	Free from anxiety	Happiness	Intellectual status	Physical app.	Popularity
Villages	-0.045	-0.051	-0.048	-0.011	-0.060	-0.036
Small towns	-0.017	-0.053	0.000	-0.007	0.053	-0.038
Large towns	-0.014	-0.111*	-0.031	0.057	0.039	-0.013
Cities (Base: Open country)	0.057	-0.025	0.068±	0.122**	0.166**	0.091*

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: *** $p<.001$; ** $p<.01$; * $p<.05$; ± $p<.10$. These models control for individual, social background, school and class characteristics.

Analyses also explored the extent to which geographical location impacted on child self-image. It is difficult to distinguish whether location is a school or family characteristic, given the greater proximity between home and school at primary level. Initial analyses distinguished between rural and urban location but this effect was difficult to assess due to the very close relationship between rural location, smaller average school size and grade structure. More differentiation is available by looking at the population density of the area in which children and their families live; this measure ranges from living in open countryside to living in one of the cities. Geographical differences are not marked but there is evidence that children living in cities tend to be more positive about themselves as learners, their physical experience and their popularity; in addition, their happiness levels are very slightly higher (Table 3.4).

3.4   INFLUENCES ON SELF-IMAGE AMONG GIRLS AND BOYS

This section explores the combination of background, school, classroom and peer factors that influence children's self-image at the age of nine. Models are presented separately for girls and boys as different factors were found to influence their perceptions of themselves. All of the models control for individual and background characteristics as well as social and gender mix of the school, class size and teacher experience (see Tables A3.1 to A3.6). Other school, classroom and peer factors are only included in the final models where they are found to have a significant effect on a dimension of self-image for girls and/or boys.[8]

The GUI study collected information on the emphasis on activities or subject areas in the school ethos overall and as curricular activities (see Chapter 1). There is tentative evidence that some aspects of girls' self-image are more negative when they attend schools with a narrower ethos or curricular emphasis.

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[8]   Presenting these factors in models combining boys and girls may be misleading. Some factors are significant in the combined model but in fact are found to have differential effects for boys and girls.

However, these results should be interpreted with some caution as different aspects of school ethos are associated with different dimensions of self-image. Thus, girls are less positive about their own behaviour and about themselves as learners in schools where drama is not seen as important. Girls have higher anxiety levels and lower happiness levels where schools do not place an emphasis on social justice. Both boys and girls have slightly lower happiness levels in schools where environmental awareness is not seen as important. The mix of students in a school also has an effect. Girls have more positive views of themselves as learners in schools where there is a greater prevalence of literacy difficulties. This reflects the 'big fish small pond' effect (Marsh, 1987) whereby students compare themselves to their peers in achievement terms. However, previous research had indicated this effect held for boys and girls rather than girls alone.

In terms of classroom type, certain aspects of girls' self-image are found to be influenced by being taught in a multi-grade class (Figure 3.5). There are no significant differences in relation to freedom from anxiety or happiness. However, girls who are taught in multi-grade settings are significantly less confident as learners, report poorer behaviour, have more negative body image and see themselves as less popular. This would appear to reflect the different reference group available to girls in these settings where they may be comparing their achievement levels and appearance to those of older students (see Quail and Smyth, 2014). The only significant effect of being in a multi-grade setting found for boys is in relation to body image, where multi-grade boys are more critical of their physical appearance. However, the direction of the coefficients for other dimensions of boys' self-image is negative.

FIGURE 3.6   The Influence of Multi-Grade Settings on Self-Image by Gender
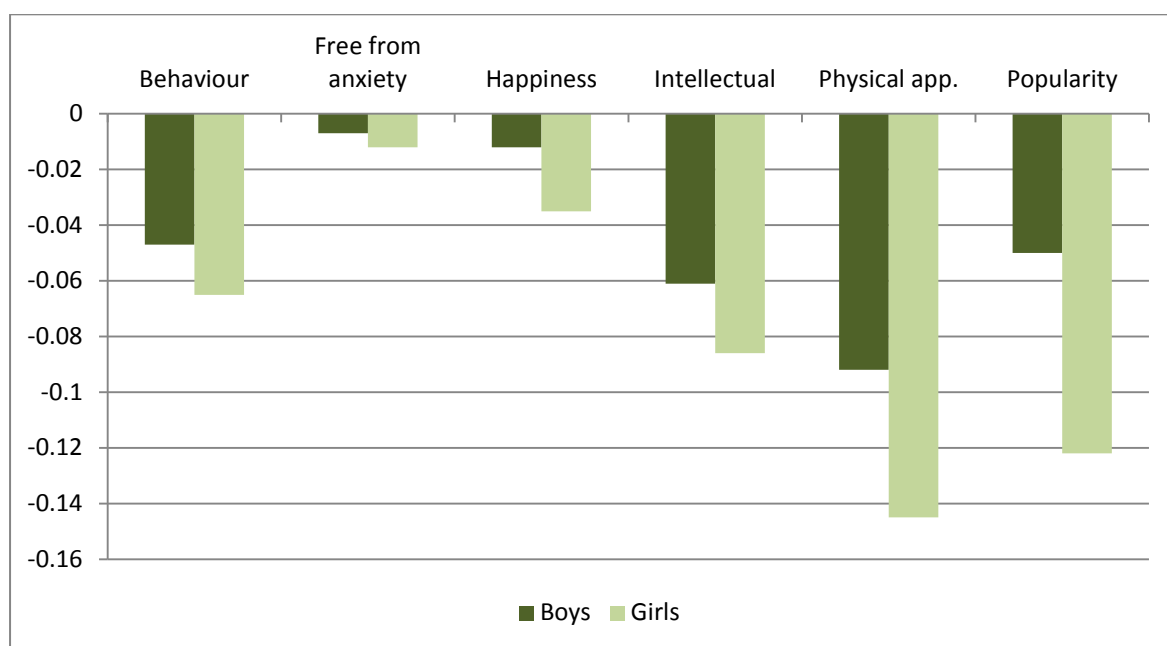
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

Teacher experience is not associated with self-image for either girls or boys. There is little consistent variation by class size but girls in larger classes (that is, those with 30 or more students) are less confident in themselves as learners and have slightly higher anxiety levels. A number of other aspects of classroom experience were considered but not included in the final models. No consistent relationship was found between the amount of time spent on different curricular activities and child self-image. Similarly, few consistent differences in self-image were found according to the teaching methods used. This result should be interpreted with some caution as the measure has some limitations. Firstly, it is based on teacher self-report rather than observation of actual practice. Secondly, it is asked about subjects in general rather than particular subject areas; the kinds of methods used are likely to vary across subject areas and thus influence child self-image differentially. However, there is some evidence regarding the effect of teaching methods. There is tentative evidence that daily use of ICT in class is associated with better behaviour and lower anxiety for girls. Furthermore, both boys and girls have slightly higher happiness levels in classes where ICT is used daily.

Time spent on homework has little consistent relationship with children's self-image.[9] However, both boys and girls who spend longer on homework tend to be

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[9]   It is therefore not included in the final models for freedom from anxiety, behavioural adjustment, popularity, body image and happiness.

less confident about their capacity to cope with schoolwork. Furthermore, girls who 'always' receive help with homework from their family are less confident as learners. The direction of the effect is complex since spending longer on homework is likely to reflect underlying academic difficulties which will also be reflected in poor academic self-image. However, it is worth noting as difficulties with homework may be an important driver of poor self-image which may, in turn, fuel achievement difficulties.

Children's self-image is strongly related to their engagement with school and their relationship with their teacher. The direction of causality can be difficult to discern as both self-image and attitudes to school and teacher are measured at the same point in time. However, using a later wave of the study, we find that attitudes to school are more stable over time than self-image (Smyth, forthcoming) so we can safely assume that the influence is mainly from attitudes to school/teacher to self-image rather than vice versa. In keeping with previous research which shows the centrality of social relationships in shaping self-image (see Chapter 1), children who only sometimes or never like their teacher are less confident as learners, have poorer behaviour, have lower happiness levels and have poorer body image than those who 'always' like their teacher. Furthermore, those who never like their teacher are more anxious and see themselves as less popular with their peers. Attitudes to school have an influence over and above the impact of teacher-student relationship. Those who only sometimes or never like school at the age of nine have poorer self-images across all of the dimensions measured.

Another aspect of the teacher-student relationship relates to the extent to which a child's behaviour is seen as problematic and how the teacher handles this (perceived) misbehaviour. Research on second-level education has shown a strong relationship between the frequency of negative interaction with teachers and a number of dimensions of young people's self-image (Smyth, 1999). Analyses of GUI data reveal that schools vary in their approach to discipline even when faced with similar levels of misbehaviour (Smyth and Quail, 2014). Teachers were asked to indicate whether the study child had discipline problems or not. Not surprisingly, children whose teachers report they have discipline problems themselves view their behaviour in a less positive light. What is interesting to note is that discipline problems are significantly associated with other aspects of self-image. Children whose teachers report discipline problems have higher levels of anxiety, are less confident about themselves as learners and report lower happiness levels. These relationships cannot be interpreted as strictly causal as they are measured at the same point in time but they point to the importance of behaviour as both a symptom and a potential driver of negative self-image.

Peer relationships emerge as a key influence on self-image. Not surprisingly, children who have more friends see themselves as more popular. Interestingly, boys are more likely than girls to base their sense of popularity on having a larger number of friends. For girls, degree of contact with friends is also influential on perceived popularity. Taking account of number of friends, girls who never see their friends outside school view themselves as less popular and are less happy. Children are also more confident about their physical appearance if they have a lot of friends (six or more). Experience of being bullied over the past year is strongly and significantly associated with poorer self-image across all of the dimensions considered. Those who have been bullied see themselves as less popular, are more anxious, have poorer behaviour, are less confident as learners, are less happy and have poorer body image than their peers.

The GUI study collected detailed information on children's day-to-day activities. Sports participation emerges as a significant influence on child self-image. Children who never or rarely play sport have higher anxiety levels, are less happy, are less confident as learners, see themselves as less popular and have a more negative body image. Furthermore, girls who rarely or never play sport report poorer behaviour levels than other girls. The influence of sports involvement appears to reflect a social dimension of engagement as these effects are not found for participation in physical exercise (other than sports). Unfortunately, the GUI survey does not distinguish between participation in school and non-school sports.

3.5   CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has considered school and classroom influences on children's self-image. In keeping with previous international research, school and class influences on self-image are not as strong as for academic achievement. Nevertheless, significant differences are found between primary schools and the classes within them. These differences do not relate as much to school type as to other dimensions of experience. However, there is evidence of better outcomes among children in larger schools. Social relationships with teachers and peers emerge as important protective factors in fostering positive self-image, with poorer outcomes among those who dislike their teacher, dislike their school and have experienced bullying. Girls appear to be more sensitive to school and classroom contexts than boys. In particular, girls are more self-critical when taught in multi-grade classes.

Appendix Tables for Chapter 3

TABLE A3.1 Influences on Behavioural Adjustment at Age Nine

	Girls	Boys
Constant	0.314	0.030
Individual and family factors		
Social class: (Base: Semi/unskilled manual)		
Professional	0.051	0.112
Managerial	0.092±	0.050
Non-manual	0.064	0.024
Skilled manual	-0.025	0.019
Economically inactive	-0.052	0.133
Household income: (Base: Quintile 1)		
Quintile 2	0.108*	0.200**
Quintile 3	0.064	0.125*
Quintile 4	0.100*	0.098
Quintile 5	0.058	0.141*
Lone parent	-0.019	-0.074
Mother's education: (Base: Lower secondary or less)		
Leaving Cert.	0.116**	-0.012
Post-secondary	0.093*	0.019
Degree	0.144**	0.029
Postgraduate degree	0.096±	0.025
No. of books: (Base: <20)		
20	0.040	0.172**
20-30	0.060	0.154*
30+	0.059	0.180**
Immigrant	-0.131*	-0.087
SEN	-0.304***	-0.279***
School factors		
DEIS Status: (Base: Non-disadvantaged)		
Urban Band 1	0.045	-0.027
Urban Band 2	0.054	0.026
Rural DEIS	-0.055	-0.164
Single-sex school	0.050	0.076
Ethos/curricular emphasis: (Base: Drama very important)		
Drama fairly important	-0.142*	0.014
Drama not important	-0.195±	0.081
Classroom factors		
Multi-grade class	-0.071*	-0.047

Contd.

TABLE A3.1 Contd.

	Girls	Boys
Class size: (Base: <20)		-0.043
20-24	-0.052	
25-29	-0.018	0.027
30+	-0.037	0.044
Teacher experience: (Base: <2 years)		
3-5 years	-0.003	-0.102
6-10 years	-0.021	-0.033
11-20 years	-0.018	-0.108
21-30 years	0.030	-0.114
30+ years	0.046	-0.064
ICT used in class daily	0.174*	0.082
Attitudes and activities		
Like teacher at age 9:		
Sometimes	-0.115**	-0.129***
Never	-0.444***	-0.423***
Like school at age 9:		
Sometimes like it	-0.145**	-0.143***
Never like it	-0.636***	-0.711***
Has discipline problems	-0.754***	-0.631***
Been bullied	-0.202***	-0.230***
Participation in sports:		
Never	-0.152*	0.049
1-2 times a week	-0.061	-0.033
3-4 times a week	0.036	-0.012
Between-school variation	0.032**	0.059**
Between-class variation	0.006	0.044
Between-student variation	0.548***	0.846***
N	3,983	3,490

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

TABLE A3.2 Influences on Freedom from Anxiety at Age Nine

	Girls	Boys
Constant	0.159	0.389
Individual and family factors		
Social class: (Base: Semi/unskilled manual)		
Professional	-0.010	0.153±
Managerial	-0.025	0.112
Non-manual	-0.029	0.094
Skilled manual	-0.122	0.143±
Economically inactive	0.062	0.285*
Household income: (Base: Quintile 1)		
Quintile 2	0.110±	0.059
Quintile 3	0.149*	0.081
Quintile 4	0.092	0.106
Quintile 5	0.138±	0.043
Lone parent	-0.048	-0.060
Mother's education: (Base: Lower secondary or less)		
Leaving Cert.	0.118*	-0.009
Post-secondary	0.189**	-0.001
Degree	0.100	0.018
Postgraduate degree	0.163*	-0.005
No. of books: (Base: <20)		
20	-0.013	0.038
20-30	0.042	0.141±
30+	0.010	0.073
Immigrant	-0.095	-0.231**
SEN	-0.216***	-0.253***
School factors		
DEIS Status: (Base: Non-disadvantaged)		
Urban Band 1	-0.028	-0.109
Urban Band 2	0.134	0.012
Rural DEIS	-0.008	-0.016
Single-sex school	-0.024	-0.036
Ethos/curricular emphasis: (Base: Social justice very important)		
Social justice fairly important	0.012	0.013
Social justice not important	-0.459**	-0.079
Classroom factors		
Multi-grade class	-0.012	-0.007
Class size: (Base: <20)		
20-24	-0.179*	0.035
25-29	-0.094	-0.052
30+	-0.165*	0.016

Contd.

TABLE A3.2 Contd.

	Girls	Boys
Teacher experience: (Base: <2 years)		
3-5 years	-0.010	-0.018
6-10 years	-0.057	-0.050
11-20 years	-0.117	-0.040
21-30 years	0.058	-0.060
30+ years	0.050	-0.031
ICT used in class daily	0.165*	0.073
Attitudes and activities Like teacher at age 9:		
Sometimes	-0.054	0.024
Never	-0.268*	-0.192**
Like school at age 9:		
Sometimes like it	-0.191*	-0.089±
Never like it	-0.215*	-0.173*
Has discipline problems	-0.519***	-0.374**
Been bullied	-0.422***	-0.301***
Participation in sports:		
Never	-0.278*	-0.217±
1-2 times a week	-0.217**	-0.213**
3-4 times a week	-0.002	-0.117*
Between-school variation	0.002	0.015
Between-class variation	0.044*	0.000
Between-student variation	0.883***	0.734***
N	3,486	3,910

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

TABLE A3.3 Influences on Happiness at Age Nine

	Girls	Boys
Constant	0.100	0.238
Individual and family factors		
Social class: (Base: Semi/unskilled manual)		
Professional	0.108	0.104
Managerial	0.079	0.118±
Non-manual	0.109±	0.049
Skilled manual	0.073	0.085
Economically inactive	0.042	0.053
Household income: (Base: Quintile 1)		
Quintile 2	0.122*	0.021
Quintile 3	0.182**	0.037
Quintile 4	0.167**	0.052
Quintile 5	0.114*	-0.038
Lone parent	-0.052	-0.084
Mother's education: (Base: Lower secondary or less)		
Leaving Cert.	0.017	-0.075
Post-secondary	0.032	-0.071
Degree	0.084	-0.036
Postgraduate degree	0.139±	-0.066
No. of books: (Base: <20)		
20	0.019	0.031
20-30	0.096	0.089
30+	0.108	0.087
Immigrant	-0.136*	-0.199*
SEN	-0.255***	-0.243***
School factors		
DEIS Status:		
Urban Band 1	0.069	0.049
Urban Band 2	0.145±	-0.100
Rural DEIS	-0.041	-0.244*
Single-sex school	0.018	0.013
Ethos/curricular emphasis:		
Social justice not important	-0.479*	0.093
Environmental awareness not important	1.440±	-0.710*
Multi-grade class	-0.035	-0.047
Class size:		
20-24	-0.071	-0.028
25-29	-0.025	-0.026
30+	-0.086	0.078

Contd.

TABLE A3.3 Contd.

	Girls	Boys
Teacher experience: (Base: <2 years)		
3-5 years	0.051	0.022
6-10 years	-0.013	0.076
11-20 years	0.015	0.050
21-30 years	0.079	-0.014
30+ years	0.076	0.000
ICT used in class daily	0.147±	0.122
Attitudes and activities		
Like teacher at age 9:		
Sometimes	-0.096*	-0.071*
Never	-0.618***	-0.360***
Like school at age 9:		
Sometimes like it	-0.119**	-0.089*
Never like it	-0.312**	-0.331***
Has discipline problems	-0.472***	-0.261**
Been bullied	-0.226***	-0.210***
Participation in sports:		
Never	-0.260*	-0.285*
1-2 times a week	-0.098*	-0.191**
3-4 times a week	0.018	-0.089*
Frequency of seeing friends outside school:		
(Base: 2-3 days a week)		
Never	-0.128*	0.024
1 day a week	0.003	0.022
4-5 days a week	0.082*	0.067
6-7 days a week	-0.010	-0.007
Between-school variation	0.013	0.036**
Between-class variation	0.022*	0.017
Between-student variation	0.717***	0.810***
N	3,906	3,481

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

TABLE A3.4 Influences on Intellectual and School Status at Age Nine

	Girls	Boys
Constant	0.421	0.426
Individual and family factors		
Social class: (Base: Semi/unskilled manual)		
Professional	0.101	0.115
Managerial	0.082	0.084
Non-manual	0.067	0.034
Skilled manual	-0.008	0.053
Economically inactive	0.106	0.191±
Household income: (Base: Quintile 1)		
Quintile 2	0.101*	0.038
Quintile 3	0.150*	0.021
Quintile 4	0.097	-0.007
Quintile 5	0.064	-0.028
Lone parent	-0.083	-0.029
Mother's education: (Base: Lower secondary or less)		
Leaving Cert.	0.044	-0.009
Post-secondary	0.052	-0.001
Degree	0.086	0.052
Postgraduate degree	0.091	0.052
No. of books: (Base: <20)		
20	0.022	0.121*
20-30	0.038	0.092
30+	0.041	0.083
Immigrant	-0.205**	-0.166*
SEN	-0.361***	-0.372***
School factors		
DEIS Status:		
Urban Band 1	0.073	-0.087
Urban Band 2	0.109	-0.043
Rural DEIS	-0.084	-0.259*
Single-sex school	0.068	0.059
Prevalence of literacy difficulties in school:		
Medium	0.031	0.000
High	0.165*	0.125
Ethos/curricular emphasis:		
Environmental awareness not important	-1.450	-0.237
Classroom factors		
Multi-grade class	-0.086*	-0.047

Contd.

TABLE A3.4 Contd.

	Girls	Boys
Class size:		
20-24	-0.100	-0.046
25-29	-0.048	-0.022
30+	-0.136*	-0.024
Teacher experience: (Base: <2 years)		
3-5 years	0.040	-0.003
6-10 years	-0.007	0.053
11-20 years	0.005	-0.038
21-30 years	0.005	-0.018
30+ years	-0.009	-0.023
Attitudes and activities **Like teacher at age 9:**		
Sometimes	-0.172**	-0.100*
Never	-0.481***	-0.367**
Like school at age 9:		
Sometimes like it	-0.148**	-0.142**
Never like it	-0.563***	-0.435***
Has discipline problems	-0.373*	-0.142±
Been bullied	-0.190***	-0.180***
Participation in sports:		
Never	-0.316**	-0.516**
1-2 times a week	-0.170**	-0.248**
3-4 times a week	0.005	-0.100*
Time spent on homework: (Base: 30 minutes or less)		
½ hour – 1 hour	-0.104**	-0.035
More than one hour	-0.194***	-0.189**
Family help with homework: (Base: Now and again)		
Always	-0.089*	-0.044
Regularly	-0.054	-0.027
Rarely	0.002	0.051
Never	-0.039	0.139
Between-school variation	0.048**	0.030*
Between-class variation	0.008	0.037*
Between-student variation	0.753***	0.814***
N	3,908	3,579

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

TABLE A3.5 Influences on Perceptions of Physical Appearance at Age Nine

	Girls	Boys
Constant	0.258	0.446
Individual and family factors		
Social class: (Base: Semi/unskilled manual)		
Professional	0.111	0.030
Managerial	0.074	0.044
Non-manual	0.025	0.026
Skilled manual	-0.011	0.052
Economically inactive	0.048	-0.083
Household income: (Base: Quintile 1)		
Quintile 2	0.109*	-0.017
Quintile 3	0.184**	0.010
Quintile 4	0.130*	0.006
Quintile 5	0.058	-0.042
Lone parent	-0.039	0.083
Mother's education: (Base: Lower secondary or less)		
Leaving Cert.	0.036	-0.050
Post-secondary	-0.020	-0.064
Degree	-0.006	-0.029
Postgraduate degree	0.015	-0.027
No. of books: (Base: <20)		
20	-0.066	-0.036
20-30	-0.037	-0.108
30+	-0.002	-0.088
Immigrant	-0.212**	-0.175*
SEN	-0.196**	-0.097±
School factors		
DEIS Status:		
Urban Band 1	0.192*	0.140
Urban Band 2	0.049	-0.107
Rural DEIS	0.016	-0.130
Single-sex school	0.051	0.073
Classroom factors **Multi-grade class**	-0.145**	-0.115*
Class size:		
20-24	-0.089	-0.077
25-29	-0.061	-0.030
30+	-0.089	-0.023
Teacher experience: (Base: <2 years)		
3-5 years	0.028	0.008
6-10 years	-0.036	0.035
11-20 years	0.011	-0.033
30+ years	0.047	-0.052
21-30 years	0.021	-0.012

Contd.

TABLE A3.5 Contd.

	Girls	Boys
Attitudes and activities		
Like teacher at age 9:		
Sometimes	-0.099*	-0.004
Never	-0.320**	-0.194*
Like school at age 9:		
Sometimes like it	-0.120**	-0.086±
Never like it	-0.417***	-0.233**
Been bullied	-0.138**	-0.152**
No. of close friends: (Base: 2 or 3)		
None	-0.030	-0.125
1	-0.057	-0.069
4-5	0.036	0.106*
6 or more	0.101*	0.126**
Participation in sports:		
Never	-0.521***	-0.818***
1-2 times a week	-0.207**	-0.325**
3-4 times a week	-0.003	-0.155*
Between-school variation	0.021*	0.016
Between-class variation	0.035*	0.034*
Between-student variation	0.764***	0.911***
N	3,971	3,578

Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

TABLE A3.6 Influences on Self-Reported Popularity at Age Nine

	Girls	Boys
Constant	0.273	0.329
Individual and family factors		
Social class: (Base: Semi/unskilled manual)		
Professional	0.033	0.111
Managerial	0.035	0.098
Non-manual	0.011	0.051
Skilled manual	-0.085	0.091
Economically inactive	-0.039	0.033
Household income: (Base: Quintile 1)		
Quintile 2	0.151**	-0.004
Quintile 3	0.171**	0.046
Quintile 4	0.133*	0.025
Quintile 5	0.093	0.017
Lone parent	-0.075	-0.014
Mother's education: (Base: Lower secondary or less)		
Leaving Cert.	0.104*	-0.034
Post-secondary	0.081	-0.033
Degree	0.042	0.023
Postgraduate degree	0.038	0.039
No. of books: (Base: <20)		
20	0.016	0.029
20-30	0.097	0.044
30+	0.084	-0.018
Immigrant	-0.192**	-0.286**
SEN	-0.297**	-0.327***
School factors		
DEIS Status:		
Urban Band 1	0.088	0.006
Urban Band 2	0.199*	0.002
Rural DEIS	0.099	-0.079
Single-sex school	-0.001	-0.065
Classroom factors		
Multi-grade class	-0.122**	-0.050
Class size:		
20-24	-0.067	-0.021
25-29	-0.008	-0.025
30+	-0.089	-0.024
Teacher experience: (Base: <2 years)		
3-5 years	0.022	0.007
6-10 years	-0.052	-0.020
11-20 years	-0.058	-0.035
21-30 years	0.079	-0.032
30+ years	0.056	-0.050

Contd.

TABLE A3.6 Contd.

	Girls	Boys
Attitudes and activities		
Like teacher at age 9:		
Sometimes	-0.053	0.013
Never	-0.208*	-0.151*
Like school at age 9:		
Sometimes like it	-0.107**	-0.018
Never like it	-0.373***	-0.199**
Been bullied	-0.399**	-0.354***
No. of close friends: (Base: 2 or 3)		
None	0.000	-0.313*
1	-0.108±	-0.159*
4-5	0.058	0.114*
6 or more	0.114*	0.149**
Frequency of seeing friends outside school: (Base: 2-3 days a week)		
Never	-0.248**	0.016
1 day	0.003	0.003
4-5 days	0.067	0.066
6-7 days	0.000	0.017
Participation in sports:		
Never	-0.423***	-0.688***
1-2 times a week	-0.210**	-0.310***
3-4 times a week	0.034	-0.104*
Between-school variation	0.046*	0.028*
Between-class variation	0.000	0.032*
Between-student variation	0.806***	0.691***
N	3,983	3,657

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

Chapter 4

Changes in Self-Image Between Nine and 13 Years of Age

4.1   INTRODUCTION

The longitudinal nature of the *Growing Up in Ireland* study means that we can trace changes in young people's self-image over the period between nine and 13 years of age. By the age of 13, almost all young people had made the transition to second-level education, with the cohort almost equally divided between first and second year of junior cycle. In this chapter, analyses focus on these young people in second-level education, examining gender and social background influences on self-image at the age of 13. In addition, multilevel models are used to look at the factors influencing changes in self-image between the ages of nine and 13, and the extent to which primary and second-level school factors serve to enhance young people's self-image. The timing of Wave 1 of the GUI child cohort survey meant that children and families were interviewed during the later period of the economic boom. Between Waves 1 and 2 of the study, families were subject to a very significant change in economic circumstances, with many experiencing a drop in income and others exposed to unemployment. In order to capture the potential impact of these changes on young people's self-image, we take into account the extent to which families reported that they were affected by the recession.

4.2   SELF-IMAGE AT 13 YEARS OF AGE

Figure 4.1 shows the different dimensions of self-image by gender at the age of 13. Overall, boys have more positive self-images than girls across all of the dimensions, with the exception of behaviour. In other words, 13-year-old girls describe themselves as better behaved but 13-year-old boys report less anxiety, are more confident about themselves as learners, are slightly happier, are more positive about their physical appearance and describe themselves as more popular. Figure 4.2 shows the extent to which self-image has changed over the four-year period from nine to 13 years of age. Here the analyses are based on raw scores on the sub-scales in order to explore whether the absolute levels of self-image have increased or decreased over time. Both girls and boys report improved behaviour and popularity over time. However, there is evidence of greater gender differentiation emerging in relation to other aspects of self-image. Boys become less anxious (more free from anxiety) while girls become more so. Girls report being less happy at 13 than at nine while for boys there is a very slight improvement in reported happiness. Both girls and boys report less

confidence in themselves as learners than previously, but the decline in academic self-image is much greater for girls than for boys. Furthermore, boys report more positive views of their physical appearance while for girls there is a slight decline.

FIGURE 4.1   Self-Image at 13 Years of Age by Gender
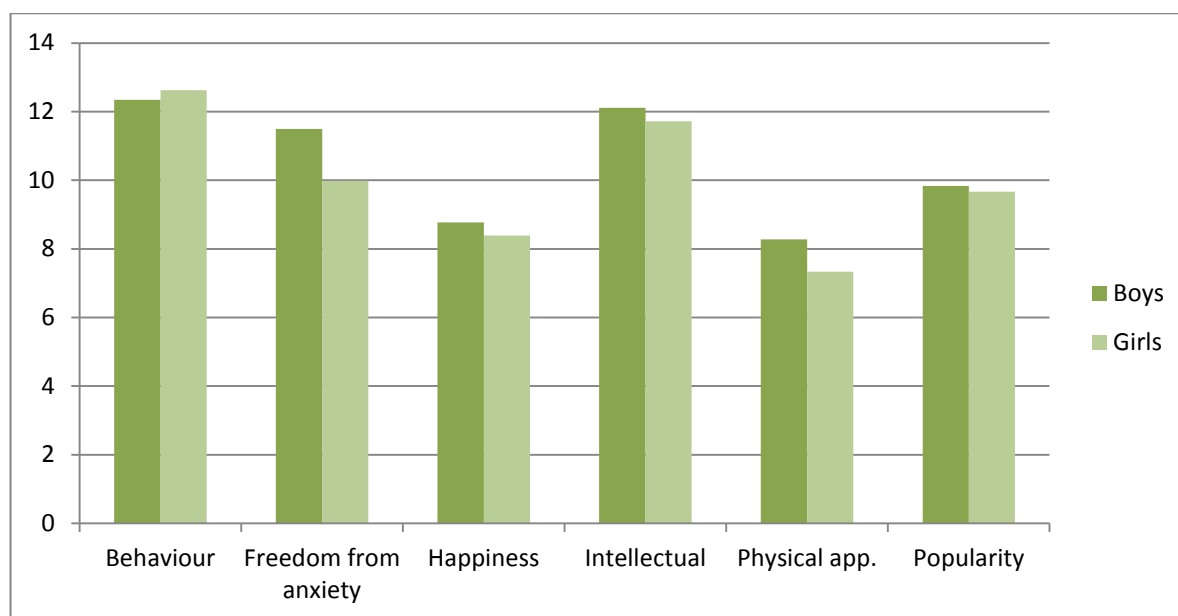
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

FIGURE 4.2   Changes in Self-Image (Raw Scores) Between Nine and 13 Years by Gender
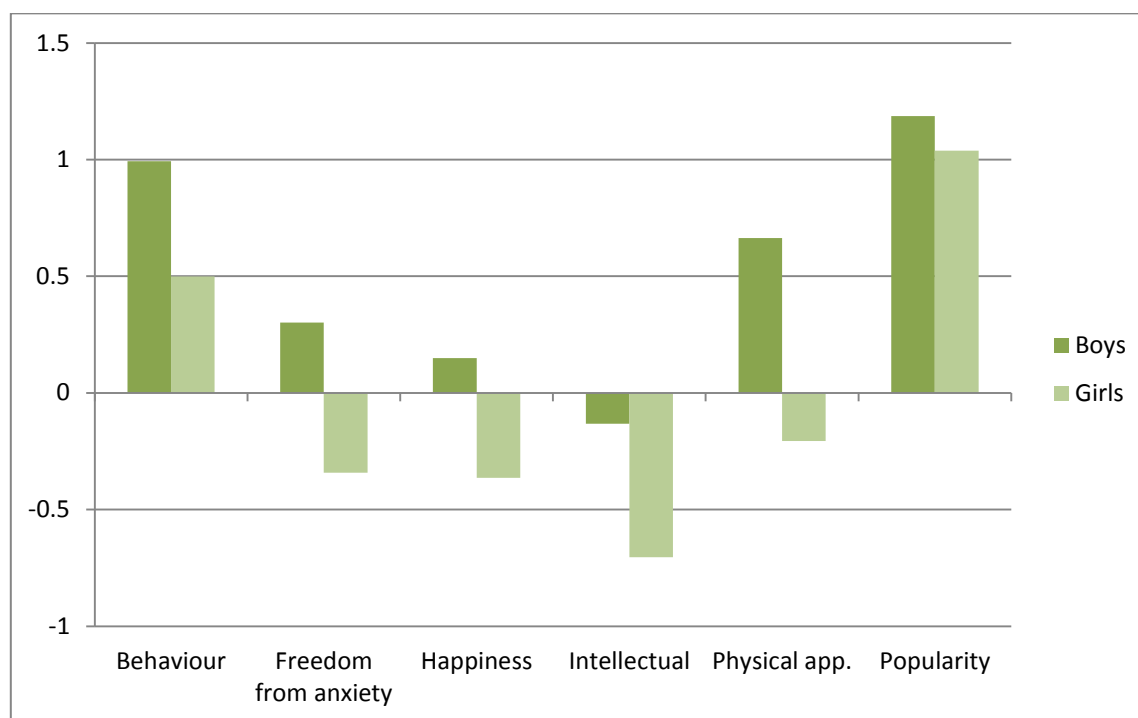
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

Figure 4.3 shows self-image at 13 years of age by social class background, contrasting young people from professional/managerial groups with those from economically inactive households. Differences by social class are much smaller in magnitude than the gender differences found. Middle-class young people are more positive about their capacity to cope with schoolwork and about their behaviour than their less advantaged peers. They are also slightly more positive about their physical appearance and report lower levels of anxiety. In contrast, middle-class young people report slightly lower levels of happiness and perceived popularity. Patterns by mother's education broadly reflect those found for social class background. Young people whose mothers have tertiary education are more confident academically, report more positive behaviour and are somewhat more positive about their physical appearance than those whose mothers have lower secondary education or less. However, freedom from anxiety, self-reported happiness and perceived popularity do not vary markedly by mother's education. Young people from lone parent families report more negative self-images across all of the dimensions; the extent to which this pattern reflects other social background factors will be explored in Section 4.3 below. In contrast to the situation at age nine, immigrant students do not differ significantly in academic self-image from their Irish peers. In fact, immigrant students are slightly more positive about their ability to cope with schoolwork than their peers. Figure 4.4 shows that young people with special educational needs continue to have more negative self-images across all of the dimensions than their peers without SEN. The difference is largest for perceived capacity to cope with schoolwork.

FIGURE 4.3   Self-Image at 13 Years of Age, by Social Class Background
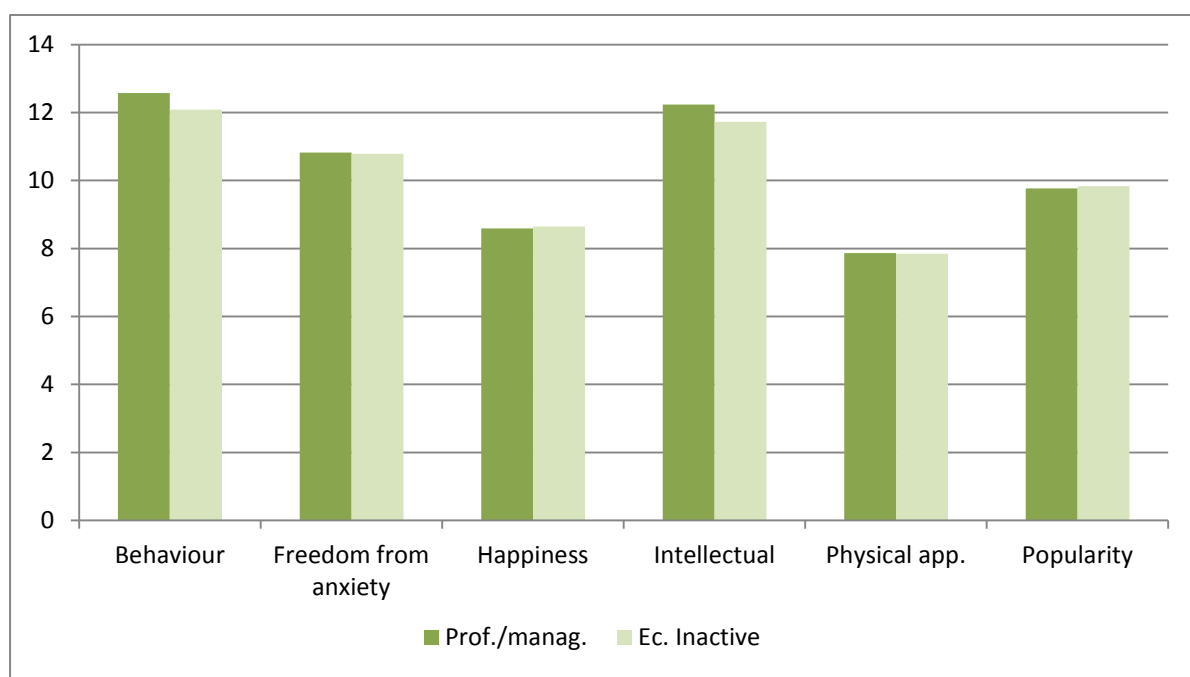
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

FIGURE 4.4   Self-Image at 13 Years of Age by SEN Status
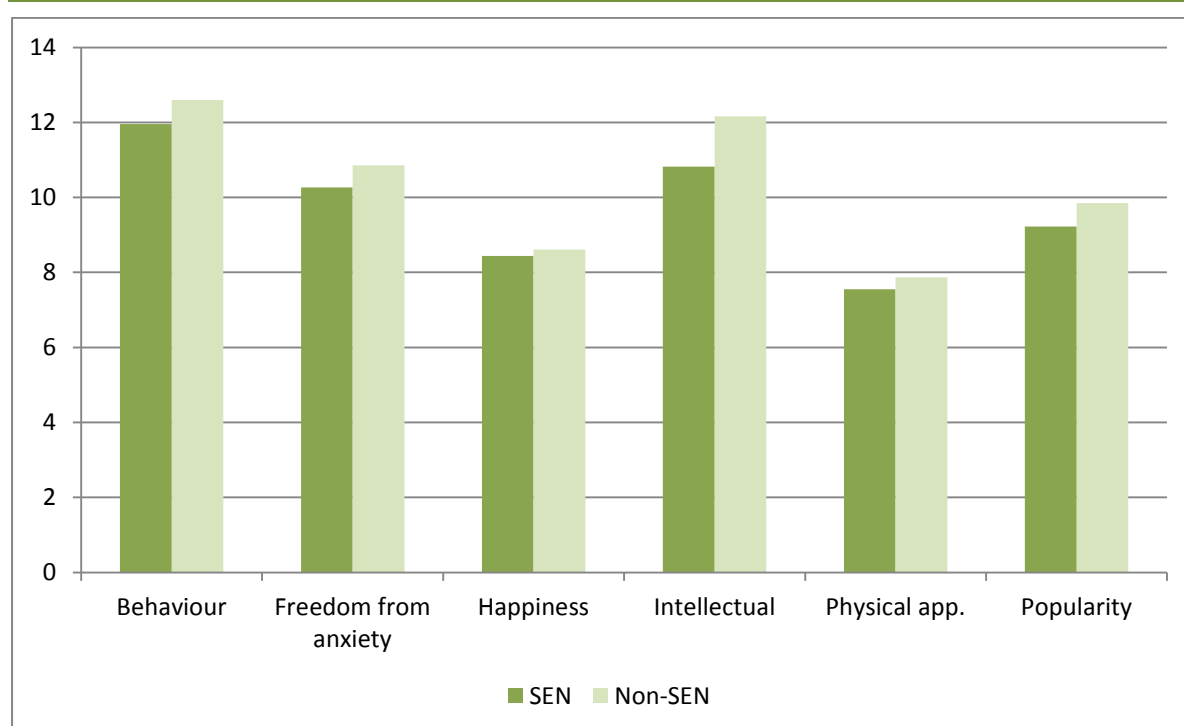
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*

As indicated above, the cohort is almost equally divided between first and second year of junior cycle education. Analyses indicate more negative self-image across all dimensions among second year students compared with their first year counterparts. The extent to which this reflects differential experiences of school by year group will be explored below.

FIGURE 4.5   Self-Image at 13 Years of Age, by Year Group
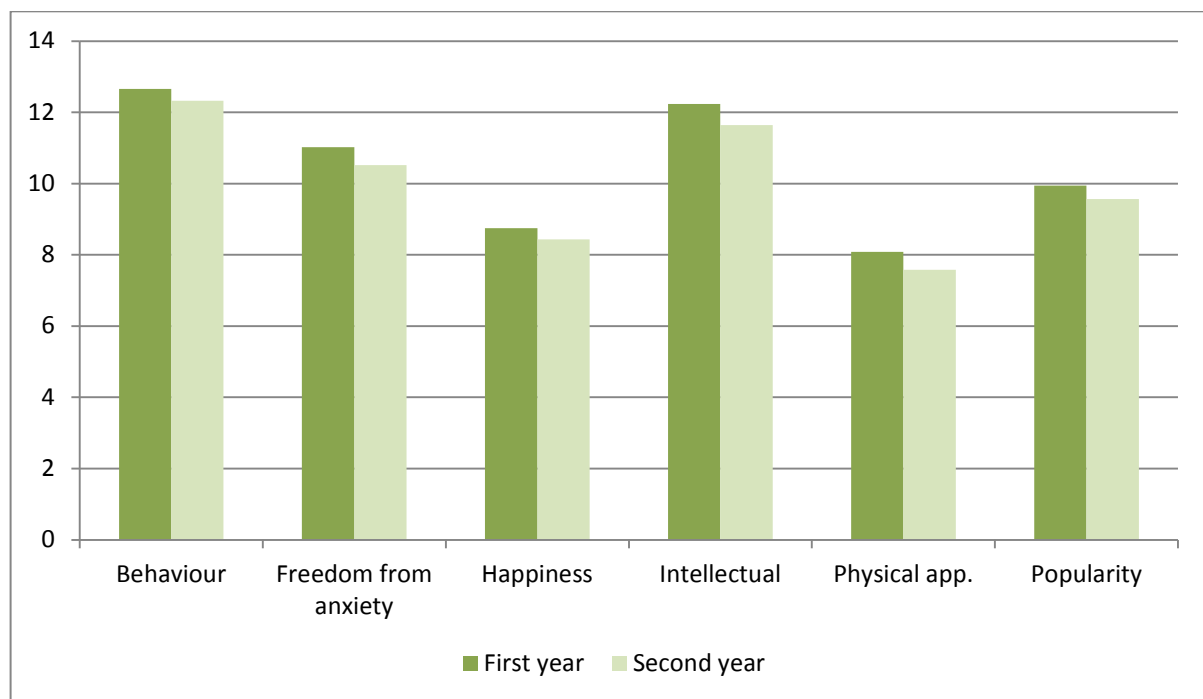
Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

4.3   FACTORS INFLUENCING SELF-IMAGE AT 13 YEARS OF AGE

In this section, we present a series of multilevel models which look at the simultaneous influence of social background, primary school experiences and achievement, and second-level factors on self-image at 13 years of age. By controlling for self-image at nine years of age, we can look at the extent of stability in self-image over time. Controlling for prior self-image means that the other factors can be interpreted as influencing *changes* in self-image. In order to take account of changes in socio-economic circumstances over time, we control for the perceived impact of the impact of the recession on families and for detailed measures of circumstances, including current social class.

As indicated in Chapter 1, the focus in these analyses is on the effect on self-image of school experiences at primary and post-primary level. The primary school experiences analysed here include attitudes to school and teacher, and attitudes to school subjects (namely, reading and Mathematics). These measures reflect children's overall engagement with school at primary level, which is hypothesised to act as a protective factor over the transition to second-level education. In addition, measures of prior achievement in reading and Mathematics at age nine are included in the models, since it is hypothesised that young people who make the transition to second-level education with poor foundational skills in literacy and numeracy will struggle academically (thus,

having poor academic self-image) which may impact on their broader self-image. The second-level factors analysed include year group, transition difficulties and quality of interaction with teachers (positive and negative). Previous research has indicated a strong effect of the nature of teacher-student interaction on young people's self-image across a range of dimensions (see Smyth, 1999). Because of the focus on school experiences, the analyses do not examine the peer and other factors which are likely to play a significant part in shaping self-image.

4.3.1   Academic Self-Image at 13 Years of Age

Table A4.1 indicates the factors influencing academic self-image at the age of 13. Academic self-image at 13 is significantly related to self-image at the age of nine. Even controlling for prior self-image, girls are more negative about their capacity to cope with schoolwork than boys. Thus, the gender difference in academic self-image has widened over time, in keeping with the descriptive patterns presented above. The negative coefficient for special educational needs indicates that, other factors (including prior achievement) being equal, the gap in academic self-image between young people with and without SEN has grown over time. The influence of family background is largely mediated by prior self-image. However, young people from lone parent families have more negative self-images, all else being equal, than those from two-parent families. It is important to note that, in contrast to the models presented in Chapter 3, household income is not included in this model because of potential changes in income level over time. It is likely that the gap between children in lone and two-parent families is due to differences in their economic resources.

Relationship with the primary teacher appears to act as a protective factor; young people who only 'sometimes' or 'never' liked their teacher at nine report increasing difficulties coping with schoolwork four years later. Similarly, engagement with school and with reading and Mathematics at age nine is predictive of later academic self-image. Not surprisingly, students with higher reading and Mathematics achievement at the age of nine feel better able to cope with schoolwork four years later. Second-level school experiences also play a role in enhancing academic self-image. Second year students are much more negative about their capacity to cope with schoolwork than first years, reflecting the greater demands placed on them regarding schoolwork and homework in second year (see Smyth et al., 2007). Young people who experienced difficulties settling into second-level education are more negative about their abilities, all else being equal. In keeping with previous research (Smyth et al., 2007), young people who experience more positive interaction with teachers in the form of praise or positive feedback have improved academic self-images while those who have

been frequently reprimanded by their teachers become more negative about their own abilities.

4.3.2   Behavioural Adjustment at 13 Years of Age

As with academic self-image, self-reported behaviour at age 13 is significantly associated with self-image four years earlier (Table A4.2). The negative coefficient for gender indicates that the gender gap in behaviour narrows somewhat between the age of nine and 13. In contrast, the gap in self-reported behaviour between those with and without SEN widens over time; even taking account of their poorer self-reported behaviour at age nine, young people with SEN report poorer behaviour at age 13. As with academic self-image, the influence of family background is largely mediated by earlier behaviour and school experiences. However, young people from lone parent families report poorer behaviour, all else being equal, which, as with academic self-image, may be related to poorer economic circumstances. The analyses indicate that young people whose families had been significantly affected by the recession had poorer behaviour at 13 than at nine. This is consistent with GUI findings which show a clear link between economic vulnerability and poorer socio-emotional development among younger children (Watson et al., 2014).

Behaviour is not as closely related to earlier school engagement as academic self-image. However, behaviour is worse, and disimproves more, among those who 'never' liked their teacher, reading or Mathematics at age nine. There is no significant relationship between prior achievement and later behaviour, once other factors are taken into account. Thus, it does not appear that poorer behaviour reflects 'acting out' among lower-achieving students. Behaviour among second years is worse than among first years, in keeping with previous research on junior cycle experiences (Smyth et al., 2007). Those who have experienced greater transition difficulties report slightly worse behaviour than previously. Self-reported behaviour is closely related to the quality of interaction with teachers, becoming more positive when interaction has been positive and significantly poorer when there is negative interaction with teachers.

4.3.3   Freedom From Anxiety at 13 Years of Age

As with the other dimensions of self-image, freedom from anxiety is significantly related to reported anxiety levels at the age of nine, indicating some stability in experience of anxiety over time. Girls report much higher levels of anxiety than boys and this gender gap widens as they grow older (Table A4.3). Anxiety levels appear to increase somewhat for those whose mothers have third-level education relative to their anxiety levels at nine, a pattern which may reflect

other aspects of school experience not captured here, such as increasing academic pressure. Those who had more negative attitudes to Mathematics at age nine experience greater anxiety at age 13, which is consistent with previous research which indicates difficulties with Mathematics as a potential barrier to school engagement (Smyth et al., 2007). Interestingly, young people in the highest two reading quintiles report higher levels of anxiety, which may reflect greater academic demands being placed on them. Second year students report higher anxiety levels as do those who have experienced transition difficulties. Anxiety levels become lower where young people have a positive relationship with teachers and are heightened where they have experienced negative interaction with teachers.

4.3.4   Happiness at 13 Years of Age

Young people who report being happier at the age nine tend to be happier four years later (Table A4.4). Girls are more likely to report being less happy than they had been at the age of nine. Those with graduate mothers report a slightly greater drop in happiness levels, which may be related to academic demands. Young people from lone parent families also report a slight drop in happiness levels. Those who only sometimes or never liked their teacher at the age of nine have lower happiness levels at the age of 13. Furthermore, those who never liked Mathematics have declining happiness levels. As with freedom from anxiety, there appears to be an inverse relationship between prior reading achievement and later happiness, with the highest-performing group having the lowest happiness levels. Second year students are slightly less happy than first years. Happiness is also related to transition difficulties and teacher-student interaction; young people are happier where they settled into second-level education well and experience positive interaction with their teachers.

4.3.5   Body Image at 13 Years of Age

Self-evaluation of physical appearance at the age of nine is significantly related to body image at 13. Girls experience a greater decline in body image over this four-year period than boys (Table A4.5). Changes in body image are not strongly related to family background but those from lone parent families become somewhat more negative about their appearance. Those who did not like Mathematics at age nine become more negative about their appearance at the age of 13. Those in the two highest reading quintiles also become more negative about their appearance than others. Body image is enhanced where young people are in first year, have experienced fewer transition difficulties and have more positive and less negative interaction with their teachers.

4.3.6   Popularity at 13 Years of Age

Perceived popularity at the age of nine is significantly predictive of later popularity. However, girls do not experience as much of an increase in popularity as their male peers (Table A4.6). Young people from lone parent families see themselves as less popular than their peers, all else being equal. The gap in perceived popularity for children with SEN found at age nine actually widens over the subsequent four-year period. Those with negative attitudes to Mathematics at age nine see themselves as less popular than previously, as do those in the two highest reading quintiles. Perceived popularity is lower among second years than for first years, all else being equal. It is also lower for those students who have experienced transition difficulties. Like other aspects of self-image, perceived popularity is significantly enhanced by having positive interaction with teachers. However, there is no significant relationship between negative teacher-student interaction and changes in perceived popularity.

4.4   CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has looked at the extent to which self-image changes as young people make the transition to second-level education. The picture is one of stability and fluidity; self-image at the age of nine is significantly predictive of self-image four years later but many young people experience a change in how they view themselves in response to the changing context. Experiences at primary level, including the child's relationship with their teacher as well as their engagement with school and school subjects, has a significant influence on their later wellbeing. Self-image is also shaped by experiences within second-level education. Difficulties adjusting to the new school context are associated with declining self-image. However, first year is not the only period of potential difficulty, with significantly worse self-image among second year students, all else being equal. Relationships with second-level teachers have a very significant influence on young people's self-perceptions, with marked decreases in self-image among those who have experienced negative interaction with their teachers.

Appendix Tables for Chapter 4

TABLE A4.1 Factors Influencing Academic Self-Image at Age 13

	Coefficient
Constant	13.709
Female	-0.785***
Social class:	
Professional/managerial	-0.206*
Non-manual/skilled manual	-0.319*
Economically inactive	-0.331*
Mother's education:	
Leaving Certificate	-0.152
Post-secondary	-0.025
Degree	-0.069
Lone parent family	-0.414***
Immigrant	0.128
SEN	-0.345***
Impact of recession:	
Moderate	-0.024
Significant	-0.028
Academic self-image at 9	0.160***
Attitudes to school at 9:	
Sometimes like it	-0.206***
Never like it	-0.293**
Attitudes to teacher at age 9:	
Sometimes like	-0.002
Never like	-0.456**
Attitudes to reading at 9:	
Sometimes like it	-0.150*
Never like it	-0.504***
Attitudes to Mathematics at 9:	
Sometimes like it	-0.137*
Never like it	-0.571**
Reading achievement at 9:	
Quintile 2	0.055
Quintile 3	0.259*
Quintile 4	0.241*
Quintile 5 (highest)	0.380*
Mathematics achievement at age 9:	
Quintile 2	0.243*
Quintile 3	0.312**
Quintile 4	0.366**
Quintile 5 (highest)	0.354**
Second year	-0.309***
Transition difficulties	-0.124***
Quality of interaction with second-level teachers:	
Positive interaction (scale centred on mean)	1.536***
Negative interaction (scale centred on mean)	-1.390***
Between-primary school variation	0.069*
Between-individual variation	6.374***

Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.
Note: N: 7,332 students who had attended 872 primary schools.

TABLE A4.2 Factors Influencing Self-Reported Behaviour at Age 13

	Coefficient
Constant	12.937
Female	-0.157**
Social class:	
Professional/managerial	-0.097
Non-manual/skilled manual	-0.069
Economically inactive	-0.115
Mother's education:	
Leaving Certificate	-0.078
Post-secondary	-0.052
Degree	-0.079
Lone parent family	-0.151*
Immigrant	-0.072
SEN	-0.188**
Impact of recession:	
Moderate	0.029
Significant	-0.131*
Self-reported behaviour at 9	0.121***
Attitudes to school at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.019
Never like it	-0.116
Attitudes to teacher at age 9:	
Sometimes like	0.009
Never like	-0.318**
Attitudes to reading at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.048
Never like it	-0.203*
Attitudes to Mathematics at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.051
Never like it	-0.146*
Reading achievement at 9:	
Quintile 2	0.090
Quintile 3	0.068
Quintile 4	0.048
Quintile 5 (highest)	0.098
Mathematics achievement at age 9:	
Quintile 2	0.010
Quintile 3	0.138
Quintile 4	0.087
Quintile 5 (highest)	0.057
Second year	-0.145**
Transition difficulties	-0.035**
Quality of interaction with second-level teachers:	
Positive interaction (scale centred on mean)	0.526***
Negative interaction (scale centred on mean)	-1.401***
Between-primary school variation	0.020
Between-individual variation	2.963***

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: N: 7,330 students who had attended 872 primary schools.

TABLE A4.3 Factors Influencing Freedom from Anxiety at Age 13

	Coefficient
Constant	12.998
Female	-1.142***
Social class:	
Professional/managerial	-0.073
Non-manual/skilled manual	-0.046
Economically inactive	-0.014
Mother's education:	
Leaving Certificate	-0.181
Post-secondary	-0.185
Degree	-0.336**
Lone parent family	-0.057
Immigrant	0.098
SEN	-0.102
Impact of recession:	
Moderate	-0.100
Significant	-0.130
Freedom from anxiety at 9	0.273***
Attitudes to school at 9:	
Sometimes like it	-0.046
Never like it	0.108
Attitudes to teacher at age 9:	
Sometimes like	-0.014
Never like	0.028
Attitudes to reading at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.069
Never like it	0.239
Attitudes to Mathematics at 9:	
Sometimes like it	-0.122*
Never like it	-0.398**
Reading achievement at 9:	
Quintile 2	-0.093
Quintile 3	-0.129
Quintile 4	-0.308*
Quintile 5 (highest)	-0.314*
Mathematics achievement at age 9:	
Quintile 2	0.164
Quintile 3	0.227*
Quintile 4	0.095
Quintile 5 (highest)	0.007
Second year	-0.177*
Transition difficulties	-0.145***
Quality of interaction with second-level teachers:	
Positive interaction (scale centred on mean)	0.462***
Negative interaction (scale centred on mean)	-0.221***
Between-primary school variation	0.077*
Between-individual variation	7.212***

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: N: 7,332 students who had attended 872 primary schools.

TABLE A4.4 Factors Influencing Happiness at Age 13

	Coefficient
Constant	9.713
Female	-0.476***
Social class:	
Professional/managerial	-0.015
Non-manual/skilled manual	0.000
Economically inactive	-0.038
Mother's education:	
Leaving Certificate	-0.090
Post-secondary	-0.055
Degree	-0.134±
Lone parent family	-0.111±
Immigrant	0.077
SEN	-0.016
Impact of recession:	
Moderate	-0.040
Significant	-0.052
Happiness at 9	0.185***
Attitudes to school at 9:	
Sometimes like it	-0.061
Never like it	-0.064
Attitudes to teacher at age 9:	
Sometimes like	-0.105*
Never like	-0.213**
Attitudes to reading at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.074
Never like it	0.162
Attitudes to Mathematics at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.008
Never like it	-0.144*
Reading achievement at 9:	
Quintile 2	-0.139*
Quintile 3	-0.171*
Quintile 4	-0.238**
Quintile 5 (highest)	-0.358**
Mathematics achievement at age 9:	
Quintile 2	0.02
Quintile 3	0.063
Quintile 4	0.025
Quintile 5 (highest)	-0.09
Second year	-0.096*
Transition difficulties	-0.058***
Quality of interaction with second-level teachers:	
Positive interaction (scale centred on mean)	0.410***
Negative interaction (scale centred on mean)	-0.292***
Between-primary school variation	0.026±
Between-individual variation	2.479***

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: N: 7,330 students who had attended 872 primary schools.

TABLE A4.5 Factors Influencing Physical Self-Image at Age 13

	Coefficient
Constant	9.659
Female	-0.974***
Social class:	
Professional/managerial	-0.080
Non-manual/skilled manual	-0.077
Economically inactive	-0.096
Mother's education:	
Leaving Certificate	0.031
Post-secondary	0.131
Degree	0.064
Lone parent family	-0.186*
Immigrant	0.086
SEN	-0.109
Impact of recession:	
Moderate	-0.064
Significant	-0.023
Physical self-image at 9	0.250***
Attitudes to school at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.006
Never like it	-0.118
Attitudes to teacher at age 9:	
Sometimes like	-0.049
Never like	-0.169
Attitudes to reading at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.077
Never like it	-0.036
Attitudes to Mathematics at 9:	
Sometimes like it	-0.148*
Never like it	-0.366**
Reading achievement at 9:	
Quintile 2	-0.113
Quintile 3	-0.065
Quintile 4	-0.240*
Quintile 5 (highest)	-0.402**
Mathematics achievement at age 9:	
Quintile 2	0.122
Quintile 3	0.115
Quintile 4	0.050
Quintile 5 (highest)	-0.161
Second year	-0.151**
Transition difficulties	-0.104***
Quality of interaction with second-level teachers:	
Positive interaction (scale centred on mean)	0.707***
Negative interaction (scale centred on mean)	-0.206***
Between-primary school variation	0.031
Between-individual variation	4.715***

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: N: 7,303 students who had attended 872 primary schools.

TABLE A4.6 Factors Influencing Perceived Popularity at Age 13

	Coefficient
Constant	10.399
Female	-0.107*
Social class:	
Professional/managerial	-0.033
Non-manual/skilled manual	-0.002
Economically inactive	-0.127
Mother's education:	
Leaving Certificate	-0.134
Post-secondary	-0.109
Degree	-0.146
Lone parent family	-0.189*
Immigrant	-0.014
SEN	-0.255**
Impact of recession:	
Moderate	-0.027
Significant	-0.067
Perceived popularity at 9	0.230***
Attitudes to school at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.003
Never like it	-0.022
Attitudes to teacher at age 9:	
Sometimes like	0.012
Never like	-0.026
Attitudes to reading at 9:	
Sometimes like it	0.105
Never like it	0.193
Attitudes to Mathematics at 9:	
Sometimes like it	-0.100*
Never like it	-0.242**
Reading achievement at 9:	
Quintile 2	0.095
Quintile 3	-0.089
Quintile 4	-0.310**
Quintile 5 (highest)	-0.434**
Mathematics achievement at age 9:	
Quintile 2	0.024
Quintile 3	0.117
Quintile 4	-0.014
Quintile 5 (highest)	-0.087
Second year	-0.148**
Transition difficulties	-0.115***
Quality of interaction with second-level teachers:	
Positive interaction (scale centred on mean)	0.404***
Negative interaction (scale centred on mean)	0.051
Between-primary school variation	0.007
Between-individual variation	3.990***

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland study.*
Note: N: 7,316 students who had attended 872 primary schools.

Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusions

Policy discourse in Ireland and elsewhere has increasingly focused on the importance of child wellbeing. Such debate has shifted from an emphasis on objective measures of wellbeing (such as educational participation) and their impact on adult outcomes towards a focus on how children experience life in the here and now. Wellbeing is a multidimensional construct with significant variation in how it has been operationalised (Ben-Arieh at al., 2014). This study takes advantage of rich data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study to look at children's wellbeing from their own perspective, using measures of how children perceive themselves (their 'self-image') across different domains of their lives. The report presents analyses of the factors influencing self-image at nine and 13 years of age across a number of domains, those of learning, peer group, body image, interaction, anxiety and overall happiness. Unlike much previous research which has focused on family influences on child self-image, this study focuses on the potential impact of school and classroom experiences.

5.1   MAIN FINDINGS

In keeping with previous research (see, for example, Parkes et al., 2014), child self-image is not as strongly influenced by social background factors as other outcomes such as educational achievement. However, children from professional and managerial backgrounds have more positive self-images at the age of nine in terms of behaviour, freedom from anxiety and happiness. In contrast, children from homes that are the most disadvantaged in terms of financial and educational resources have the worst outcomes in terms of behaviour, happiness and anxiety. Gender is a key influence on certain aspects of self-image at the age of nine, especially anxiety and behaviour, but not on others. Furthermore, gender differences in some aspects of self-image widen over time (see below). Children from immigrant families are more negative about themselves at the age of nine across all of the dimensions of self-image; in other words, they are more self-critical of their academic ability and appearance, are less happy and more anxious, report poorer behaviour and see themselves as less popular than their Irish peers. The largest individual differences in self-image relate to the presence of a special educational need. Children with SEN are negative about themselves across all of the sub-scales of self-image and these differences from their peers are substantial in size. This difference is most marked for those with learning disabilities or emotional-behavioural difficulties, with no significant differences in self-image between those with physical disabilities and their peers.

In keeping with previous international research (see, for example, Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000), school and classroom influences on self-image are less marked than is the case for academic achievement. Nevertheless, significant variation in child self-image is found between schools and among classrooms within schools. There is relatively little variation in child self-image between single-sex and coeducational schools or between schools with different concentrations of disadvantage. There is some evidence, however, of higher anxiety levels among children attending DEIS urban Band 1 schools. School size is significantly associated with child self-image, with more positive self-image among children attending larger schools (with more than 100 students) than among those in medium or smaller schools. This is evident for all dimensions of self-image except freedom from anxiety where no significant differences are found by school size. This pattern is partly, but by no means entirely, related to the greater use of multi-grade classes (see below) and to the apparent closer monitoring of student behaviour in small schools as well as to the location of larger schools in urban areas, where child self-image tends to be more positive. This finding is somewhat surprising, given that international research tends to highlight small to medium-sized primary and secondary schools as having better academic and social outcomes (Darmody et al., 2008) and there has been no consistent evidence of school size effects on academic outcomes, at least within Irish second-level education (Smyth, 1999).

In contrast to the significant relationship with achievement (McCoy et al., 2014), teacher experience has no significant influence on child self-image. There is no marked variation in child self-image by class size but class size is difficult to disentangle from size of school and whether the class is multi-grade or not. However, girls in larger classes (those with 30 or more students) are somewhat less self-confident as learners and have somewhat higher levels of anxiety than girls in smaller classes. A very significant proportion, a third, of nine-year-olds are taught in multi-grade settings but there has been a lack of Irish research on the impact of such structures on child outcomes. Overall girls appear to be more sensitive to being taught in a multi-grade setting than boys. These girls are significantly less confident as learners, report poorer behaviour, have more negative body image and see themselves as less popular. This would appear to reflect the different reference group available to girls in these settings where they compare themselves to a wider pool of students, including older peers (see Quail and Smyth, 2014). The only significant effect of being in a multi-grade class for boys is in relation to body image, where multi-grade boys are more critical of their physical appearance. The direction of the coefficients for other dimensions of boys' self-image is also negative but not statistically significant.

Social relationships with teachers and peers emerge as important protective factors in fostering positive self-image, with poorer outcomes among those who dislike their teacher, dislike their school, are reported to have discipline problems and have experienced bullying. Frequent involvement in sports also enhances child self-image. Unfortunately, GUI data do not distinguish between school and non-school sports but children who are involved in sport on a very frequent basis are likely to have at least some of that involvement through school. The influence of sports involvement appears to relate to its role in fostering a sense of belonging and fulfilment. It is not strictly related to its physical benefits as we do not find the same relationship between physical exercise and child self-image.

Information from the second wave of the child cohort study was used to look at changes in self-image between nine and 13 years of age. Certain aspects of self-image become more positive over time; in particular, young people report more positive behaviour and see themselves as more popular at 13 than was the case at nine years of age. However, academic self-image becomes more negative over the transition to second-level education, particularly for girls. Gender differences also widen in terms of body image and freedom from anxiety. Self-image at the age of nine is significantly predictive of self-image four years later but many young people experience a change in how they view themselves. The influence of social background factors on self-image remains largely stable between nine and 13 years of age, although where families have been significantly affected by the recession, young people's behaviour tends to disimprove. In contrast to the relative stability in social background effects, the gap in self-image between young people with SEN and their peers becomes wider, adding to differences that were already marked at the age of nine.

Primary school factors, including the child's relationship with their teacher as well as their engagement with school and school subjects, have a significant influence on their later wellbeing. Self-image is also shaped by experiences within second-level education. The *Growing Up in Ireland* study provides useful information on young people's self-reported relationships with their teachers and, as the cohort is more or less evenly divided between first and second year, allows us to examine the potential impact of the stage of junior cycle. Young people who experience difficulties adjusting to the new school context report deteriorating self-image. However, in keeping with previous research (Smyth et al., 2007), second year appears as potentially more problematic than first year, with worse self-image among second year students, all else being equal. As at primary level, relationships with second-level teachers have a very significant influence on young people's self-perceptions, with markedly poorer self-image emerging among those who have experienced negative interaction with their teachers.

5.2   IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings show that most variation in self-image occurs among children in the same class and school but, at the same time, school and class characteristics do influence how children see themselves as learners and more generally. School size appears to influence self-image, with more positive self-images found among children in larger schools (100 or more students). This pattern reflects the interplay of multi-grade settings, teacher perspectives on student behaviour and location. While school size is largely outside the immediate control of school **boards of management and principals**, the findings point to the necessity to reflect on the implications of school size for school and classroom practice (see below). There is some evidence of poorer self-image among children, especially girls, in schools with a narrower curricular focus, indicating the importance of balance in provision and practice across the different subject areas of the primary curriculum. This is all the more important, given that sports participation emerges as a crucial ingredient in fostering a positive self-image among children. This poses **challenges for schools** in a context where an average of one hour a week is devoted to physical education, schools vary in their access to sports facilities and provision of extra-curricular sport, and children differ in their access to team-based sports outside the school setting.

The study adds to the growing body of literature on the experiences of children and young people with special educational needs (see McCoy and Banks, 2012; Banks et al., 2013, 2015). The significantly poorer self-images among students with SEN indicate **challenges for inclusion** at classroom and school level. The gap in self-image between children with SEN and their peers is already evident at the age of nine but widens over the transition to second-level education. The gap is particularly marked for those with emotional-behavioural and learning difficulties, and is evident even when taking account of prior achievement levels. Thus, the differential appears to reflect the wider interplay of school, class, family and peer factors rather than the impact of academic difficulties alone.

While social background differences are less marked than differences by SEN, nine-year-olds from more disadvantaged backgrounds, in terms of educational and economic resources, are more anxious, less happy and report poorer behaviour. Those who have been worse affected by the recession have deteriorating behaviour levels over time, in keeping with research about the link between poverty and socio-emotional difficulties among younger children (see Watson et al., 2014). Furthermore, children in the most disadvantaged urban Band 1 schools report higher anxiety levels, even taking account of their individual social background. This finding echoes previous work on the complexity of need in urban Band 1 schools (Smyth et al., 2015) and highlights the

importance of **targeting socio-emotional support to children** in these settings through initiatives such as the School Completion Programmes (see Smyth et al., forthcoming).

The significant variation in self-image among children in the same classroom has **implications for teacher practice**. It is clear that even children in the same class group have very different experiences of school (see Gutman and Feinstein, 2008) and react to these differences in varying ways. This presents a **challenge for teachers** who are faced not only with differentiating their practice to accommodate different abilities but must also take on board the different self-images among their students. This task is particularly complex for multi-grade teachers, who are working with a range of ages in the same setting. Girls appear particularly sensitive to being taught in multi-grade classes and seem to make negative self-evaluations by comparing themselves with older peers. Given the prevalence of multi-grade teaching in Irish primary schools, it is remarkable that it has been given relatively little attention in terms of research and policy development. The findings of the study point to the necessity of developing innovative ways for **initial teacher education** and **continuous professional development** to support teachers to engage students, manage classroom interaction and discipline, and provide feedback in such a way as to prevent potentially negative effects on students' self-image and performance.

There are potential implications from the findings for **homework policy**. Children who spend longer on their homework, and require frequent help from parents, are more negative about themselves as learners. This is not surprising given that they are spending longer because they find homework difficult to complete. However, there may be a way of reframing homework in such a way that it does not place too much pressure on children to 'complete' it and so that issues over homework can become the basis for communication between **parents and teachers**.

For parents, the study findings highlight the impact of out-of-school activities on children's self-image. At primary level, in particular, parents can play a key role in facilitating contact with a child's friends outside school and their participation in sports activities, both of which play important roles in fostering wellbeing (positive self-image) among children. The findings point also to the critical impact of certain stages of the schooling process on young people's wellbeing, suggesting the importance of parental support not just over the transition to second-level education but as students move on through the junior cycle.

The quality of teacher-student relationships emerges as a key influence on child self-image. Self-image is much more negative among children who are seen as having discipline problems and those who have been reprimanded frequently by teachers. It is therefore crucial that **school and class behaviour policy** places a strong emphasis on positive reinforcement rather than negative sanctions. The creation of a positive climate should be seen as a central component of **school development planning**. **Continuous professional development** for principals and teachers is likely to facilitate change in school and classroom climate; **initial teacher education** should also emphasise school and classroom climate as many new teachers may not realise the impact they actually have on their students. It is evident therefore that any reform of the curriculum must be embedded in broader policy and practice which fosters positive interaction between teachers and students.

Primary school experiences are found to matter in themselves in shaping how children view themselves as learners and in other dimensions of their self-image. They matter too in influencing longer-term self-image and engagement with school. GUI data offer unique insights into the ways in which schools and classrooms shape, and are indeed shaped by, children, and provide evidence of the centrality of social relationships in enhancing school and classroom practice.

5.3   POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The *Growing Up in Ireland* study provides a unique opportunity to explore the interplay between different domains of the child's life and collects rich information from parents, school principals, teachers and children themselves. The wealth of knowledge being created by the study has enormous potential to support the development of educational policy. This study has focused on the influence of school and classroom experiences on children's wellbeing but there is considerable scope to broaden the focus to take account of family relationships and dynamics, tracing the way in which the quality of interaction with parents and siblings influences how children view themselves. There is also scope in the future to exploit the longitudinal nature of the study to examine the ways in which wellbeing at the age of nine may influence self-image in later adolescence and early adulthood. This study shows that the quality of relationships with teachers acts as an important protective factor in enhancing young people's view of themselves. Future research could usefully examine the extent to which negative self-evaluations are precursors of mental health difficulties in adolescence, a very pressing issue for schools and families.

There has been very little research in the Irish context on how schools and teachers handle potential misbehaviour. This study points to discipline problems, even at the age of nine, as a potential symptom and driver of poor self-image. There is considerable scope to use GUI data to look at how children's behaviour at age nine influences their self-reported misbehaviour within and outside school at the age of 13 (and beyond) and to examine the role of school discipline policies in shaping the prevalence and consequences of such behaviour.

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Learning in Focus

Wellbeing and School Experiences among 9- and 13-Year-Olds: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study

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