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Working Paper No 525

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Attitudes to Irish as a school subject among 13-year-olds

*Emer Smyth *; Merike Darmody*

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of background and school factors on second-level students' attitudes toward Irish as a school subject drawing on the Growing Up in Ireland study. The study focuses on the perceptions of the core subjects, English, Mathematics and Irish, and presents a profile of students who find the Irish language interesting or difficult. The study enables us to investigate the attitudes of teenagers towards the language in a systematic way, including personal, school and other characteristics that may have an impact on attitudes towards the Irish language.

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Introduction

Attitudes can be considered one of the constructs of the affective domain (Aiken and Aiken, 1969; Koballa and Crawley, 1985; Koballa, 1988). There is now a large body of literature on the topic as attitudes have the potential to predict future behaviours such as the field of study and career preferences of students (Koballa, 1988; Osborne, Simon and Collins, 2003). Attitude is a multidimensional variable including various constructs such as importance and enjoyment (Gardner, 1995). Research on attitudes to subject areas such as Science has identified a number of factors that affect secondary school students' disposition towards the subject such as grade levels (Hofstein, Ben-Zvi, Samuel and Tamir, 1977; Yager and Yager, 1985; Simpson and Oliver, 1990; Francis and Greer, 1999; George, 2006; Barmby, Kind and Jones, 2008), gender (Hofstein et al., 1977; Harvey and Stables, 1986; Francis and Greer, 1999; Barmby et al., 2008), and achievement (Weinburgh, 1995; Salta and Tzougraki, 2004).

The investigation of language use and attitudes has become one of the central themes in sociolinguistic research (Chakrani and Huang, 2014). Attitudes can be relatively enduring dispositions toward 'a social object' (Garrett 2010, 20). The nature of language attitudes is three-dimensional: it is cognitive in that attitudes comprise 'beliefs about the world,' affective in that they are constructed 'feelings about an attitude object,' and behavioural in that they 'encourage certain actions' (Cargile et al., 1994, 221). Studying language attitudes helps to explain and predict language behaviour (Baker 1992). In modern societies, sociolinguists have argued that the educational domain shapes attitudes towards languages (Rampton, 2006).

In recent decades there has been continued interest in the position of the Irish language. The Republic of Ireland has two official languages; Irish and English. According to the Irish Constitution, the Irish language is the first official language of Ireland, despite the fact that English is the mother tongue of the majority of the population. The language is more frequently used in Gaeltacht areas; areas where the Irish language continues to be the main spoken language of a substantial number of inhabitants. The Irish language is also one of the core subjects in primary and post-primary schools. Some primary and post-primary schools operate through the medium of Irish. A broad range of government policies exists protecting the language and several initiatives promote its use. Recent Census figures (2011) show that in the Republic, 41 per cent of the population reported being able to speak Irish (CSO, 2012). Nevertheless, the number of adults fluent in the language, despite having

learned it in primary and post-primary school, is considerably lower – 14 per cent claimed to be able to participate in most conversations or have a native speaker ability (Darmody and Daly, 2015)¹.

This study is designed to explore the factors affecting attitudes towards the Irish language in post-primary schools. Analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI 9-year-old cohort) and Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) data shows that student attitudes in the Republic towards Irish tend to be more negative than to other core subjects. Children attending Irish-medium primary schools tend to hold more positive attitudes towards the Irish language. This may be due to a selection effect whereby parents who are positive about the Irish language and want their children to learn Irish enrol them in Irish-medium schools (see Darmody and Daly, 2015; Smyth et al., 2004, 2006, 2007). In post-primary schools in the Republic, students considered Irish less useful than English and Mathematics. The Irish language was also considered more difficult and less interesting than the other two subjects. Interestingly, other European languages (e.g. French) were also considered difficult by some students. Students' negative attitudes towards Irish seemed to remain constant throughout their post-primary schooling (ibid). Drawing on the national longitudinal study, Growing Up in Ireland (13-year-old cohort data), the research presented here builds on previous work in the Irish context on students' attitudes towards subjects in post-primary schools. In particular, the study aims to answer the following questions:

Research questions:

How do second-level students perceive Irish as a subject compared to English and Mathematics?

What factors predict finding the subject interesting?

What factors predict finding the subject difficult?

Theoretical Framework

Together with personality, motivation, the learner's expectations and socio-cultural experience, attitudes are part of the 'affective variables' of language learning. The term attitude is defined as a disposition that refers to 'a general and enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, objects, or issue' (Abu-Rabia 2003, 3). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975, 6) define attitude as a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object. In other words, it is not innate but 'learned' through a socialisation process which begins in early childhood.

There is now a growing body of research on language attitudes. Bissoonauth (2011) argues that language attitudes can have an impact on language change within a community. Language is an important component of group identification (see Cavallaro, 2005; Fought, 2006), and the attitudes

¹ *The same study found that a further 43% of adults 18 and over have 'basic fluency' – that is, being able to understand a few simple sentences or parts of conversation.*

and actions of a majority group regarding a minority language are likely to determine its position within society (McKay, 2011). Our understanding of languages and language attitudes has undergone a considerable shift moving from the perception of language as behaviour to seeing it as cognitive activity. Lambert and Peal differentiated between overt and covert attitudes and the ability of both to potentially influence policy. Attitudes to a language may be positive or negative as well as instrumental or integrative. In second language acquisition, Gardner and Lambert (1972) identified two main roles of attitudes: instrumental attitudes which are related to the desire to receive social-status recognition or profitable benefits; and integrative attitudes which are related to the desire to be integrated into another language community. Instrumental attitudes are when an individual is learning the language for personal interest, and integrative attitudes are when the student is learning a language with the desire to be integrated into a specific community that speaks that language. People learning a second language may report both instrumental and integrative attitudes (Gardner, 1985). Attitude change is an important notion since attitudes are affected by experience (Mamun et al., 2012). The study of language attitudes as a theoretical construct is important because of the role attitudes play in the linguistic stratification of multilingual communities. A comparative study of Irish and Galician languages (O'Rourke, 2005, 2011) showed that in both situations there is a 'mismatch between attitudes and use' regarding the language. The study highlighted an interesting paradox – while people generally hold favourable dispositions towards their respective languages as a marker of identity, they do not consider it as an essential component to understanding the associated culture.

Several researchers have explored students' attitudes towards school and subjects in the curriculum. The concept 'attitudes towards school' is inherently related to other concepts, such as students' perceptions and interest about learning, their competence (perceived and as result of academic achievement) and motivation (Candeias and Rebelo, 2010). Girls are found to have more positive attitudes, while boys are found to exhibit lower levels of motivation and tend to have less positive attitudes toward school (Van Houtte, 2004). Also there is evidence that cognitive variables such as ability-related and expectancy beliefs, general attitudes toward school, and attitudes toward specific academic subjects are related to academic performance and that these can differ across gender and racial groups (Linnehan, 2001). Schools that are more engaging stimulate more positive attitudes. Students who perceive more support from adults who live with them and their peers have more positive attitudes and academic values and feel more satisfied with school (Akey, 2006).

In terms of attitudes towards subjects, pupils least enjoy subjects in which they perceive lower levels of practical activity or application, such as modern foreign languages, maths and Religious Education (in the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Key stage 3)². By the middle phase of secondary education, modern languages are amongst the lowest ranking in terms of enjoyment in a number of studies and indeed, were most often mentioned as the subject(s) pupils would most like to drop (according to Stables and Wikeley, 1997, 1999; Lord and Jones 2006).

² See also: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/91105/91105.pdf>

Existing research has revealed age differences regarding language attitudes: while the surveys with adults (18+) show mostly positive dispositions towards the Irish language, research by Walsh (2011) conducted among a group of Transition Year students showed that only 22% of students expressed strong motivation in the learning of the language and that only 14% of students reported a strong desire to learn the language. Relevance seems to have been a factor - with many students questioning the place of the language in their future lives. Ó Riagáin et al. (2008) explored the socio-linguistic impacts of after-school activities of adolescents attending second-level schools. The authors found that the majority of non-Gaeltacht schoolchildren discontinue using Irish after leaving school. The authors argue while children acquire sufficient literacy in school, the 'social' use of the language outside school is low. The study revealed strong parental influence - parents who use Irish in the home have a strong influence on their children regarding language use both at home and outside. Other important factors such as the socio-economic background of students, the length of time in the education system and post-school aspirations have an impact on language use outside the school environment.

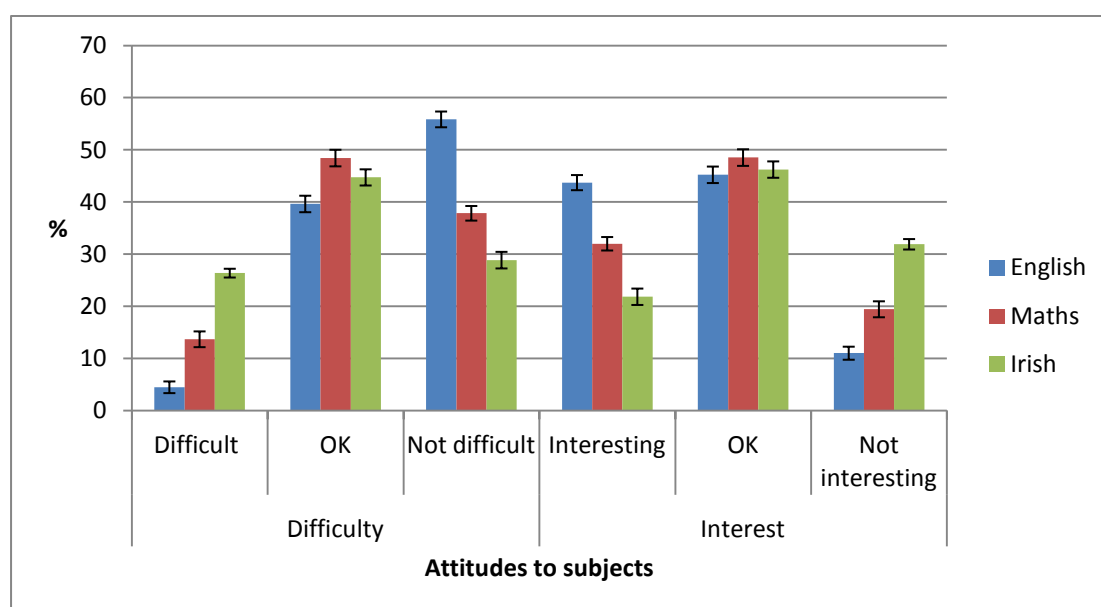
Methodology

Growing Up in Ireland is a Government-funded study of children being carried out jointly by the ESRI and Trinity College Dublin. The main aim of the study is to paint a full picture of children in Ireland and how they are developing in the current social, economic and cultural environment. This information will be used to assist in policy formation and in the provision of services which will ensure all children will have the best possible start in life. The Child Cohort is made up of just over 8,500 children who were selected randomly through the National School system. A nationally representative sample of 900 schools was selected from all over Ireland including mainstream national schools, private schools and special schools. The sample of 8,500 nine-year-old children was then randomly selected from within these schools. The children and their parents were given an information pack on the study and invited to participate. In addition, over 2,300 individual teachers of the study children cooperated with the study as well as their Principals. Data collection for Wave One of the Child Cohort took place from September 2007 to June 2008. To gather as much information as possible about each child, information was collected from the child, their parent(s)/guardian(s), school teacher and Principal, and childminder (where relevant). Data collection for Wave Two took place from August 2011 to March 2012. This involved returning to the same group of 8,500 children at 13 years of age to find out how they had grown and how their lives had changed over the four intervening years.

Analytic Approach and Research Results

As a first step, descriptive analyses were carried out on students' attitudes towards the three core subjects: English, Mathematics and Irish. Figure 1 shows that Irish teenagers did not generally perceive these subjects as difficult although a significant minority (26%) found Maths difficult. Compared to the other two subjects, English was the most likely to be described as 'not difficult', with over half of the cohort doing so. In general, English was found to be the most interesting and Irish the least interesting, a finding consistent with earlier studies on the post-primary sector (see Smyth et al, 2004, 2006, 2007). A significant group (31%) of young people described Irish as 'not interesting' and around a fifth expressed their lack of interest in Maths.

Figure 1: Attitudes to English, Maths and Irish (perceived difficulty and interest) among 13 year old young people



A significant relationship was found between interest in Irish and perceived difficulty of the subject. Only 7 per cent of those who described Irish as interesting found it difficult while over half (55%) of those who found it 'not interesting' characterised it as difficult. While it may be difficult to disentangle the direction of causality here (e.g. uninterested students may invest less time and therefore find the subject difficult), it is more likely that the perceived difficulty of the language may serve to disengage young people.

As a next step, multivariate analysis was carried out with 'interest in Irish' and 'perceived difficulty of Irish' as the dependent or outcome variables. The models presented in this study explore which factors most strongly predict students liking the subject or finding it difficult.

Table 1 shows the factors predicting levels of interest in Irish, with finding it 'interesting' or 'not interesting' contrasted against finding it 'OK'. Looking at individual background factors, girls are significantly more likely (1.4 times) to find Irish interesting than boys and much less likely to find it

not interesting. There are few differences by social background in the level of interest young people express in Irish. Thus, interest in Irish does not vary significantly by social class or maternal education. The exception to this pattern is the significantly greater lack of interest reported by young people from lone parent families. Those whose families speak Irish at home are much less likely to find Irish not interesting but surprisingly this group of young people does not display a higher level of interest in Irish. Young people with immigrant mothers are slightly more likely to find Irish not interesting, though the scale of the difference (1.16 times more likely) is not large. Young people with special educational needs are much less likely to find Irish interesting than their peers.³

Model 2 takes account of a number of factors relating to young people's primary school characteristics and experiences. Young people who attended a gaelscoil express higher levels of interest in Irish, all else being equal, but there is no significant boost in interest associated with attending a Gaeltacht school. Those attending gaelscoileanna or Gaeltacht schools are significantly less likely than other young people to describe Irish as not interesting. No significant variation is found in levels of interest in Irish by DEIS status of the school. Interest in Irish at the age of 13 is found to be related to earlier interest in the subject as well as to attitudes to school more generally. Those who 'never' liked school at the age of 9 are 1.8 times more likely to find Irish 'not interesting' four years later. Similarly, those who 'never' liked Irish at age 9 are 1.8 times more likely to find Irish not interesting at the age of 13. Those with higher levels of (English) reading achievement at the age of 9, namely, those in the top 40 per cent of readers, are more likely to express interest in Irish at the age of 13. Interestingly, the likelihood of finding Irish not interesting does not vary by reading achievement. The less negative attitudes found among those in Irish-speaking households are related to the type of school attended and their earlier attitudes to Irish (compare models 1 and 2).

Model 3 takes account of second-level experiences and characteristics. All else being equal, students in second year indicate a slightly higher level of interest in Irish than their first year counterparts. Even taking account of the language medium of the primary school, those attending Irish-medium second-level schools are much less likely to find Irish not interesting but no such difference is found for reported interest in Irish. The DEIS status of the school is not significantly associated with interest in Irish. There is little variation by school sector when the profile of students in the school is taken into account. Those in vocational schools are less likely to find Irish interesting than those in other school types. Furthermore, those in girls' secondary schools are more likely to find Irish 'not interesting'. This is a surprising finding but may reflect the fact that students in these schools may not have positive attitudes to the extent that would be predicted by their gender, earlier high levels of interest in Irish and higher reading achievement. Young people who have experienced greater transition difficulties are less likely to find Irish interesting and slightly more likely to report it not interesting. There is a strong relationship between the quality of teacher-student interaction and the level of interest in Irish. Students who have experienced frequent positive interaction (in the form of praise or positive feedback) are significantly more likely to find Irish interesting while those who have experienced

³ *It should also be noted that a significant proportion of young people with (particular types of) special educational needs are exempt from studying Irish (see Darmody and Smyth, 2016).*

more negative interaction (being 'given out to' or reprimanded) are much more likely to report Irish as not interesting.

Perceived difficulty of Irish

Table 2 presents a series of multilevel multinomial logistic regression models which show the factors associated with the perceived difficulty of Irish among 13 year olds. Girls are less likely than boys to describe Irish as difficult and more likely to describe it as not difficult (Model 1). In contrast to the patterns for interest in Irish, there is some variation by social background, with young people whose mothers have tertiary education more likely to describe Irish as not difficult. Those from lone parent families are more likely to characterise Irish as difficult than those from two parent families. Young people from Irish-speaking families are more likely to describe Irish as not difficult and much less likely to view it as difficult. Those with immigrant mothers are less likely to describe Irish as not difficult than their peers. Young people with special educational needs are 1.7 times more likely to describe Irish difficult and two-thirds as likely to consider it not difficult. Unlike interest in Irish, significant variation is found in the perceived difficulty of Irish depending on the primary school attended.

Primary school characteristics and experiences are found to influence the perceived difficulty of Irish later on. Those who attended a gaelscoil are much less likely to consider Irish difficult, although those who were in Gaeltacht schools do not differ significantly from those in English medium schools in this respect. Both groups (those who attended gaelscoileanna or Gaeltacht schools) are much more likely to describe Irish as not difficult. There is very little variation by DEIS status of the school, though those who attended rural DEIS schools are less likely to view Irish as not difficult. Those who had negative attitudes to school at age 9 are more likely to find Irish difficult, even taking account of their prior reading test scores. As with interest in Irish, attitudes to Irish at age 9 are highly predictive of perceived difficulty four years later on. Those who never liked Irish previously are 1.7 times more likely to find Irish difficult. The perceived difficulty of Irish is found to be highest among those with the lowest (English) reading scores at primary level; the contrast here is between those in the lowest fifth and all others. For finding Irish not difficult, there is more of a gradient by prior reading score, with those in the top fifth most likely to find Irish not difficult. As with interest in Irish, more positive attitudes among those from Irish-speaking households are found to be largely mediated by primary school characteristics and experiences. Most of the between-school variation in the difficulty of Irish is mediated by school type and the extent to which young people developed positive attitudes to the language at primary level. However, a direct effect is still evident, indicating that other factors, such as emphasis on and quality of the teaching of Irish, may be at play.

In terms of second-level experiences, second year students are less likely to describe Irish as not difficult than their first year counterparts, suggesting increasing challenge as young people move through junior cycle. Those who attend Irish medium second-level schools are much less likely to

describe Irish as difficult, even taking account of the language medium of their primary school. The perceived difficulty of Irish does not vary by the DEIS status of the school, all else being equal. Those attending single-sex schools are less likely to describe Irish as not difficult than other students. Young people who have experienced transition difficulties are more likely to describe Irish as difficult and less likely to describe it as not difficult but, as was the case for interest in Irish, the scale of these differences is very modest. As with interest in Irish, the quality of teacher-student interaction is highly associated with the perceived difficulty of Irish. Thus, those who have experienced more positive interaction with teachers are less likely to consider Irish difficult while those who have experienced negative interaction with teachers are more likely to do so.

Table 1: Multilevel multinomial logistic regression models of the factors associated with interest in Irish (Reference category: Finding Irish 'ok')

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Interesting	Not interesting	Interesting	Not interesting	Interesting	Not interesting
Constant	-0.904	-0.442	-0.580	-0.899	-0.428	-0.957
<i>Individual characteristics</i>						
Gender: female	0.335***	-0.176*	0.295***	-0.092	0.326***	-0.132±
Social class:						
Professional/managerial	0.043	0.072	0.016	0.048	-0.025	0.063
Non-manual/skilled manual	0.019	0.187	0.024	0.173	0.020	0.162
Not employed (Ref.: semi/unskilled manual)	-0.238	0.203	-0.213	0.211	-0.253	0.221
Mother's education:						
Leaving Certificate	-0.043	-0.017	-0.058	-0.010	-0.118	0.072
Post-secondary	0.110	0.037	0.070	0.050	0.026	0.110
Tertiary (Ref.: Lower secondary or less)	0.121	0.102	0.044	0.132	-0.032	0.205±
Lone parent household	0.097	0.374**	0.126	0.348**	0.209*	0.274**
Irish speaking household	0.049	-0.304**	-0.080	-0.143	-0.087	-0.141
Immigrant mother	-0.130	0.157*	-0.133	0.171*	-0.112	0.165*
Home language English	-0.024	-0.097	-0.022	-0.108	-0.006	-0.188
Special educational needs (teacher report)	-0.227*	0.060	-0.142	0.050	-0.097	0.004
<i>Primary school characteristics</i>						
Language medium:						
Gaelscoil			0.230*	-0.271*	0.359**	-0.158
Gaeltacht (Ref.: English medium)			0.220	-0.515*	0.298	-0.339
DEIS status:						
Urban Band 1			-0.228	-0.056	-0.277±	-0.129
Urban Band 2			0.060	0.078	0.024	0.061
Rural DEIS (Ref.: Non-DEIs)			-0.168	-0.046	-0.128	-0.047
<i>Primary school experiences</i>						
Liking school:						
Sometimes liked			-0.160*	0.228*	-0.119	0.134±
Never liked (Ref.: Always liked)			-0.231	0.607**	-0.146	0.460***
Liking Irish:						
Sometimes liked			-0.378***	0.192*	-0.358***	0.153*
Never liked (Ref.: Always liked)			-0.461***	0.586***	-0.395***	0.497***

Reading achievement:						
Quintile 2			0.013	-0.103	-0.055	-0.084
Quintile 3			0.142	-0.125	0.055	-0.113
Quintile 4			0.209*	0.045	0.071	0.116
Quintile 5			0.333*	0.026	0.156	0.113
<i>Second-level school characteristics</i>						
Year group: second year					0.145*	0.022
Language medium:						
Some classes through Irish					-0.169	-0.158
All classes through Irish (Ref.: English medium)					0.011	-0.481**
DEIS school					-0.035	0.130
School sector:						
Girls' secondary					-0.205	0.340**
Coeducational secondary					-0.174	0.138
Vocational					-0.379***	-0.010
Community/comprehensive (Ref.: Boys' secondary)					-0.189	0.102
<i>Second-level school experiences</i>						
Transition difficulties					-0.026**	0.014±
Positive interaction with teachers					0.501***	-0.392***
Negative interaction with teachers					-0.114*	0.424***
Between-school variation	0.037	0.027	0.034	0.022	0.030	0.020

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ± $p < .10$.

Table 2: Multilevel multinomial logistic regression models of the factors associated with perceived difficulty of Irish (Reference category: Finding Irish 'ok')

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Difficult	Not difficult	Difficult	Not difficult	Difficult	Not difficult
Constant	-0.626	-0.686	-0.936	-0.653	-0.971	-0.456
Individual characteristics						
Gender: female	-0.320***	0.125*	-0.253***	0.136*	-0.256***	0.295**
Social class:						
Professional/managerial	-0.082	0.094	-0.036	0.004	0.005	-0.035
Non-manual/skilled manual	0.154	-0.042	0.166	-0.072	0.171	-0.085
Not employed (Ref.: semi/unskilled manual)	0.068	0.027	0.096	0.001	0.101	-0.044
Mother's education:						
Leaving Certificate	-0.204*	0.140	-0.177	0.092	-0.122	0.005
Post-secondary	-0.137	0.181	-0.083	0.104	-0.049	0.021
Tertiary (Ref.: Lower secondary or less)	-0.155	0.310*	-0.069	0.162	-0.017	0.065
Lone parent household	0.380**	-0.031	0.367**	-0.027	0.307**	0.077
Irish speaking household	-0.458***	0.344***	-0.240*	-0.005	-0.231*	0.008
Immigrant mother	0.110	-0.161*	0.125	-0.144	0.104	-0.123
Home language English	0.153	-0.006	0.214	-0.111	0.136	-0.064
Special educational needs (teacher report)	0.509***	-0.427***	0.420***	-0.367**	0.365***	-0.322*
Primary school characteristics						
Language medium:						
Gaelscoil			-1.396***	2.005***	-1.231**	2.045***
Gaeltacht (Ref.: English medium)			-0.455	1.794***	-0.188	1.835***
DEIS status:						
Urban Band 1			0.182	-0.065	0.101	-0.043
Urban Band 2			0.046	-0.136	0.055	-0.124

<i>Rural DEIS (Ref.: Non-DEIS)</i>			-0.240	-0.444*	-0.263	-0.468*
<i>Primary school experiences</i>						
<i>Liking school:</i>						
<i>Sometimes liked</i>			0.181*	-0.005	0.096	0.079
<i>Never liked</i>			0.377**	0.044	0.271*	0.173
<i>(Ref.: Always liked)</i>						
<i>Liking Irish:</i>						
<i>Sometimes liked</i>			0.223***	-0.340**	0.205***	-0.316**
<i>Never liked</i>			0.547***	-0.505***	0.487***	-0.437***
<i>(Ref.: Always liked)</i>						
<i>Reading achievement:</i>						
<i>Quintile 2</i>			-0.311*	0.144	-0.323*	0.147
<i>Quintile 3</i>			-0.393	0.333**	-0.411*	0.357**
<i>Quintile 4</i>			-0.246*	0.493***	-0.253*	0.488***
<i>Quintile 5</i>			-0.393*	0.710***	-0.393*	0.708***
<i>Second-level school characteristics</i>						
<i>Year group: second year</i>					0.070	-0.259***
<i>Language medium:</i>						
<i>Some classes through Irish</i>					-0.143	0.032
<i>All classes through Irish</i>					-0.800*	0.197
<i>(Ref.: English medium)</i>						
<i>DEIS school</i>					0.026	-0.092
<i>School sector:</i>						
<i>Girls' secondary</i>					0.212	-0.489***
<i>Coeducational secondary</i>					0.106	-0.230*
<i>Vocational</i>					0.063	-0.201*
<i>Community/comprehensive</i>					-0.053	-0.335*
<i>(Ref.: Boys' secondary)</i>						
<i>Second-level school experiences</i>						
<i>Transition difficulties</i>					0.024**	-0.017*
<i>Positive interaction with teachers</i>					-0.241***	0.450***
<i>Negative interaction with teachers</i>					0.450***	-0.224***

<i>Between-school variation</i>	<i>0.101**</i>	<i>0.302**</i>	<i>0.053*</i>	<i>0.068*</i>	<i>0.043</i>	<i>0.062*</i>
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*Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, $\pm p < .10$.*

Conclusion

Attitudes, whether learned or acquired, have an impact on individuals' behaviour and the process of attitude formation continues throughout one's life, and can be informed by societal and institutional processes. Social learning theorists recognize the considerable impact which other people and communities have on the development of an individual's attitudes. They argue that approval for a particular social behaviour will strengthen that behaviour and increase the chances of the behaviour being repeated; at the same time disapproval can discourage antisocial behaviours. Literature on young people's attitudes towards school and subjects indicates that they are associated with a number of socio-demographic and institutional variables.

The aim of this paper was to provide an update on recent research about attitudes of students towards the core subjects in Irish post-primary schools, with a special focus on the Irish language. It builds on, and adds to, the research conducted by Darmody and Daly (2015) on attitudes towards the Irish language on the island of Ireland and a longitudinal study on the experiences of post-primary students (Smyth et al., 2004; 2006; 2007). The latter body of research has found that many second-level students tend to perceive the Irish language, one of the core subjects in the post-primary curriculum, as less interesting and less useful compared to other subjects.

In line with the previous studies, the analysis presented here shows that compared to other core subjects such as English and Mathematics, attitudes towards the Irish language tend to be more negative. Students are more likely to describe Irish as not interesting and difficult than is the case for English and Maths. The perceived difficulty of Irish appears to contribute to disengagement from the subject. In line with related research on Irish primary schools (McCoy et al. 2012), at post-primary level girls are significantly more likely to find Irish interesting. As can be expected and echoing findings from the adult population (see Darmody and Daly 2015), students whose families speak Irish at home are least likely to dislike Irish. Interestingly, however, they are not necessarily more likely to have more positive dispositions towards the subject. Other groups of students not finding the subject interesting include students with migrant mothers and those with special educational needs. Attitudes towards Irish as a subject seem to endure over time – students who found Irish not interesting in primary school feel the same in post-primary school. In addition, primary school characteristics and experiences are found to influence the perceived difficulty of Irish (but not necessarily interest) later on. Surprisingly, the likelihood of finding Irish uninteresting does not vary by reading achievement. Previous research has indicated that positive school climate (often defined in terms of teacher-student interaction) has the potential to impact on

broader student engagement. It is found here that positive interaction can enhance student's engagement in all subjects, including Irish.

In policy terms, the findings point to the need to provide students with positive experiences of Irish at primary level; this is likely to ensure that positive attitudes towards the language acquired in earlier years will endure at post-primary level. Over the transition to second-level education, the nature of interaction with teachers is also likely to enhance student perspectives on the Irish language.

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