Prior to 1878, post-primary schooling in Ireland was dominated by religious provision and throughout the 20th Century Catholic congregations, in particular, operated the majority of such schools. As we see below, there is much evidence to support the position that young, female bodies were heavily regulated in these schools. Historically, such regulation was as much a result of wider social constraint as it was particular to Catholicism. However, given that those girls who secured post-primary schooling before the advent of free education in 1966, and the majority of those that have passed through secondary schooling since then, attended Catholic convent institutions, they provide a useful starting place in surveying the regulation of the young, female body. They also allow us to identify to what extent traditional notions of femininity have succumbed to more hyper-sexualised versions of young women in a world where the body as commodity has become normalized.

This chapter seeks to explore the regulation of the schoolgirl body within the Irish secondary school landscape. In doing so it describes historic practices that reinforced stereotypical behaviours for young women of school and university-going age and discusses how these practices find striking resonances in contemporary schooling. Our focus is on one aspect of regulation – that of the body. Through the body, that form by which we so often seek self-definition and are defined, that to which we are so intimately bound, regulation becomes immediate and in some instances all-encompassing. Increasingly, for young girls in particular, it has become the form of expression – a public manifestation of personality, values and aspirations and to others, frequently, therefore, a symbol of threatened aggression, immorality and anarchy. Regardless of the epoch schoolgirls have been the subjects of quite exaggerated regulation. The manner in which schools expect girls to dress, walk, eat, talk, socialize or move are all subject to a regime of regulations the object of which was to make young women conform to versions of feminine ‘ladylikeness’ that may or may not reflect wider socio-cultural expectations of women in the 21st Century. This discussion maps the embodied surveillance and regulation of girls within the Irish education landscape, drawing particular attention to the contradictions placed upon both classical and contemporary femininity.
In the late 20th Century feminist movements centered on rupturing normalized practices of sexism and gender stereotyping. A new era of girlhood emerged, not only offering girls opportunities to be autonomous, successful and self-stylised, but expecting them to be. Since the 1960s a neoliberal discourse has come to dominate the education and labour market agenda for girls, culminating in today’s presentation of girls as entrepreneurial and empowered. According to Harris (2005, 94), narratives of economic success, personal responsibility and “being the best you can be” are directed at young girls in particular. ‘DIY’ biographies of choice and success are defining features of post-feminist and third wave feminism: smart girls work hard but also play hard, embodying the characteristics of both. It is acceptable for them to maximize their entrepreneurial success on the basis of “entrepreneurial” (Coleman 2009, 8) expression. Girls in late modernity are socialized to realise that their tits, hips and lips are their power tools (Karp and Stoller 1999, 7). While Irish schools have tended to embrace the ideals of upward mobility for girls in terms of academic achievement, they have also often retained a conservative outlook on the sexualized assertiveness of young ‘ladies’ which is at odds with the hyper-femininity discourse of wider culture. This is not dissimilar to the tension experienced by girls attending religious schools in the 1940s where schools’ commitment to equipping girls for their dual lives in ‘ladylikeness’ and ‘domesticity’, was not easily synthesized with a proliferation of new world opportunities. It remains extremely difficult for young girls today to embody the identity of ‘lady’ which continues to be enforced as the dominant code within the school setting, given the competing hetero-sexualized and hyper-feminized demands that require girls to be sexy as well as successful in the 21st Century (Allan 2009). Commonly, schools still enforce a type of embodied femininity that hinges on bodily refinement and spatial confinement.

The latter part of the chapter will refer to data gathered in 2005 as part of research focused on the embodied experiences of teenagers. The data that will be presented arose from one-to-one interviews with nine girls aged 13 to 16. Three girls attended a disadvantaged single sex girls’ school based in inner-city Dublin, Ireland. Three others attended a private, fee paying girls’ school on the outskirts of the city, while three others attended a lower-middle class co-educational school also located on the outskirts of the city. Their narratives evidence how powerful discourses of feminine performance continue to be played out and negotiated by young girls in their school contexts as they have been for at least a century. Aspects of their stories will be used to gain an insight into the contradictions encountered by young girls as they attempt to synthesize school based expectations of spatial and corporeal confinement with wider social idioms.