



# *'They know what's ahead of them in September'* Protective factors in the transition from primary to secondary school for students with special educational needs

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# Outline

- Background, previous research, research questions
- Two components: quantitative and qualitative
  - Growing Up in Ireland, 9 and 13 year old data
  - National Survey of Special Classes: in-depth case studies
- Summary



# Primary / secondary transitions

- Key **turning-point** in a student's school career
- **Formal** school structures:
  - Built environment of the school, its size, the complexity of the building
  - Organisation of the school day (single class teachers to class subjects)
  - Shift from child-centred, activity-based primary classrooms to a more didactic approach
  - New learning demands, heavier workload
- **Informal** structures:
  - Friendships, fears about losing friends, fears of being bullied
  - Not feeling 'known' by teachers and friends
- Some **become disengaged** from school over the transition period with implications for their later educational outcomes

# What about students with SEN?

- Unique set of issues **in addition** to issues for the general school population
- More susceptible to discontinuities in:
  - Organisation
  - Curriculum and pedagogy
  - Resource allocation
  - IEPs
  - Personal and social interaction
- Lack of consistency in support and guidance - high levels of stress

(Rose et al. 2015; Barnes-Holmes et al. 2013; Maras and Aveling 2006; Hughes et al. 2013; Makin et al. 2017; Myklebust 2010; Forgan et al. 2000; Smyth 2016; Doyle et al. 2017)

# Previous research...

## Students with additional needs:

- between 25-28% of students
- majority in mainstream provision, increasing number of special classes however

## School experiences?

- like primary school less than their peers
- have more negative peer relations
- lower academic achievement

# Research questions

- Are students with SEN exposed to additional risks in the transfer from primary to secondary school?
- What practices can protect students with special educational needs against negative transitions to secondary school?



# Data (i)

Two large scale longitudinal studies:

***Growing Up in Ireland:*** cohort of children born in 1998

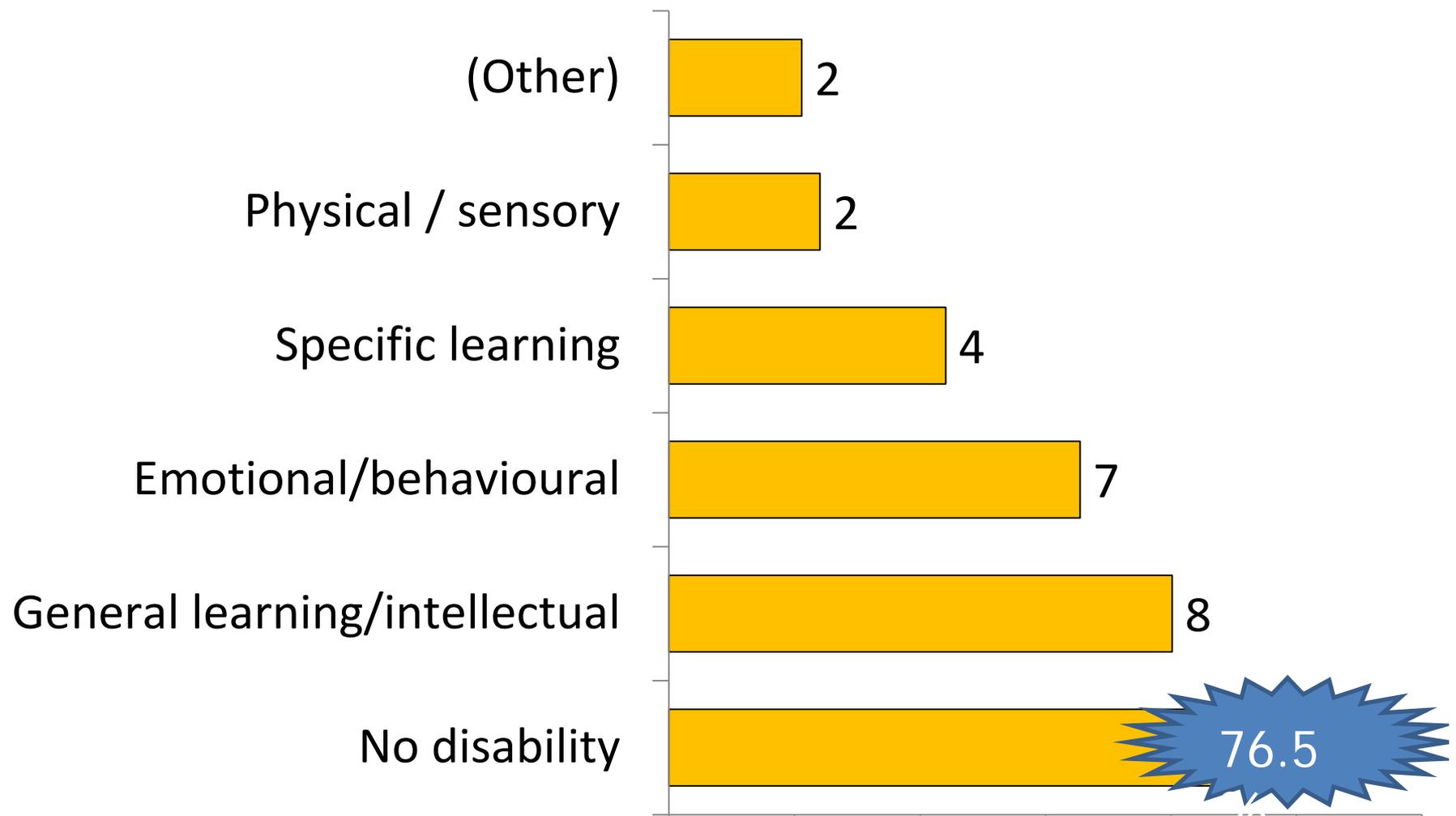
- 7,423 families responded in both waves (age 9 & age 13)
- Rich data, multiple informants – child interests, activities, socio-emotional wellbeing, academic performance; family structure, relationships, special educational needs of child, involvement in schooling; teacher reports of child engagement, performance, academic and socio-emotional difficulties.

## **National Survey of Special Classes**

- 12 schools - range of sectors, sizes, locations and student characteristics
- Cohort of approximately 70 students in special classes at age 9 and age 12
- In-depth interviews with special class teachers and principals
- Experiences of supporting students before and after transition, their concerns about transitions for students with SEN and their views on effective transition practices



# Type of disability at age 9 (% of children)



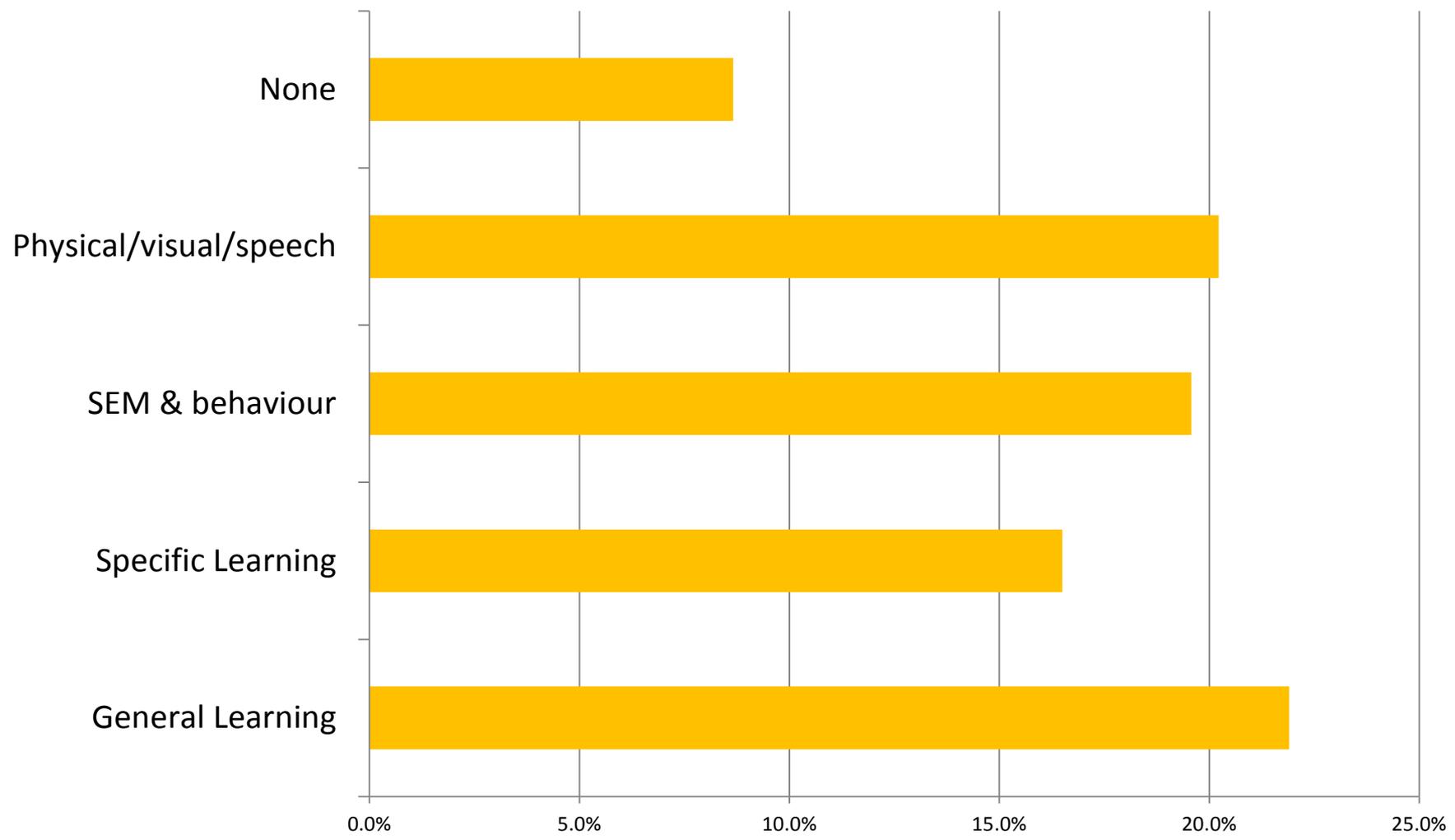


# Transition Difficulties Scale

- In line with Smyth et al. (2016) we focus on poor transition – being in bottom 10%
- **Scale variables (strongly agree .... Strongly disagree):**
  - » My child settled/is settling well into secondary school
  - » My child misses old friends from primary school
  - » My child was anxious about making new friends
  - » My child coped well with the schoolwork
  - » My child made new friends
  - » My child is involved in extracurricular activities
  - » My child gets too much homework
- **Stepped logistic model**

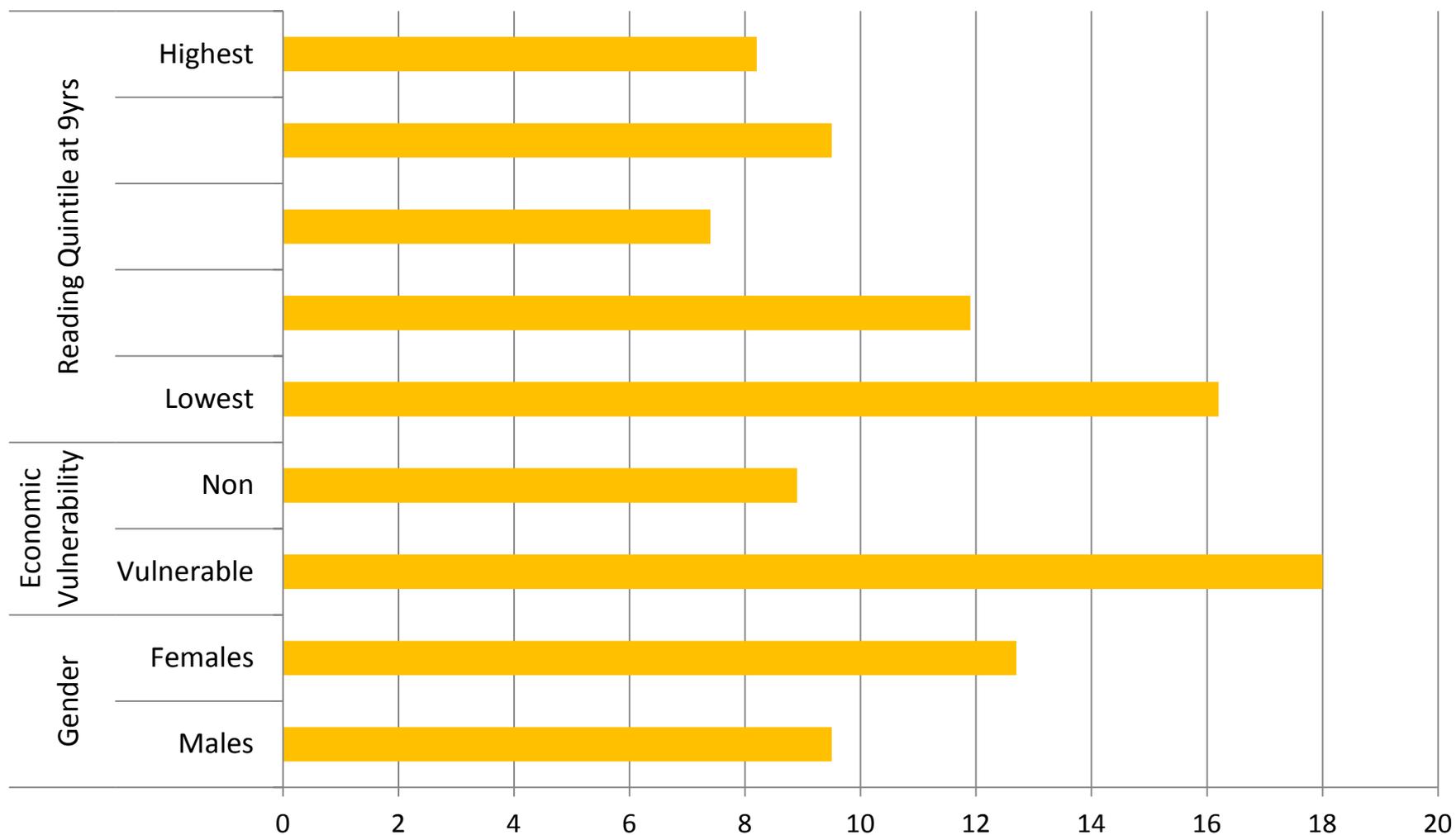


# % Experiencing Significant Transition Difficulties



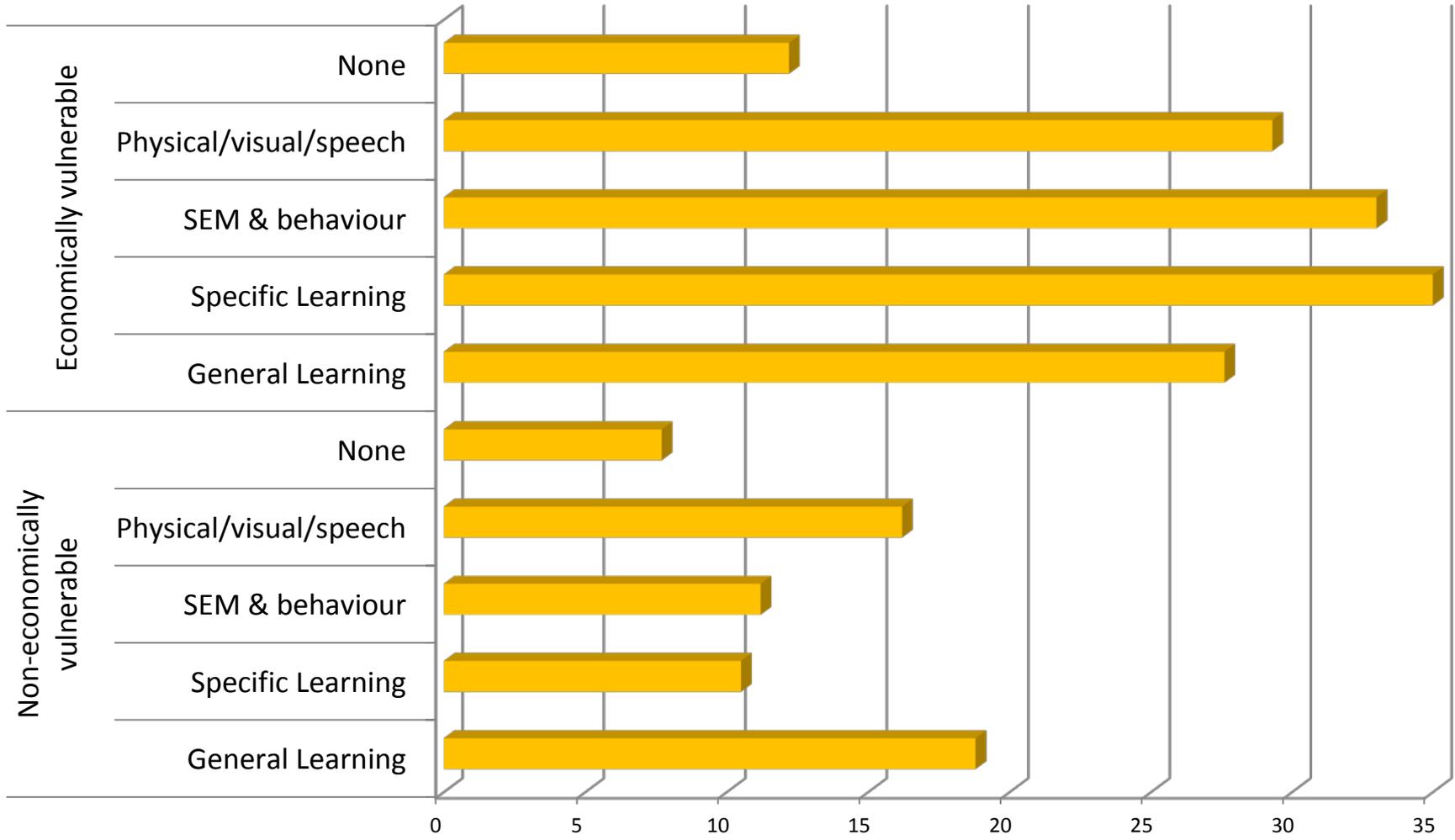


# % Experiencing Significant Transition Difficulties





# % Experiencing Significant Transition Difficulties





# Modelling Approach

- » Year in school (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>), child gender
- » Family characteristics and dynamics
- » Child school engagement, academic self-concept and peer relations
- » Reading performance at 9yrs



# How much more likely are young people with a SEN/disability to be in the poor transition group

	Model 1 (controls for year group, gender)	Model 2 (add controls for family socio- economic and relationship characteristics)	Model 3 (add child school engagement, academic self-concept and peer relations)	Model 4: (add reading performance at 9yrs)
No disability	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
General learning/intellectual	3.128	2.481	2.195	1.782
Specific learning	2.556	2.142	1.954	1.643
Emotional/behavioural	2.113	1.587	1.446	n.s.
Physical/sensory	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Female	1.337	1.303	1.316	1.323
Economically vulnerable			1.482	1.466

# Protective factors against negative transitions

- Transition planning:

*‘it makes the step from primary to second level far **less anxious** for the child’*

*‘during the month of May, the child comes here on two occasions to the school, to just **familiarise** himself with the setting, take photographs, make up a little booklet then that he can **talk** about **during the summer**. And then one of us, one of the teachers goes first to the national school, but it works quite well, and then they know what is ahead of them in September’*

# Protective factors against negative transitions

- Transition projects:

*‘He’s doing a little transition project, so he’s learning about the school that he’s going to...So **he’s been to see the school**, so today the principal will come up and I will talk to him. All his reports and so on will go to the secondary school as well so that, that would be part, so that would be how we would transition, it would be up to the secondary school then to sort of manage him from there, you know, but I will sort of be **outlining** kind of what...**what his needs would be**, you know’*



# Protective factors against negative transitions

- Information sharing:

*'[I] **actually met** with the teachers and the principles of the primary schools' with the view that 'they are the people who **know the kids the best**'*

*'They will identify them kids who're **entitled to resource services** or learning support and **maybe also those who aren't** but who find learning difficult'*

- Facilitators:

*'We've a **home school liaison teacher** who would be going to the primary schools with the previous you know she'd be with the primary schools **visiting them several times a year.**'*

# Changing profile/need?

*'I suppose there's more and **more kids coming that are not being caught by the special system**, where they are now landing at the second level teachers door and the **resources aren't there** to meet their needs. But like you have a right as a parent to have your child in the local school. And that's perfectly acceptable, but it's a case of there has to be the resources there to meet those needs.'*

*'So we put them into the local secondary school and we give it a try. And then **there won't be resources**, the max you are going to get is five teaching hours towards this student, you know, on multiple disabilities...So you are going to have **a child with major disability that can be now in a mixed ability class**. Okay you may be lucky enough to get an SNA to go with that student but still like how's that going to work out, you know, it's difficult.'*

# Summary

- Social implications of inclusive policies
- Findings highlight the intersection of economic vulnerability and special educational needs
- SEN type matters: challenges become more academic – impacting on those with learning difficulties the most
- Solution to apply interventions and support structures:
  - preparation, home-school communication
  - diaries, timetables, planners, visits
  - collaboration between sending and receiving schools