

# Externalising behaviour among primary school children

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# Introduction

- Research on school factors and student behaviour generally focuses on secondary level
- Studies on younger children tend to emphasise the role of individual and family factors, with less focus on the school context
- This paper uses Cohort '08 data to look at the role of school and classroom factors in externalising behaviour among 9-year-olds
- Research questions:
  1. What school and classroom factors are associated with externalising behaviour at age 9?
  2. Is behaviour at age 9 influenced by experiences around the transition to primary school?
- Use multilevel modelling to control for school and classroom/teacher level: 4,895 children clustered within 2,885 classes within 1,771 schools
- Policy relevance: identifying the factors that lead to externalising behaviour provides evidence for targeted measures to prevent such behaviour becoming entrenched

# Previous research

- Previous studies on younger children have tended to emphasise poverty, maternal depression and parenting practices (Mensah, Kiernan, 2010; Noonan et al., 2018; Zilanawala et al., 2019; Tamura et al., 2020)
- Not as much focus on school and classroom effects for younger children, with some exceptions
- School social mix is associated with level of, and growth in, externalising behaviour (Flouri and Midouhas, 2016; Horoz et al., 2022; Patalay et al., 2020)
- Research on younger children has highlighted differences in teacher-student relationships by gender and race/ethnicity (Saft and Pianta, 2001; Drugli, 2013) but little focus on social background
- The quality of the teacher-child relationship is predictive of skill development over the first year of school (Pianta and Stuhlman, 2004)

# Measures

- Outcome: externalising behaviour – conduct and hyperactivity subscales of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), completed by teacher
- Individual and family background
  - Gender
  - Disability/SEN
  - Multidimensional approach: maternal education, social class, income, financial strain, family structure, migrant background (parent(s) born outside Ireland)
  - Urban/rural

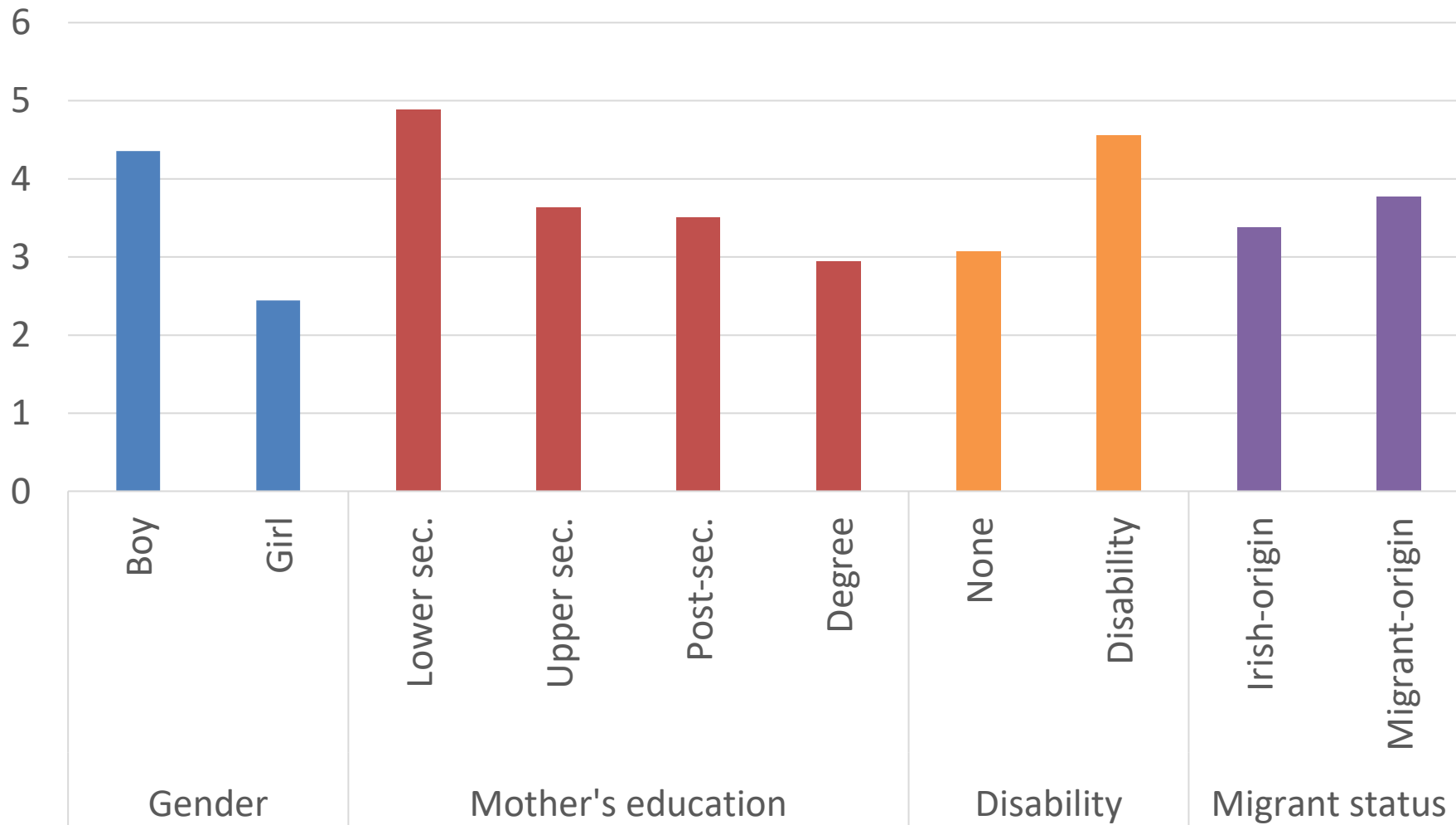
# Measures (continued)

- School
  - Social mix (using participation in the DEIS scheme as proxy)
  - School size
- Classroom/teacher
  - Gender
  - Years of experience teaching
  - Class size
  - Whether multigrade
  - Teacher perceptions of autonomy

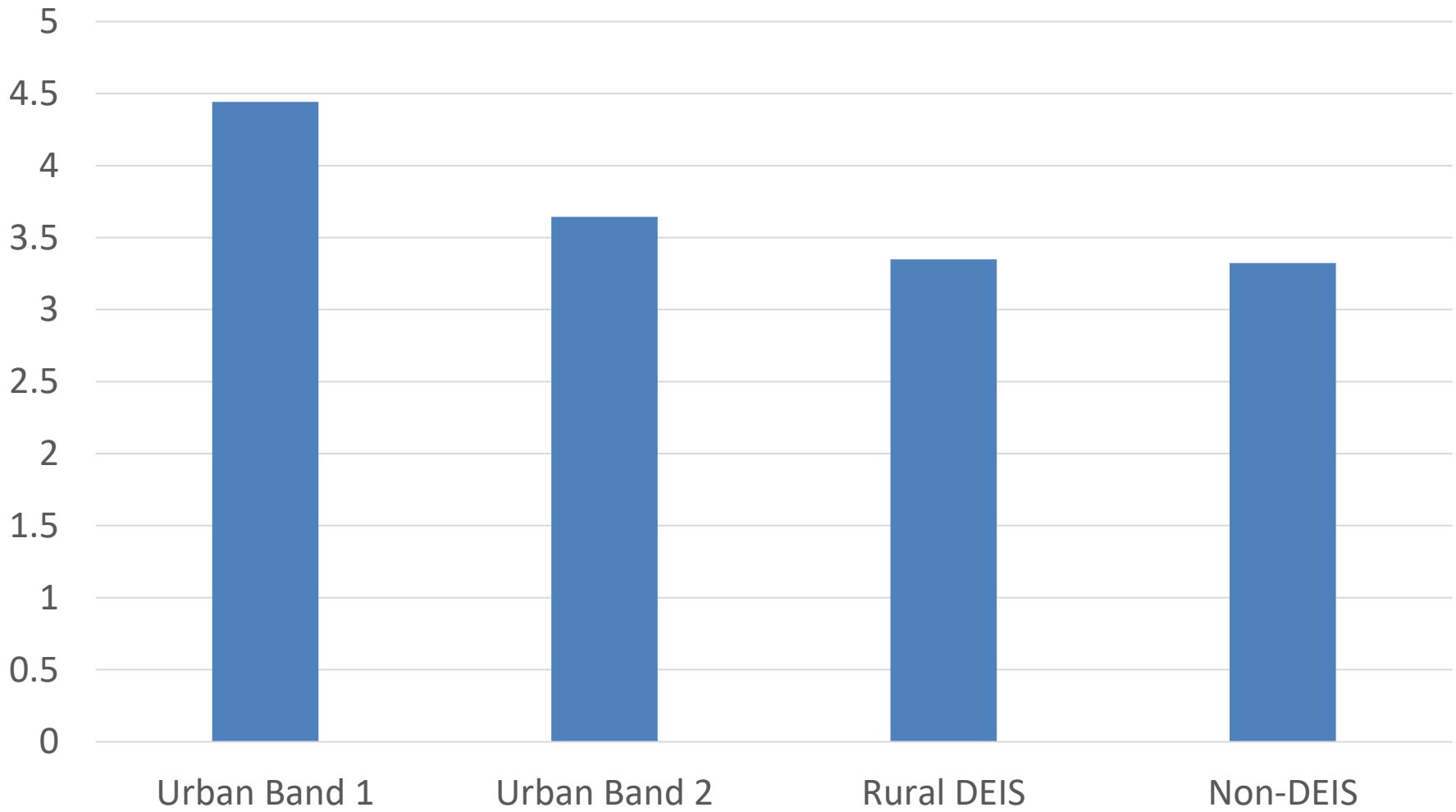
# Measures (continued)

- Interaction between child and class context at 9
  - Teacher-child closeness and conflict (Pianta scale)
  - Children's perception of school, Reading and Maths
- Reading (vocabulary) test score at age 9
- Experiences around school transition
  - Mother's report of child's settling in (4 item scale)
  - Teacher-child closeness and conflict (Pianta scale)
  - Externalising behaviour at age 5
  - Vocabulary at age 5 (BAS)
- Pre-school characteristics
  - Externalising behaviour at age 3 (mother report)
  - Vocabulary at age 3 (BAS)

# Externalising behaviour at age 9 by child and family factors



# Externalising behaviour by school social mix





## Model results: individual and family background

Higher levels of externalising behaviour among:

- Boys
- Where mothers have lower levels of education
- Non-employed or working-class families
- Lower-income families
- Lone-parent families
- Those with a disability or special educational need

NS: migrant background

# Model results: School and teacher/classroom factors

- School
  - Social mix NS when detailed measures of family background are included
  - School size NS
- Teacher
  - Gender and experience NS
  - Perceived autonomy NS
- Classroom
  - Class size and whether multigrade NS

## Model results: interaction between child and context

Higher levels of externalising behaviour if (at age 9):

- More conflictual relationship with teacher (Pianta); closeness NS
- Child sometimes or never likes school
- Child never likes Reading
- Child sometimes or never likes Maths
- Child has lower score on reading test

# Model results: transition to primary education

Greater if:

- More settling-in difficulties, as reported by mother
- Closer relationship with their teacher – suggests an optimal balance
- More externalising behaviour at age 5
- Robust to inclusion of externalising difficulties (mother-reported) and vocabulary at age 3

Taking early experiences into account, externalising behaviour is more prevalent in larger classes (31+)

# Conclusions

- Value of looking at school and class context, especially the interaction between the child and that context, in explaining behaviour
- Role of school and curriculum engagement; Maths emerges as important
- Large classes as a challenge to behaviour
- Transition difficulties can have longer-term effects
- Even at a young age, negative cycle of conflict with teacher and 'acting out' but also need to balance care and challenge (Darmanin, 2003)
- Role of initial teacher education, CPD and whole-school positive behaviour policy in helping teachers promote inclusion of all social groups