



One of the gang? Peer relations among students with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools

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Policy context

Inclusion, inclusion, inclusion...

International

- Salamanca Statement (1994)
- UN Convention on the Rights of Children with a Disability (2006)
- 'Education for all'

Ireland

- Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (1993)
- Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (2004)
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
- Legal cases, policy reports, circulars



SEN Discourse

- **SEN research traditionally distinct from education research**
- **Can this research area be situated within broader educational debates?**
- **SEN specific issues**
 - Specialised versus mainstream instruction
 - Mainstream schools' capacity (resources, funding)
 - Teacher expertise in SEN
 - Curriculum access
- **More recently, a focus on student experiences...**



School experiences for children with SEN

- **School engagement of children with SEN compared to their peers in mainstream settings (McCoy and Banks 2012)**
- **A diverse group: can we define school engagement for students with SEN?**
- **Peer relations are just one measure...**



Previous research on peer relations

A 'live' debate...

- Sociometric/peer nomination data to assess no. of friends
- Quality of friendships or degree of acceptance – measures of student loneliness, sense of belonging, self-concept

Research findings:

- Question the assumed benefits of mainstream education – are they academic? social? or both?
- Highlight the role of parents of children with SEN in inclusive education
- Raise concerns – isolation, bullying, rejection (Cambrian and Silvestre 2003; Koster et al. 2010; Rose and Shevlin 2010)
- Show variations in peer relations by type of SEN (De Boer et al., 2012; Pijl, Frostad and Flem 2008)

Q. Is inclusion fulfilling its promise?



Why are peer relations important?

- Findings show that peer relations, friendship quality, feelings of support are directly connected with school engagement (Manzeske and Estell 2009; Sammons et al. 2011).
- Positive peer relations aid children in learning how to play, work, interact – can enhance motivation, school performance, sense of belonging (Purdue, Manzeske and Estell 2009).
- There are long-term risks of negative peers relations as a child, impacting on future life chances, mental health, social exclusion.
- Responsive to social interventions? Peer relations are influenced by contextual factors, such as policies and practices of the school and family.



Interventions to promote social outcomes?

- **Internationally e.g. ‘special friends’ programme (De Boer et al. 2012)**
- **Primary**
 - Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management programme (McGilloway et al., 2010)
 - School level – buddy systems?
- **Post-primary**
 - National Behavioural Support Service, ‘FRIENDS for life’ programme
 - National Educational Welfare Board: *Developing a code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools*
 - Department of Education: *Guidelines for supporting students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties*



Methodology

- **Primary school data**
- **Data from GUI Wave 1 Child Cohort (at 9 years)**
- **8,568 children, sampled through schools**
- **Holistic view of children's in-school and out-of-school lives**
- **Multiple informant**
 - Teacher report of child SEN
 - Quantity: Primary care-giver report of no. of close friends
 - Quality: Teacher report of peer relations (SDQ peer problems subscale)



Research questions

- **To what extent do individual student characteristics and out-of-home activities impact on their number of friends and the quality of their peer relations in school?**
- **What role can schools play in ameliorating negative peer relations among students?**

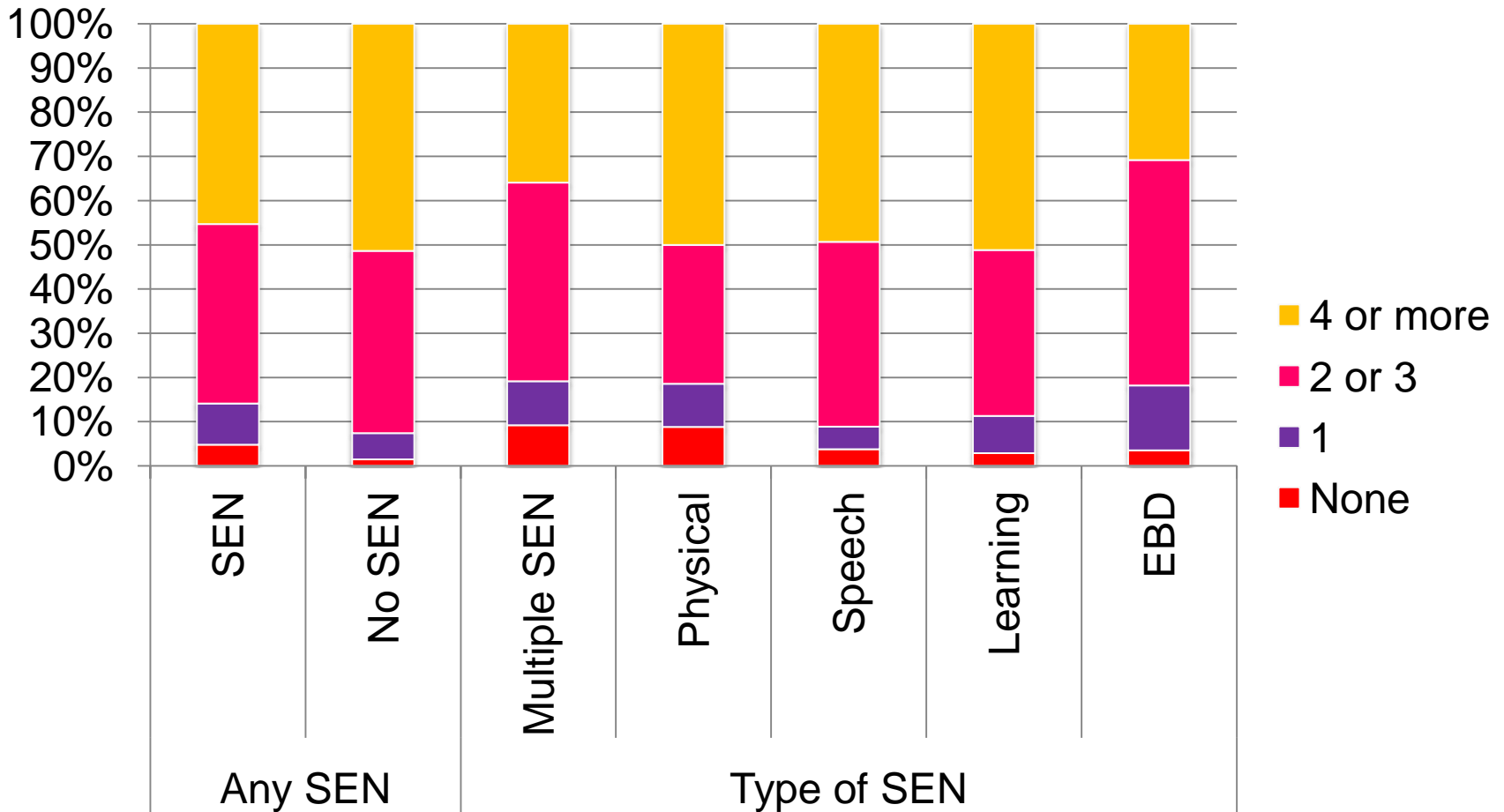


Variables

Child level:	School level:
Child SEN	Teaching experience
Child gender	Teaching methods
Child social class	Class size
Mother's education	DEIS status
Household income quintile	Gender mix
One parent household	School size
Migrant	
School engagement	
Out-of-school activities	

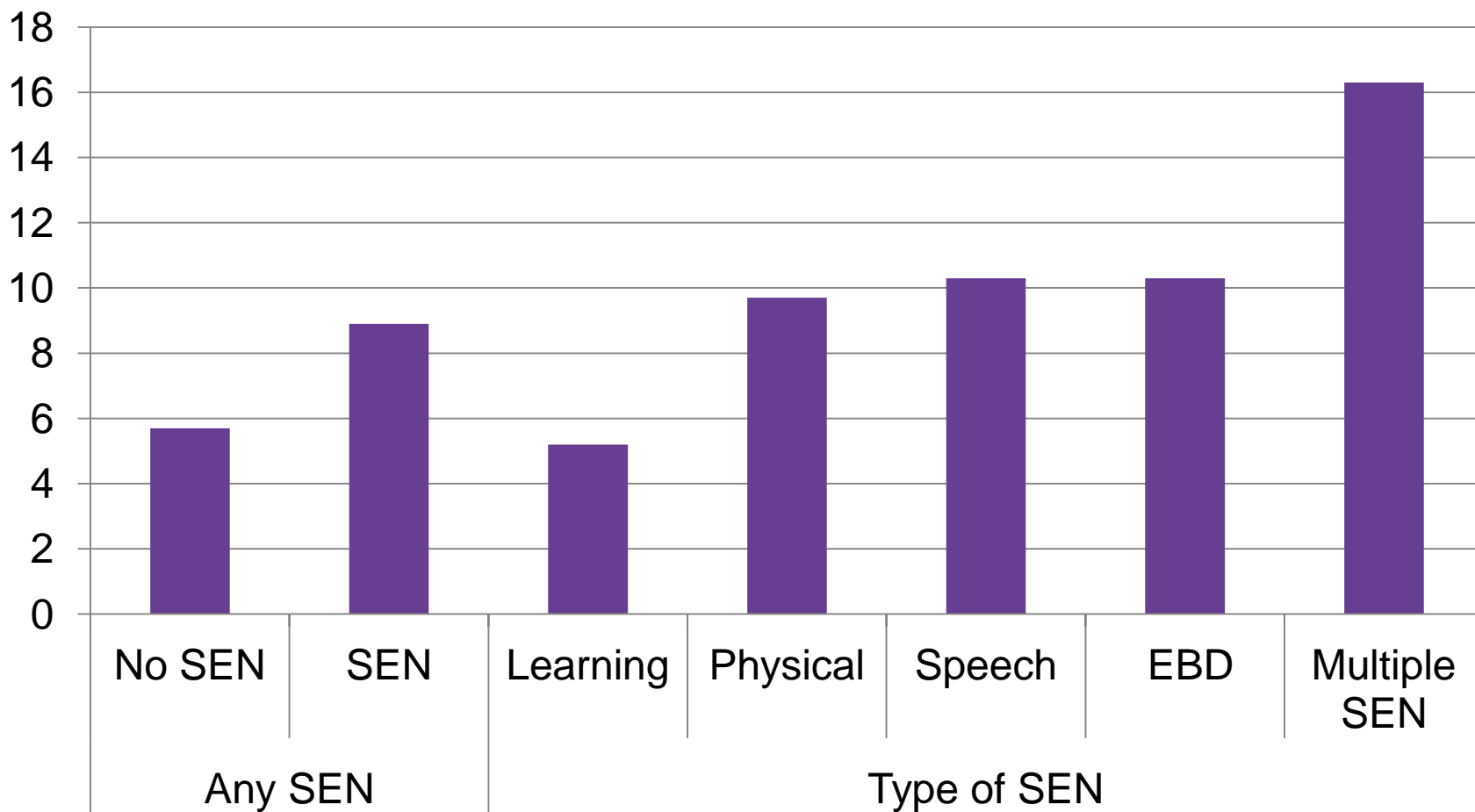


No. of close friends by SEN



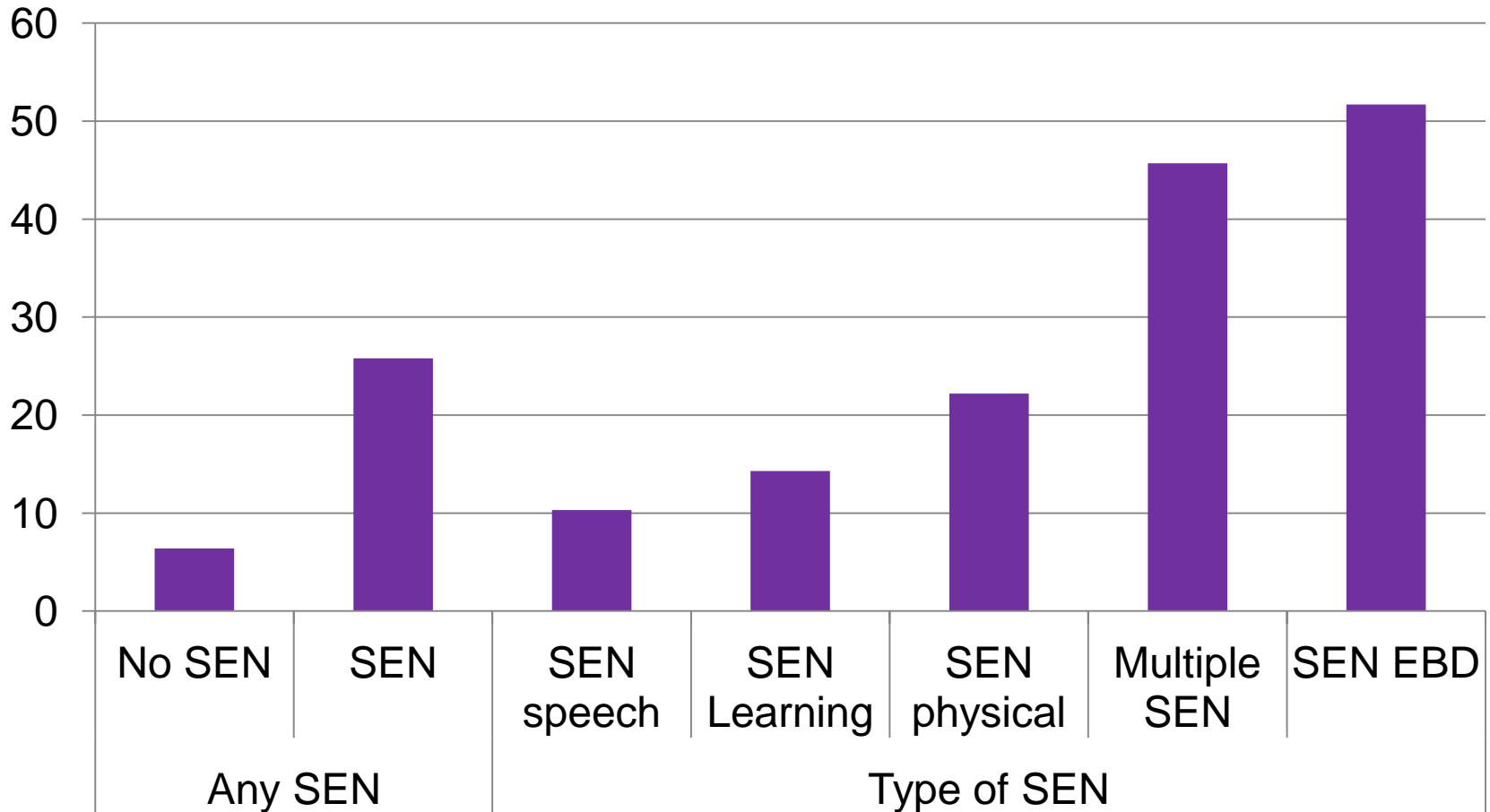


Children 'never' meet-up with friends by SEN





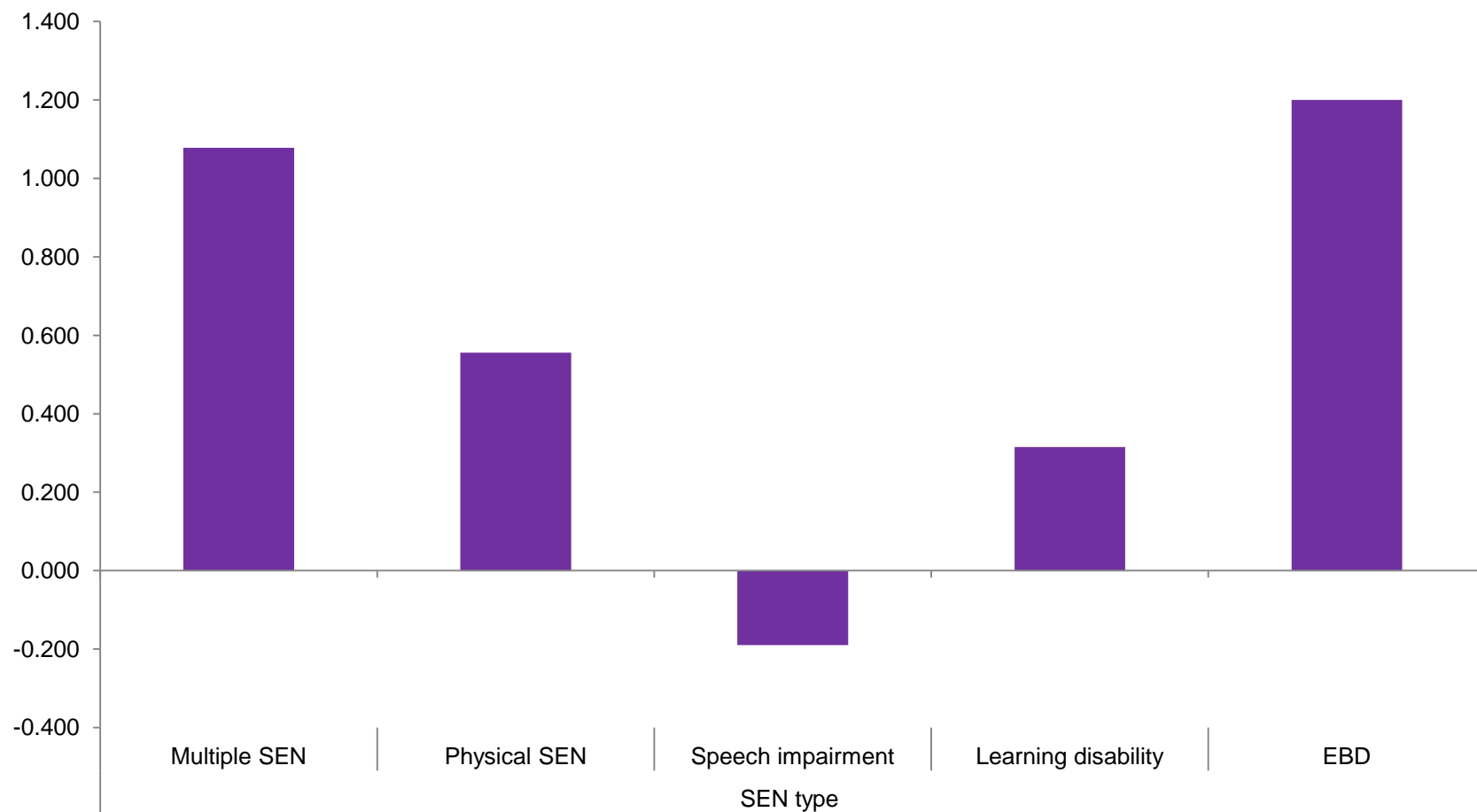
SDQ 'Abnormal' Peer mean scores by SEN





Children with SEN with one or no friends

(taking account of individual and school characteristics)





One or no friends (all children)

Individual characteristics	Coef.	Sig.
Gender - Boys (ref: girls)	0.439	***
Family structure: Lone parent	0.213	*
Out-of-school activities:		
More than 3 hours TV a day	0.331	**
More than 1 hour a day using home computer	0.010	
More than 1 hr/day video games	0.050	
Engages in cultural activities	0.095	
Plays sport almost everyday	-0.298	***
Reads everyday	0.298	**



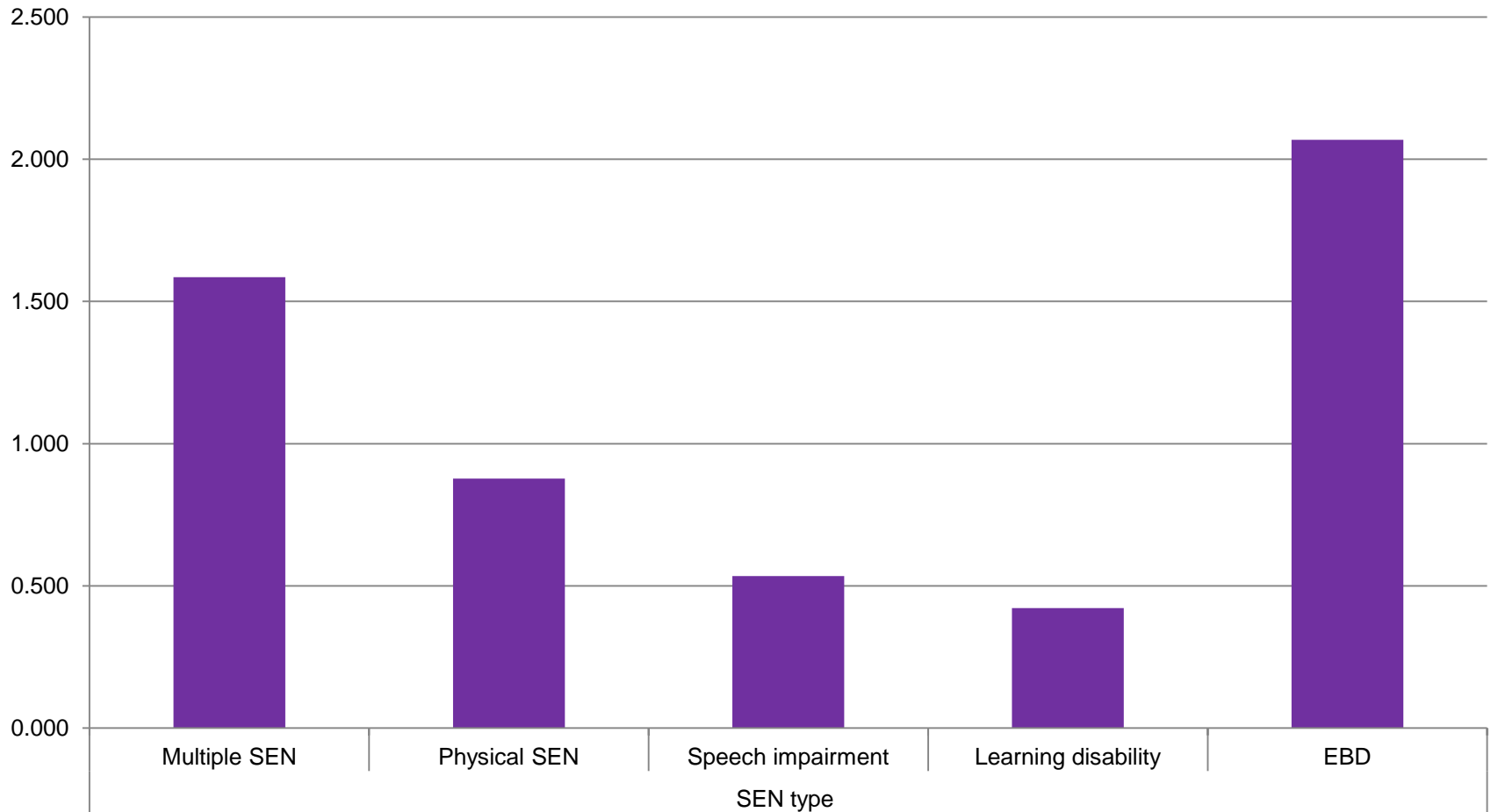
One or no friends by school characteristics (all children)

School characteristics		Coef.	Sig.
Class size (ref: less than 20)	Between 21-30 students	-0.374	**
	Over 40 students	-0.203	**
DEIS status (ref: Non-DEIS)	Urban band 1	0.431	**
	Urban band 2	0.228	
	Rural	0.264	
Gender mix (ref: Single-sex boys)	Coeducational	0.201	
	Single-sex girls	0.251	



Children with 'abnormal' peer relations

(taking account of individual and school characteristics)





'abnormal' peer relations (all children)

Individual characteristics	Coef.	Sig.
Gender - Boys (ref: girls)	-0.229	***
Out-of-school activities		
More than 3 hours TV a day	-0.052	
More than 1 hour a day using home computer	0.300	**
More than 1 hr/day video games	0.123	
Engages in cultural activities	0.082	
Plays sport almost everyday	-0.501	***
Reads everyday	0.301	**



'abnormal' peer relations by school characteristics (all children)

School level characteristics		Coef.	Sig.
Class size (ref: less than 20)	Between 21-30 students	-0.087	
	Over 40 students	-0.040	
DEIS status (ref: Non-DEIS)	Urban band 1	0.081	
	Urban band 2	0.015	
	Rural	-0.332	
Gender mix (ref: Single-sex boys)	Coeducational	-0.139	
	Single-sex girls	-0.045	



Issues

Methods used:

- **Two (often different) perspectives on peer relations: parent versus teacher report**
- **Different contexts (school and home) where peer relations are observed**

School factors:

- **Are SNAs playing a role?**

“There is evidence to suggest that SNA support may contribute to the social isolation of students as the presence of an adult may create **an unintentional barrier** between the student and his/her peers” (DES, 2011)

“It is important to ensure that the presence of SNA support does not create **over dependency**, act as a barrier or intermediary between the student and class teacher or contribute to the social isolation of students by creating a barrier between the students and his/her peers”. (Circular, 0300/2014)



Conclusions

- **To what extent is real inclusion taking place in Irish primary schools?**
- **Why are students with EBD at particular risk of social isolation**
- **How can we explain gender differences in peer relations (parents and teachers differ!)**
- **How can we foster positive peer relations in children's out-of-school lives?**
- **What role can schools play? How can school policies encourage greater peer interaction?**



Next steps

- **Multi-level modelling – take account of clustering of children within schools - MLwiN**
- **Longitudinal 13 year GUI data – examine the factors influencing peer relations moving from primary to post-primary school**



Thank you
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