Niamh at 9 months

Niamh at 3 years

Niamh at 5 years

Bold Boys and Good Girls? The Gender Gap in Special Educational Needs in Irish Primary Schools

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Outline

- Context
- Research questions
- Data and methods
- Descriptive results
- Multivariate analysis
- Summary of findings
- Policy implications

Context

- **Recent focus on apparent gender disparity in special education**
- **Boys outnumber girls by 2: 1 (Internationally and in Ireland)**
- **Boys with behavioural and emotional difficulties tend to attract most attention, concern and resources (Lloyd, 1996)**
- **New research on 'withdrawn girl' – linked to notion that success for girls is defined as 'being good' (Arms et al., 2009)**
  - Girls with potential disabilities do not want to 'risk' exposure or need for special attention
  - Invisibility of girls with SEN? Double jeopardy? (Wehmeyer and Schwartz, 2001)

Context II

- **No clear explanation as to why the gender disparity exists. Are boys over-represented? Are girls under-represented? Are some of the disparities appropriate?**
- **Three theories (Coutinho et al., 2001) have emerged to explain the gender differences for SEN identification rates:**
  1. Biological differences
  2. Behavioural differences
  3. Bias in referral and identification processes

Biological

- **Higher rates (among boys) for foetal mortality, postnatal mortality, complications during pregnancy/childbirth and congenital malformations (Eme, 1984)**
- **Boys mature more slowly than girls (Nass, 1993)**
  - This may impact on their adaptability to educational environment
- **Genetic link to autism?**
  - Recent research (e.g. Werling and Geschwind, 2012) has suggested that the absence of a second X chromosome in males could render them more susceptible to autism

Behavioural

- **Boys who are frustrated academically ‘act out’ (Oswald et al., 2003), tend to be physical in class and express themselves verbally**
- **Girls tend to internalise their feelings and work harder to please; girls experiencing anxiety issues tend to remain silent (Biederman et al., 2002).**
- **These qualities may skew the numbers and imply boys have higher incidence of emotional behavioural difficulties**

Bias in referral

- **Issues around over-identification of minority groups in special education** (e.g. De Valenzuela et al., 2006)
- **Evidence of disproportionality in EBD** (Dyson and Kozleski, 2008; Banks et al., 2012)
- **Disproportionality greatest among children aged 5-11, during which rates for boys surge** (Philips, 1982)
- **Bias based on gender stereotyping** (Arms et al., 2008)
- **Boys far outnumber girls in the groups referred and identified through school system**
  - Externalising behaviours (e.g. disruptive classroom behaviour) more commonly result in referral than internalising behaviours (e.g. symptoms of anxiety or depression) (Caseau et al., 1994)

Research questions

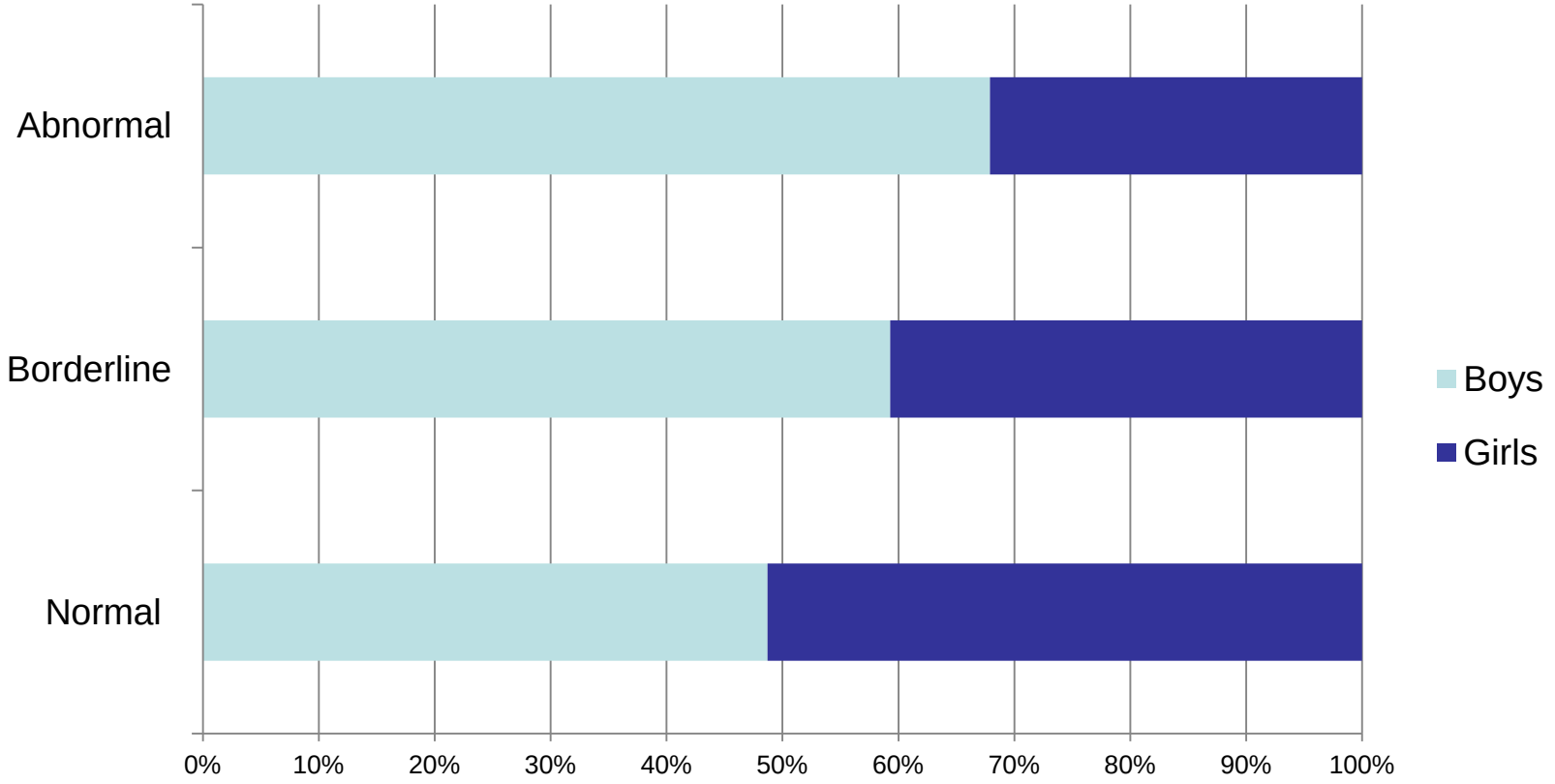
- **What factors influence teachers' perception of well-being among 9-year-olds in Irish primary schools?**
  - Are boys experiencing more 'externalising problems' (hyperactivity and conduct) than girls?
  - Are girls experiencing more 'internalising problems' (peer and emotional) than boys?

Data and method

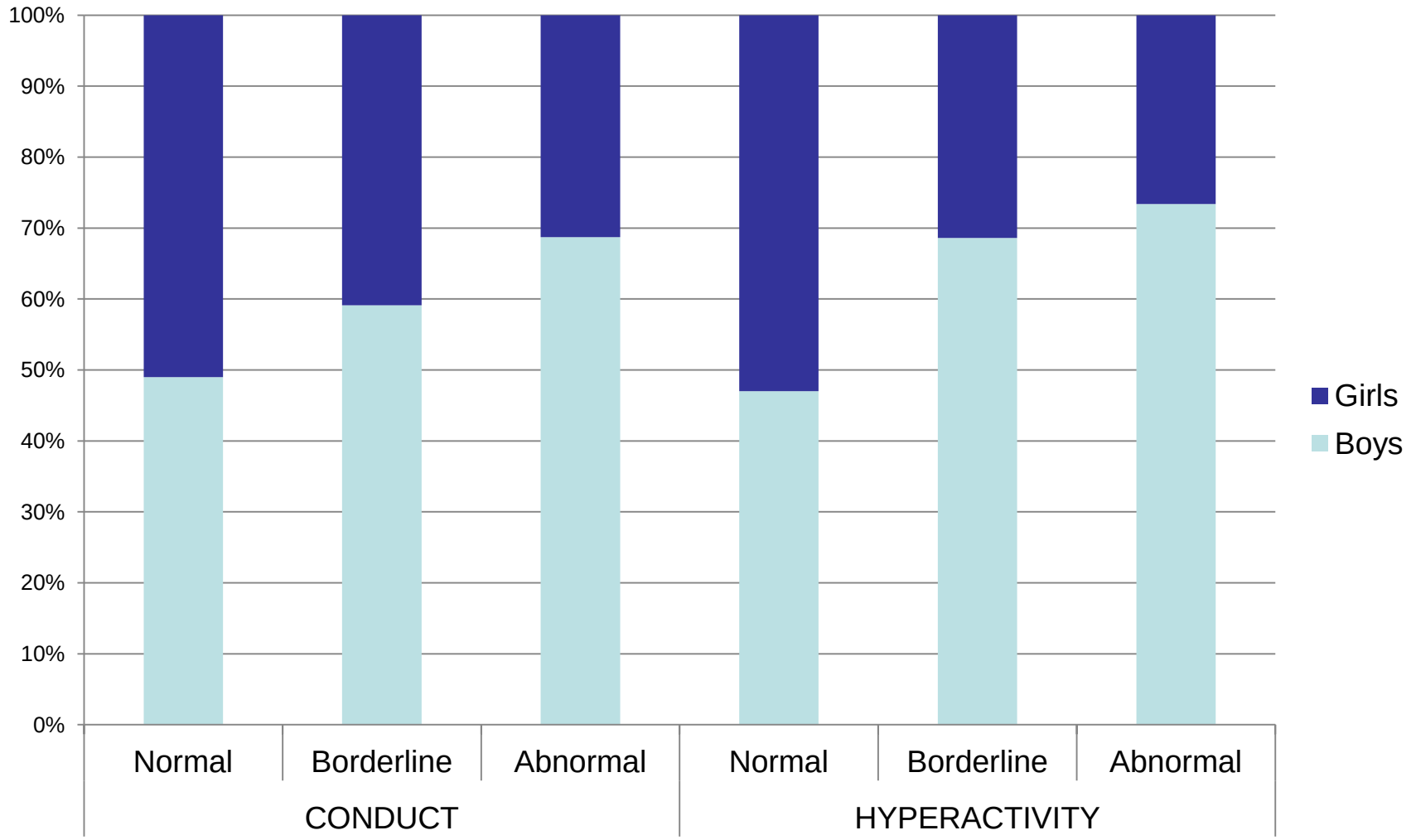
- **Important to consider both ‘externalising problems’ and ‘internalising problems’ of children**
- **Teacher reported SDQ**
- **High risk group – approximately 10% (Goodman, 1997):**
  - Total difficulties (4 sub-scales added)
  - Hyperactivity + Conduct = ‘externalising problems’
  - Peer Problems ↘
  - Emotional ↗

  ‘Internalising problems’ – but arguably measuring different things?
- **Other important factors:**
  - Social class, teacher reported SEN type, school context

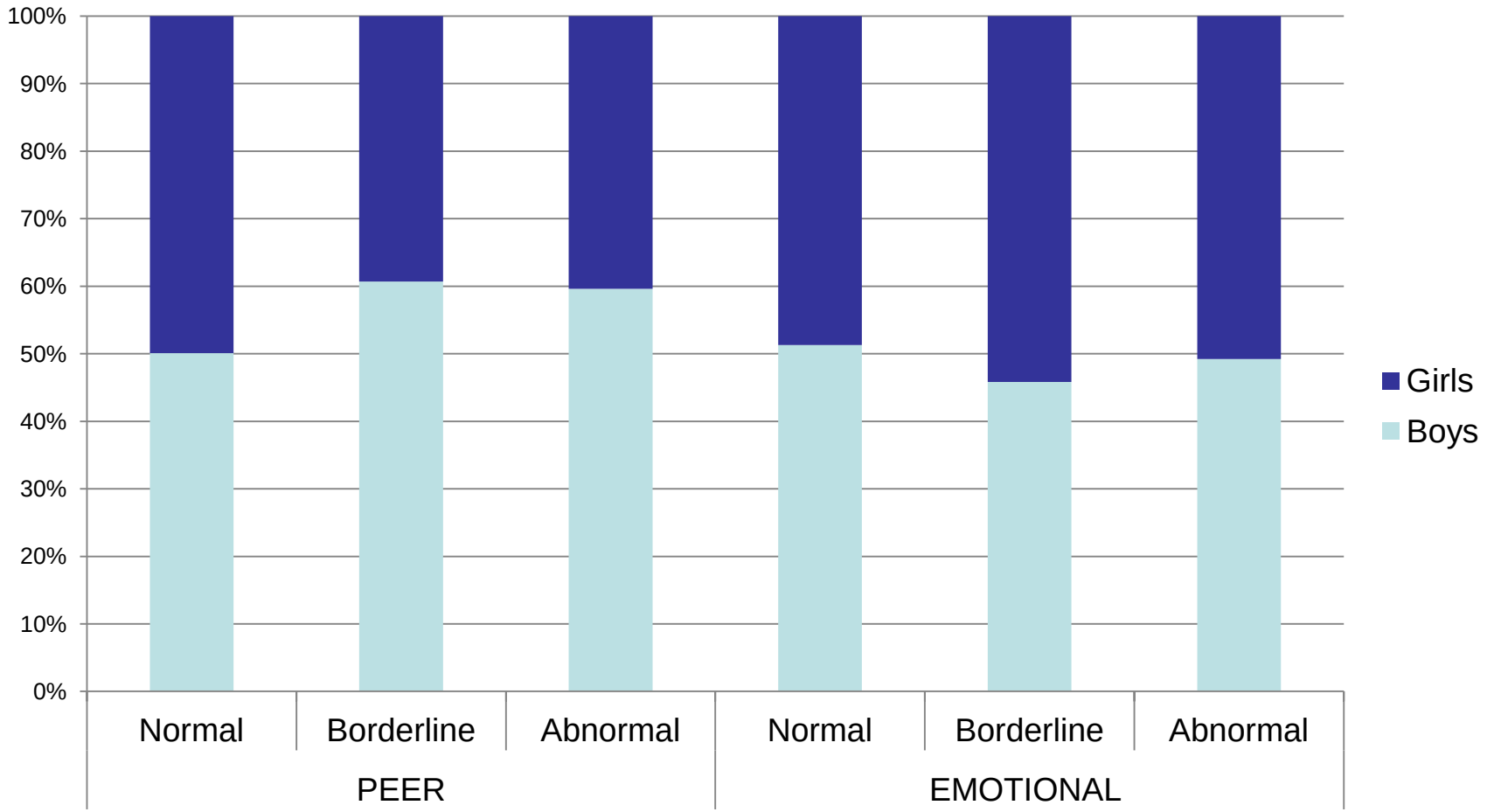
SDQ Total Difficulties (teacher reported) by Gender



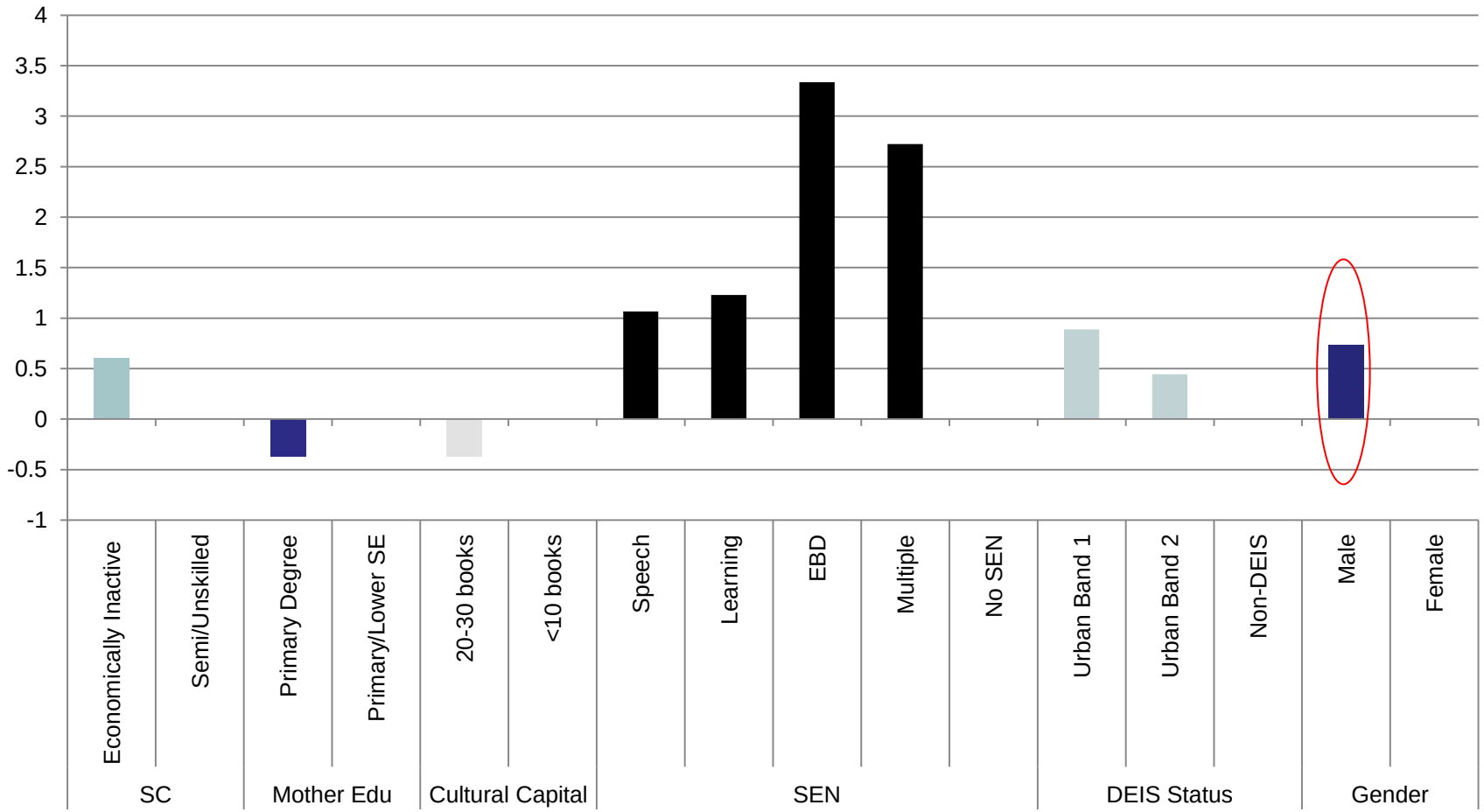
‘Externalising Problems’ by Gender



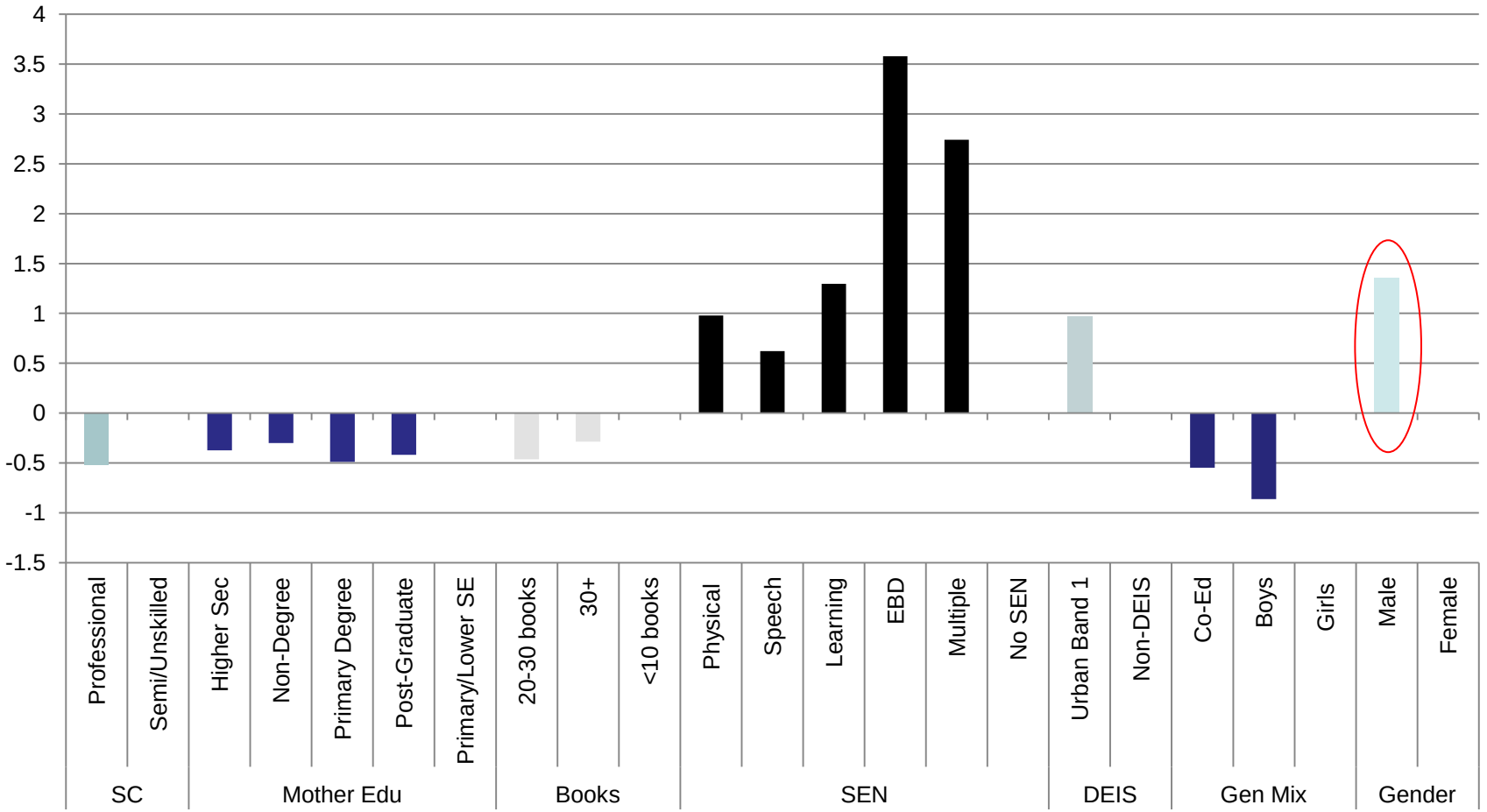
‘Internalising Problems’ by Gender



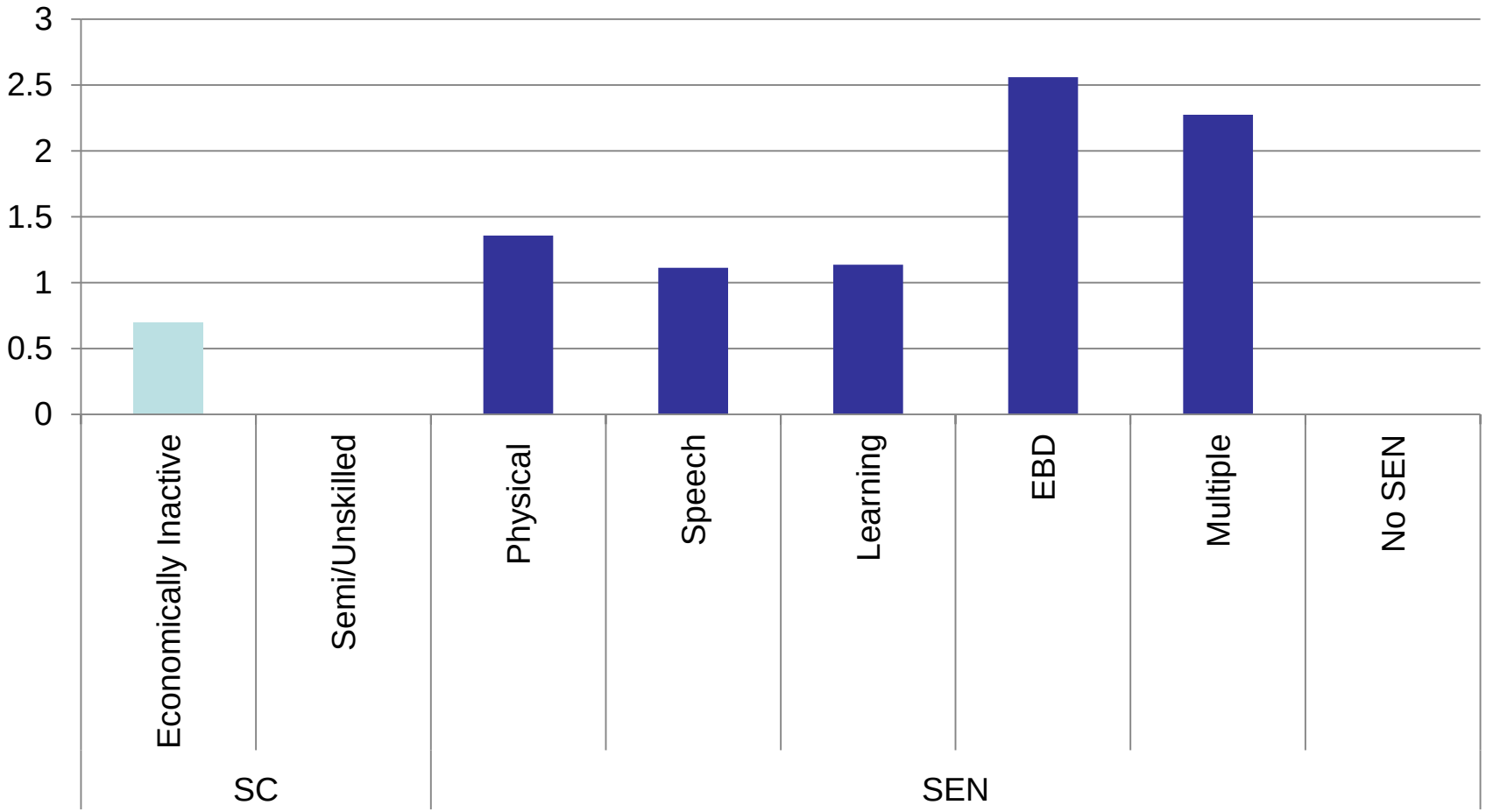
Model 1: High Risk of SDQ Total Difficulties



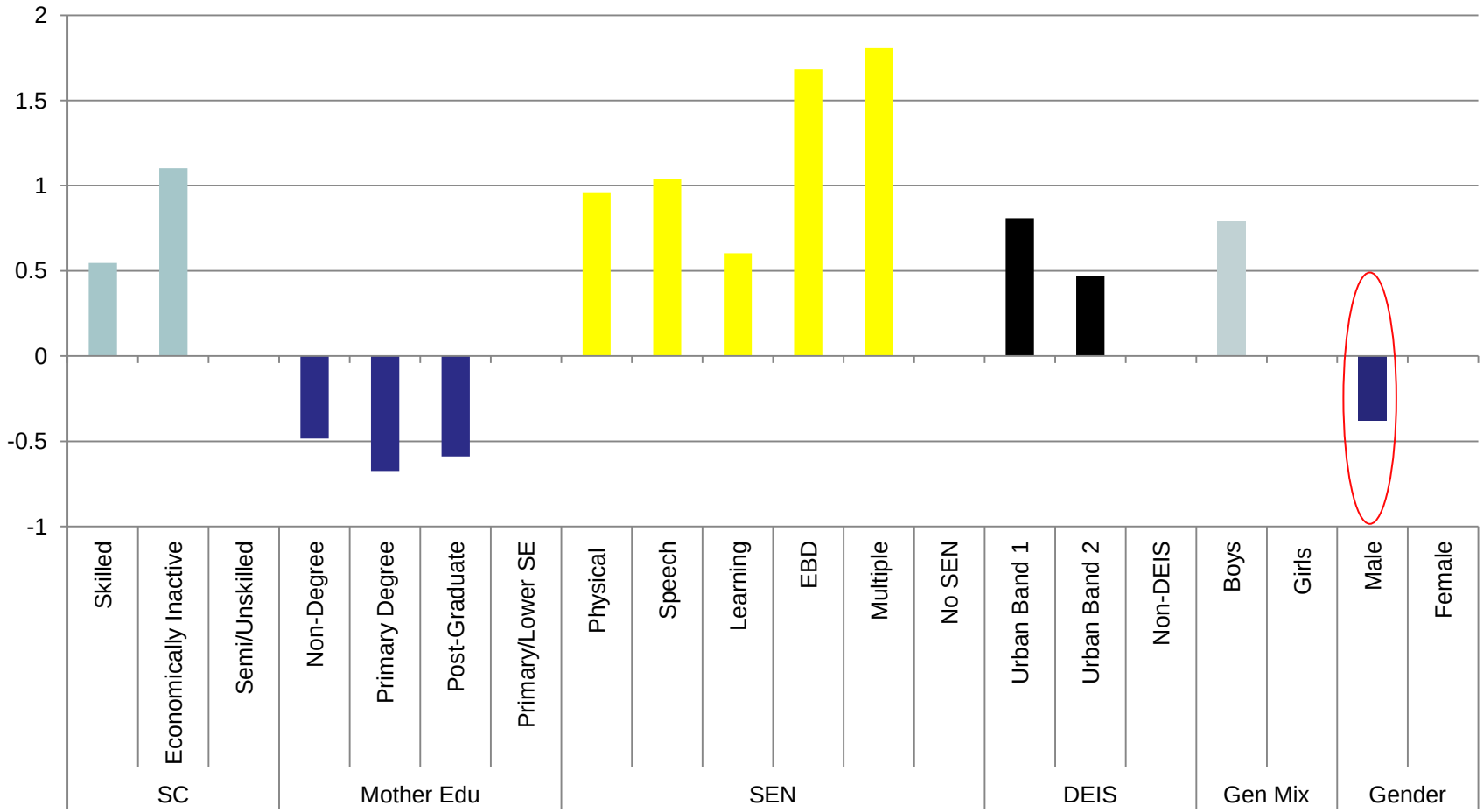
Model 2: High Risk of 'externalising problems'



Model 3: High Risk of Peer Problems



Model 4: High Risk of Emotional Symptoms



Summary of Findings: Gender

- **Boys significantly more likely to be in high risk category for total difficulties**
- **However, total scores appear to be masking important gender differences**
- **Boys more likely to be in the high risk category for ‘externalising problems’**
- **Gender is not significant for peer problems**
- **Boys less likely than girls to be in the high risk category for emotional symptoms**

Summary: SEN

- **All SEN groups (except physical) significantly more likely than peers with no SEN to be in the SDQ total high difficulties category**
- **However, all SEN groups more likely to suffer from high risk 'externalising problems', peer problems and emotional problems**
- **1st signal of difficulties for physical group. Recent research has shown positive peer and academic engagement**
- **Effects are particularly pronounced for the EBD and multiple (mostly EBD + learning disability) groups**

Summary: Other groups

- **Social class**
  - ‘Economically inactive’ group at higher risk of total difficulties, peer problems and emotional symptoms
- **School Context**
  - Urban band 1 & 2 higher risk of total difficulties and emotional symptoms
  - Urban band 1 higher risk of ‘externalising problems’
- **Gender mix**
  - Interestingly, boys’ and co-ed schools less likely (than girls’ schools) to be identified as high risk for ‘externalising problems’
    - Teachers influenced by the composition of the class and reference group?
  - Boys’ schools more likely to be indentified as higher risk of emotional symptoms
    - Linked to the absence of a female reference group?

Next steps

- More research necessary on gender, social class and social context differentials in special education
- Multi-level techniques for school effects
- Gender interactions by school context
- Teacher versus parent SDQ reports
- 13-year data will allow for greater insights in tracking the transition of these students into secondary education

Policy Implications

- **This research points to the need for further questioning of the processes at play around SEN identification:**
  - Are boys being over-identified? (and/or)
  - Are girls being under-identified?
- **Identifying ‘introverted’ forms of need in addition to those more easily identified through behaviour**
- **Implications for teacher training**
- **Implications for school supports and services**
- **Putting the ‘E’ back in ‘EBD’? (Bowers, 1996)**

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Thank you

- **Questions?**