



# Early School Leaving and Learners with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs

Final Summary Report

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**EUROPEAN AGENCY**  
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



# **EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES AND/OR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

Final Summary Report



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Secretariat  
Østre Stationsvej 33  
DK-5000 Odense C Denmark  
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20  
[secretariat@european-agency.org](mailto:secretariat@european-agency.org)

Brussels Office  
Rue Montoyer, 21  
BE-1000 Brussels Belgium  
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80  
[brussels.office@european-agency.org](mailto:brussels.office@european-agency.org)



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# INTRODUCTION

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Early school leaving (ESL) is broadly defined as the phenomenon of young people leaving formal education before completing upper-secondary schooling. The European Union (EU) has set a target of reducing ESL to 10% across all member states by 2020.

Between 2015 and 2016, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) conducted a project on Early School Leaving. The first part of the project involved a review of the literature to explore peer-reviewed research undertaken in Europe. It became apparent that literature reporting on research in Europe was scarce. A decision was made to include literature from around the world, mainly the United States and Australia, where ESL has a longer political history and has been a focus of concern. The literature linking ESL to learners with disabilities and/or special educational needs (SEN) is not well developed. However, it is clear that learners with disabilities/SEN are particularly at risk of ESL. This led to the production of the first project report, which outlined how the literature review was undertaken and the main findings (European Agency, 2016).

The second part of the project involved comparing EU policy with the established literature. The second report explored the extent to which EU policies reflect the evidence found in the literature (European Agency, 2017). The report concluded that policy is broadly in line with the research findings.

The review of the literature and how it is envisaged in policy led to a blending of the two approaches. This resulted in the development of a model that can be used across member states to understand what is happening within each one. It can also be used locally to help decision-makers involve stakeholders and develop policies to reduce ESL. This approach overcomes variations in definitions of ESL and disabilities/SEN. It allows for consideration of the transferability of research findings that might be specific to the locality in which the research was conducted.

This final summary report outlines the key evidence and ideas. It re-presents the model for thinking about ESL that has evolved from the first two reports, along with the main recommendations for policy-makers<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For brevity, this summary report does not include citations to the underlying literature as these are extensive. The two original reports contain a complete list of literature and policy documents (European Agency, 2016; 2017).



## BACKGROUND

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There is consensus that completing upper-secondary school education is crucial to individual life chances, wellbeing, health, employment and reducing the risk of social exclusion. Upper-secondary school completion rates vary across EU member states, with ESL rates ranging from 4.4% to 21.9% in 2014. Reducing ESL has been identified as a priority for action, with a goal of reducing it to 10% across all member states by 2020. There is some evidence of progress towards this goal, with the mean value falling from 14.3% in 2009 to 11.1% in 2015. Learners with disabilities/SEN are considered vulnerable to ESL and this presents additional challenges for member states. Responding to learners with disabilities/SEN and improving their school completion rates would be consistent with the broader UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal on education (SDG 4) by 2030.

## FINDINGS

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The project used existing literature in the ESL field and compared it to EU policy documents to explore the challenges facing policy-makers in developing actions for reducing ESL. The findings indicate:

- difficulties in agreeing and applying common definitions;
- the need to see ESL as a set of processes running through a learner's life, rather than an outcome;
- different subgroups of learners may experience ESL and each is subjected to different risks and protective factors;
- actions laid out in policy are divided into those that focus on prevention, intervention or compensation;
- the focus for action needs to be at different levels and these include a school improvement focus, a learner engagement and motivation focus, and a focus on the wider social aspects of learners' lives.

The findings were used to develop a model to inform decision-making at the EU level, national level and local level.

## Defining and comparing ESL as an outcome

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Measuring and comparing ESL across member states is not without its challenges.



Different countries have different ages at which young people can legally leave formal education, ranging from 14 to 18 years of age. Estêvão and Álvares (2014) distinguish between formal and functional definitions. The former are based on legal school leaving age; the latter are where ESL refers to leaving school without adequate skills and qualifications to enter successful employment, irrespective of age at leaving. This provides different possibilities for counting ESL:

- Those who leave school before they are legally allowed to do so in particular member states
- Those who leave school without adequate qualifications to transition to employment
- Those who remain at school until reaching the school leaving age, but still do not have adequate qualifications.

At first glance, learners with disabilities/SEN seem to be particularly prone to leaving school without adequate qualifications irrespective of school leaving age and more likely to be classified as 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET). However, this depends on which groups of learners the disabilities/SEN category includes. Some countries have a broad interpretation of disabilities/SEN that includes learners who are underachieving, while other countries restrict the term to those with severe difficulties. It is also evident that some social groups are disproportionately more likely to be identified with disabilities/SEN. These include those from minority ethnic backgrounds, low socio-economic status or disadvantaged backgrounds. This serves as a reminder that learners with disabilities/SEN are not a homogenous group and they have distinct learning and social needs.

Caution is needed when thinking about what an 'adequate qualification' means and what types of employment or further education are envisaged. There is some evidence of particular groups of learners with disabilities/SEN having default transition routes between secondary and post-secondary education that focus on particular qualifications irrespective of the learners' abilities or aspirations. This leads to them leaving education without appropriate qualifications to engage in employment at a later stage or leads to them becoming disengaged before qualifications are achieved. Several studies have found that learners with disabilities/SEN find transitions more challenging than their peers and this leads to increased risk of ESL or lower levels of qualifications.

The EU definition for ESL used by Eurostat also appears to be a functional definition, in that it requires completion of the upper-secondary level of education (Box 1).





*The European Union defines early school leavers as people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training.*

*Early school leavers are therefore those who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years (European Commission, 2011).*

**Box 1. European Union definition used by Eurostat**

The Eurostat definition is a pragmatic solution to deal with the variation in measuring ESL across member states by setting a common measure of an upper-secondary education. The advantage is that individual states can measure the impact of any measures that they take to reduce ESL. However, some member states consider ESL to denote exit from education before completing upper-secondary education, while for others it denotes leaving school without adequate qualifications. To complicate comparison further, different countries have different end-of-school qualifications with different proportions of learners expected to achieve them. In 2003, the EU Council of Education Ministers stressed the importance of the need for adequate qualifications to ‘ensure full employment and social cohesion’ (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 4). The efforts to arrive at a common measure are complicated by different administrations that prefer to use different definitions for their own purposes. Consequently, not all member states use the Eurostat definition.

Another complication arises from the concept of being ‘no longer in education or training’. This is similar to NEET, which is used across many member states. However, while there may be overlap between the NEET population and ESL, they are not exactly the same. The NEET category also has its own definitional problems and some countries have subdivisions of the NEET category.





There are clear difficulties in defining ESL across different member states. Nevertheless, the overall goal of reducing ESL rates across all learners is assisted by the attempt to have a common measure to provide a headcount of learners experiencing ESL. This way of defining ESL presents it as an outcome; it is a measure of the number of learners who leave education. Consequently, the definition does not explain why they leave. Understanding why learners leave education early can help drive policy and inform actions to be taken.

Similarly, the literature uses a variety of terms to refer to ESL, such as ‘drop-out’, ‘push-out’, ‘pull-out’, ‘fall-out’, ‘fade-out’, ‘ease-out’, ‘opt-out’, ‘early departure’ and ‘non-completion’. The terms are used in different ways and some authors use them to denote ESL as an outcome. Other authors use the terms in a way that suggests that different processes may be occurring among different subgroups of learners that lead to different pathways towards ESL. This implies that ESL is a multi-faceted phenomenon that requires different actions for different groups of learners.

## Modelling ESL as a process that involves a complex set of interacting forces

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If ESL is the outcome of different processes operating in different ways for different individuals, then it seems likely that no single course of action is going to lead to a reduction in ESL. Rather it is necessary to consider the processes that lead to some learners successfully completing upper-secondary education while other learners do not. An approach that proved helpful in making sense of the complexity was to use Force Field Analysis, devised by Kurt Lewin (1943). For a given individual learner, there are different forces at play. Some push the learner towards the desired outcome of completing upper-secondary school education; other forces push in the opposite direction and lead towards ESL. One can think of the forces pushing towards ESL as a set of risks that operate at the level of the school organisation, the learner or the learner’s situation, or the interaction between the learner and the school. The second report thematically grouped the risk factors around a set of themes to provide a focus (for more detail of the risks, refer to Appendix 1 of European Agency, 2017).

At the school organisation level these included: a school discipline focus, a teacher focus, a curriculum focus, and a focus on the school within the local community. When these areas are not right, the overall effect is for the school to act in a way that leads to the learner being pushed out of education. The underlying process is known as **push-out**. At the level of the learner or the learner’s situation the foci included: a financial focus, a



family focus, an employment focus, a health focus, and a peer focus. These tend to be forces that pull the individual out of school; this process is known as **pull-out**. The foci reflecting the interaction between the learner and the school reflect those risks that lead to the learner gradually falling out of education. This is known as **fall-out**. These included: an academic success focus, a motivational focus, and a sense of belonging to the school focus.

Realising that there are three distinct processes in operation, with different risks for different individuals, enables actions to be developed to reduce ESL around three main areas:

- those that lead to school improvement;
- those related to improving learners' lives outside of school;
- those aimed at improving learners' academic success, motivation and sense of belonging to school.

However, despite these risk factors, there are some learners who succeed. Therefore, there must be a set of protective factors that operate in the opposite direction. For example, for some learners with disabilities/SEN this might be an inclusive school ethos in which there are good relationships between teachers and learners; a curriculum focus that is matched to the learners' needs; engagement with parents who are supportive of school and help to motivate the learner through encouragement; and sufficient economic resources for the family to allow the learner to continue with education.

For any individual learner, it is theoretically possible to monitor the risks and the protective factors and then understand the likelihood of ESL. At the population level, it seems that understanding the risks and the protective factors at play will lead to actions at different levels (national, school, family, individual). In EU policy documents, the kinds of actions possible are grouped as prevention, intervention or compensation. Different authors use these three terms differently. In this report, they are understood as follows:

- Prevention should be about anticipating risks and taking action before they arise.
- Intervention accepts that risks continue to exist, but then attempts to overcome them or to enhance the protective factors.
- Compensation deals with the situation when education has not worked out as planned and allows for a second chance of learning or increases opportunities for lifelong learning.



The interplay of risks, protective factors, prevention, intervention and compensation can be represented in a model that can be used locally or nationally to map on the particular forces at play and actions to address ESL. This was shown in the second report and is reproduced here as Figure 1.

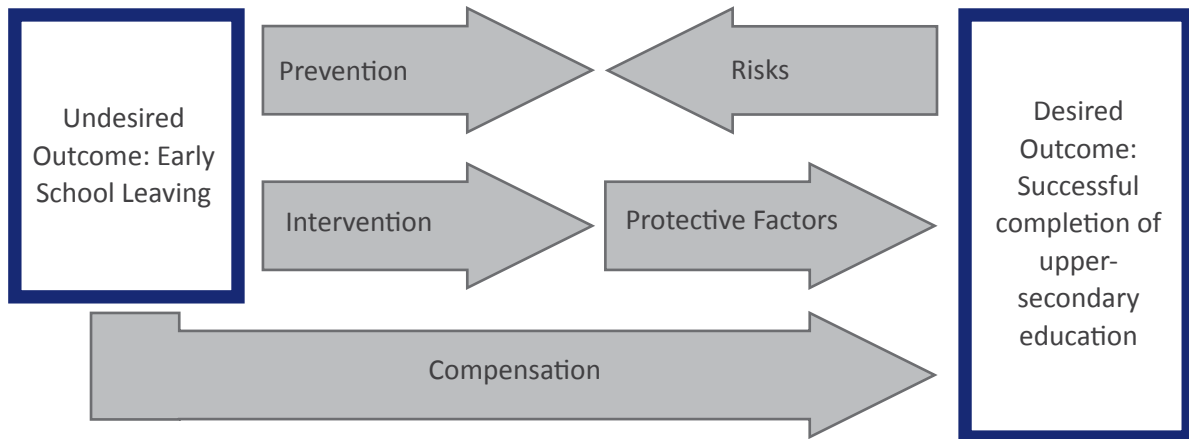


Figure 1. Forces leading towards and away from ESL (Source: European Agency, 2017, p. 20)





As already explained, there are different processes at play (push-out, pull-out and fall-out). These operate at different levels (school organisation, learner or learner's situation, interaction between the learner and the school). This means that the model can be replicated for each process and level.

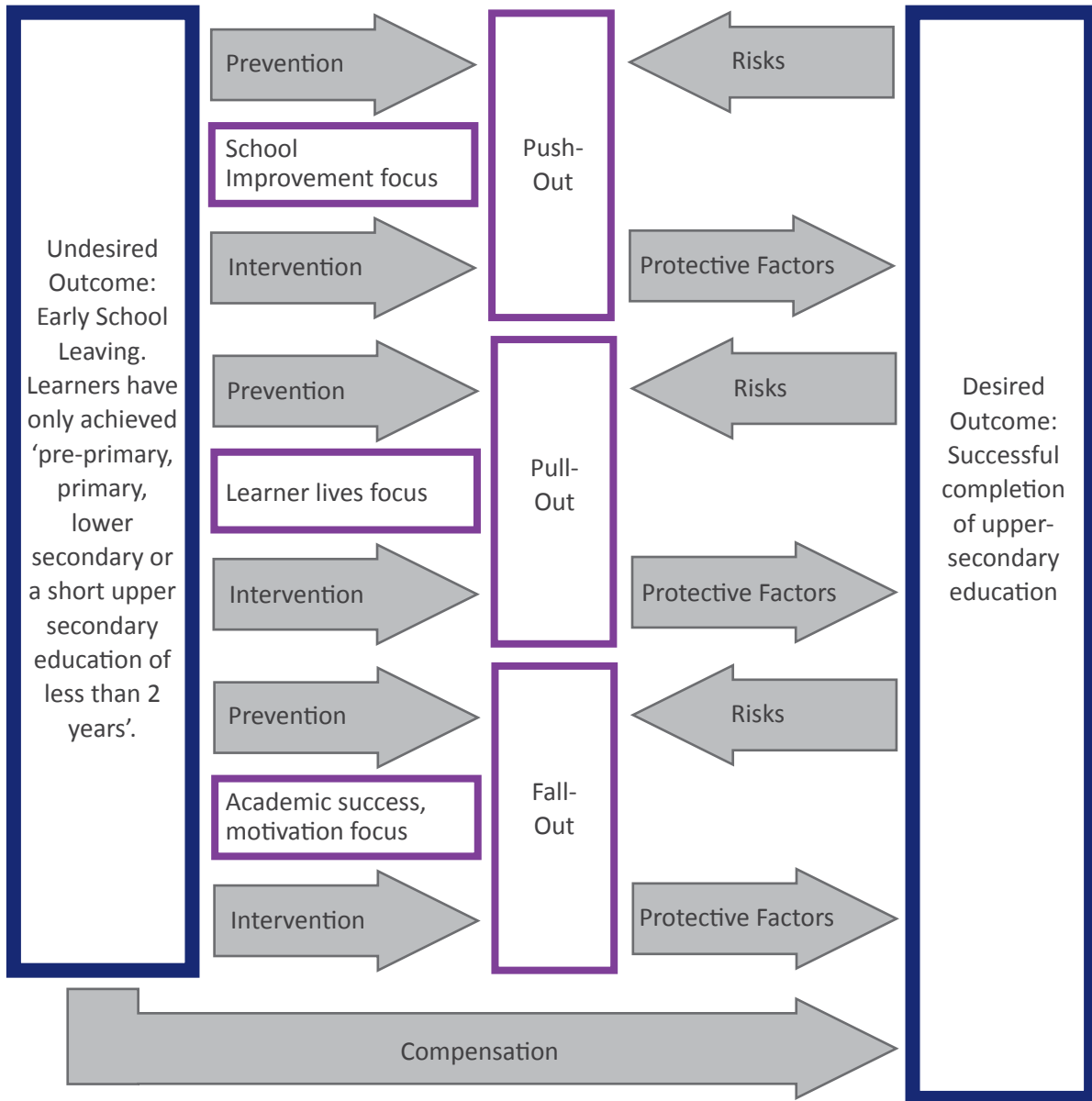


Figure 2. Model of forces and processes involved in ESL (Source: European Agency, 2017, p. 22)

The model is intended to be flexible by encouraging thinking about the three main processes and associated risks and the protective factors associated with the level of



policy being considered (international, national, local or school). This can then lead to a set of tailored actions that have: a wider societal focus on issues that influence learner lives; a school improvement focus; or an individual focus building on academic success, improved motivation and improved engagement with education.

While the model encourages thinking around each of the three processes of push-out, pull-out and fall-out, it does not mean that an individual learner is only subjected to a single process. This contrasts with the European Parliament study (2011), which emphasised distinct subgroups of learners. It is possible for a learner to be subjected to a complex interaction of all three processes during their life and education (refer to European Agency, 2017, p. 23 for an example).

This summary report concurs with Coffield's (1998) view that it is more important to focus on actions related to intervention and prevention than compensation. Nevertheless, there are some impressive compensation approaches being developed, such as Youthreach in Ireland which seems to address the needs of learners who have fallen out of mainstream education. Other authors suggest that compensation is also likely to benefit learners who left education early as a result of pull-out because of events in their personal lives. These may include financial reasons, family reasons, caring, relationships or parenting responsibilities.

## Monitoring and early warning systems

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Defining ESL in terms of outcomes makes monitoring across member states easier. It allows the overall scale of the problem to be understood and for policies and actions to be evaluated. This simple headcount suggests that across Europe, ESL is in decline and moving towards the 2020 target. However, simple monitoring systems are of limited value, given the complexity of the processes underlying ESL. They do not allow for monitoring of different groups of learners with disabilities/SEN or within different regions of each country. The Council of the European Union advocates developing a broad range of indicators, with five main uses for the data:

- early detection of learners at risk of ESL;
- defining criteria and indicators of educational disadvantage;
- understanding the reasons for ESL;
- using data at different policy levels to steer and guide policy development;
- providing the basis for guidance and support in schools.





Early warning systems have been developed for learners with disabilities/SEN at risk of ESL and implemented in many school districts in the United States. Similar systems are being used in Europe. These systems generally include cognitive and behavioural measures and focus on individual learners with the potential of improving support and reducing the effect of fall-out. However, Figure 2 suggests that a wider set of indicators is needed to cover the different foci associated with the different risks and processes of push-out, pull-out and fall-out in order to inform actions associated with prevention and intervention. This could lead to monitoring systems that draw upon:

- Measures of factors at the national and education system level, such as rates of school completion, performance of groups of learners with different background characteristics including disabilities/SEN, levels of social inequality, and the state of the labour market. These provide some indication of learners' wider social background, as well as differential indicators of educational outcomes.
- Measures of a local focus and school focus, such as individual school performance, levels of inclusiveness, teacher-learner relationships, quality of teaching and learning, and curricular pathways and choices.
- Measures with an individual focus, such as those that measure attendance, school engagement, emotional affect, cognitive ability, attainment, motivation, sense of belonging, changes in individual or family circumstances, and learner views and aspirations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The second report (European Agency, 2017) included recommendations for policy-makers. These are repeated here:

1. Current policy efforts in respect of ESL are promising. Efforts to define ESL clearly, to set up monitoring systems (at the national, local and individual level) that identify the extent of the problem and the impacts of any interventions, and to make definitions and indicators useful in trans-national comparisons all seem like useful steps. A key task for policy-makers at national and European level is to extend these efforts so that all European countries have an appropriate basis for developing policy interventions.
2. At the same time as the coverage of current monitoring systems is extended, however, there is a strong case for making them more sensitive to the realities of educational





marginalisation. The key here is to move away from single-strand definitions and individual indicators. Some account needs to be taken of the links between ESL and other forms of sub-optimal educational outcomes, the complex processes through which ESL emerges, and the many ways in which different groups and individuals come to experience ESL.

This is possible if policy-makers work towards developing more sophisticated monitoring systems. Ideally, such systems should log a range of educational outcomes (attainments, progression to other educational experiences, employment outcomes, etc.), should do this at the level of the individual learner, and should be able to link outcomes data to data on learners' backgrounds and educational experiences.

3. Sophisticated monitoring systems at national level are only part of the answer. Different levels of education systems need to have good information on what is happening to the learners for whom they are responsible. In particular, schools need to know what is happening to individuals – what risks they are facing, what educational outcomes they are achieving, and how they are responding to interventions. Policy-makers therefore need to support schools and other system levels in setting up and using their own monitoring systems. In many schools, the necessary data will already be available, but may be scattered in different places and accessed by different teachers and other professionals. The task, therefore, may largely be one of collation and of supporting schools in understanding how best to use the data they already have available.

4. Monitoring systems are only of value if they form the basis for effective interventions. The research evidence is clear that such interventions need to be wide-ranging. It is highly unlikely that single-strand interventions undertaken only when the risk of ESL is severe will be adequate for reducing ESL numbers significantly or linking any reduction to a meaningful improvement in educational outcomes. Interventions need to run throughout the life-course of learners, to embrace all aspects of their educational experience and to extend beyond education settings into the background factors in families and societies that place learners at risk. They need to include interventions when risks become apparent, but also preventative measures to stop risks emerging in the first place.

Conceptualising and marshalling such interventions are major challenges for policy-makers. The model that has been developed goes some way towards offering a conceptual framework within which interventions can be developed. However, it is



clear that many aspects of education policy – and of wider social policy – are involved in combating ESL. Co-ordinating across the different sections of ministries presents a formidable challenge. However, this challenge can be reduced by seeing policy to reduce ESL as part of wider policy efforts to improve educational outcomes and reduce educational inequality and marginalisation. Reducing ESL is then not simply *yet another* policy priority, but is an outcome of these wider policy actions.

In particular, policy-makers might find it useful to shift the focus of their efforts away from preventing ESL as a stand-alone outcome measured in terms of qualifications and/or leaving points, and towards a more functional understanding of the phenomenon. The key question, in other words, is not how many young people leave school before some more-or-less arbitrary point, but how many leave before they are equipped to do well in the adult world. This raises more fundamental questions about the purposes of education systems and their effectiveness in achieving those purposes.

5. Just as monitoring systems need to be in place at all levels of education systems, so effective interventions need to be deployed at all levels, not least in schools. Stand-alone national initiatives are likely to achieve relatively little unless they are embedded within efforts to improve the quality and effectiveness of all levels of the education system, and local, school and classroom efforts to ensure that every learner has meaningful opportunities to do well. A key task for policy-makers, therefore, is to support schools and other system levels in undertaking this task.

6. The evidence base on disabilities/SEN and ESL is less substantial than one might like. However, what it shows is very much in line with the evidence from mainstream education. Policy-makers are right to see learners with disabilities/SEN as an at-risk group and to ensure that targeted interventions are in place to maintain that group in education. However, the risks for that group are not substantially different from those for other groups and, therefore, they need to be included within mainstream interventions and practices, rather than treated as an entirely separate special case. As might be expected from the evidence on ESL overall, it seems likely that good quality schools which respond to individual characteristics and intervene early in individual difficulties are key to reducing ESL. If the practices of such schools are understood as being characteristically inclusive practices, then the evidence suggests that the development of inclusive education may be an important way to combat ESL among learners with disabilities/SEN.



## PROJECT OUTPUTS

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Two reports have been published on the Agency's website and the findings have been presented at an international conference for school psychologists.

- European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016. *Early School Leaving and Learners with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs: A Review of the Research Evidence Focusing on Europe*. (A. Dyson and G. Squires, eds.). Odense, Denmark

This report sets out the findings of a review of the research evidence on ESL in Europe, with particular reference to young people identified as having disabilities/SEN. The review focuses primarily on published material that relates directly to the situation in one or more European countries and that is available in English. However, there is a paucity of research that meets these criteria. European research literature has therefore been supplemented, where necessary, by literature from other parts of the world.

- European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017. *Early School Leaving and Learners with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs: To what extent is research reflected in European Union policies?* (G. Squires and A. Dyson, eds.). Odense, Denmark

This report summarises the key research literature on learners with disabilities/SEN with regard to the phenomenon of ESL and compares its findings and implications to the positions adopted by EU policy documents. The review leads to recommendations for how policy-makers might tackle the issue of ESL more effectively, particularly as it impacts on learners with disabilities/SEN.

- Squires, G., 2017. *Early School Leaving and SEN: Understanding the literature and policy in Europe*. Paper presented at the International School Psychology Association Conference 2017, Manchester, United Kingdom, Saturday 22 July 2017

The development of the model for understanding the processes leading to ESL was presented at an international conference for school psychologists. It was well-received, with participants wanting to use the model at the school level.



Secretariat:

Østre Stationsvej 33  
DK-5000  
Odense C  
Denmark  
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20  
[secretariat@european-agency.org](mailto:secretariat@european-agency.org)

Brussels Office:

Rue Montoyer 21  
BE-1000  
Brussels  
Belgium  
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80  
[brussels.office@european-agency.org](mailto:brussels.office@european-agency.org)



[www.european-agency.org](http://www.european-agency.org)