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

A Review of the Research Evidence Focusing on Europe

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

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

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**European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full version</b>
ADHD:	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
ESL:	Early school leaving
EU:	European Union
European Agency:	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
ISCED:	International Standard Classification of Education
NEET:	Not in education, employment or training
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA:	Programme for International Student Assessment
SEN:	Special educational needs
SEND:	Special educational needs and disabilities
SES:	Socio-economic status
UK:	United Kingdom
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USA:	United States of America



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Having an upper-secondary education is crucial to young people's life chances. It is often seen as the minimum entry requirement for the labour market and is an important protector against unemployment. In Europe, however, by no means all young people enter or complete upper-secondary education. Those who do not tend to come from groups that are marginalised in many other ways, and tend to go on to experience multiple disadvantages into adulthood. In this context, the EU has identified the reduction in rates of early school leaving (ESL) as a priority for action.

Young people who are identified as having disabilities and/or special educational needs (SEN) seem likely to be particularly at risk of ESL. It is important to understand whether this is the case and whether inclusive provision protects young people against the risks for ESL or worsens those risks.

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 SEN and/or disabilities. 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 (notably the USA).

There is no agreed definition of ESL that is used consistently in the research literature. Other terms, such as 'dropout' or 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training), are often used as near synonyms. Attempts to define and quantify ESL precisely may be useful for policy purposes, but they ignore the complexity of the phenomenon. It is useful to think in terms of a distinction between formal definitions of this kind and functional definitions. The latter are concerned less with the phenomenon of leaving school before the end of compulsory education (a point which varies from country to country), and more with leaving school without adequate skills, knowledge or qualifications to deal with adult life and employment.

ESL is best understood as not just an outcome, but as the result of processes that run through the student's life and education up to the point of leaving school. The research literature uses different terms – such as 'push-out', 'pull-out' and 'fall-out' – to draw attention to different aspects of these processes that affect different sub-groups of students.

There is no single 'cause' of ESL. Instead, there are multiple risk factors and protective factors which interact with each other and which operate at various levels of young people's ecologies. Factors relate to individual characteristics, family background, schools, education systems and wider social and economic conditions.



ESL should be seen as closely related to other forms of limitation in educational opportunities, participation and achievement. In many cases, it stems from underlying social disadvantage.

Likewise, there is no one policy or practice response that will reduce the incidence of ESL. A wide-ranging response is needed which tackles risk factors across children's and young people's ecologies. Treating ESL as a stand-alone problem with stand-alone responses is a mistake.

Some young people identified as having SEN and/or disability may be particularly at risk for ESL. However, there is not a set of distinctive SEN/disability-related risk factors. Rather, the risk factors to which they are subject are similar to those impacting on their peers in the general population, and are also the factors that lead to young people being identified as having SEN and/or disability.

It follows that there is no distinctive policy or practice response that is particularly appropriate for young people with SEN and/or disability. Holistic programmes based on careful individual monitoring, building individual capacities, involving parents and increasing the sense of school belonging are likely to be effective.

There is only limited evidence on the impact of type of SEN provision on ESL. If inclusion is understood only in terms of placement in mainstream schools and classrooms, the evidence is mixed. However, if inclusion is understood in terms of building supportive educational environments, the evidence suggests that it is likely to reduce ESL.

These findings suggest some clear implications for action to reduce the incidence of ESL:

### **Understanding the determinants of ESL**

Policy-makers and practitioners need to develop a sophisticated understanding of the determinants of ESL in their contexts. At national and system level, this analysis will be at the level of broad risk factors and the identification of at-risk groups. Systems therefore need to develop the capacity to generate and analyse the data that will enable them to do this and to explore the interaction between risk factors. Analyses can become more fine-grained at a local level, drawing on local-level data and the experience of front-line professionals and of young people themselves.

### **Identifying at-risk students**

Systems need data which enable them to identify young people who are most at risk of ESL. At local level it should be possible to call upon detailed knowledge of individuals and their circumstances and the different pathways to ESL in different cases. Local actors (municipalities, school principals and the like) need to have some





freedom of action to make use of their local knowledge. They should not be overly constrained by national policies and initiatives.

### **Taking action to reduce ESL**

Many types of intervention to reduce ESL are likely to work, if they are introduced with sufficient quality and sufficient attention to local circumstances. However, single-strand interventions are not the most effective way forward. There is a need for a broad range of actions focused on students, their schools, their families and the opportunity structures which shape their choices. Action has to be taken well before young people are on the point of leaving and, arguably, throughout learners' education careers.

The action that needs to be taken to reduce ESL should be seen as part of wider efforts to reduce the impacts of disadvantage. These actions are likely to be relevant to the at-risk population as a whole and are likely to benefit all students. They should therefore be seen as part and parcel of general system improvement.

### **Reducing risks for young people with SEN and/or disability**

Combatting risks for ESL among young people identified as having SEN and/or disability involves ensuring that:

- these young people have an appropriately high level of support;
- their transitions are planned carefully;
- their families are involved;
- there actually are appropriate high-quality upper-secondary opportunities available to them.

These actions have to be seen as part of the wider set of actions to combat ESL among all groups.

### **Promoting inclusion**

Policy-makers and practitioners should seek to develop inclusive provision as part of their strategy for combatting ESL. Inclusion in this broader sense means breaking down barriers facing students, extending young people's opportunities and networks, and ensuring that schools are welcoming and educationally effective.



## INTRODUCTION

Having an upper-secondary education is crucial to young people's life chances. It is seen as the minimum entry requirement for the labour market in industrial and post-industrial economies and as one of the main markers of successful transition to adulthood (Schoon, 2015; Staff, Ramirez & Vuolo, 2015). In OECD countries, 84% of adults had attained this level in 2013 (OECD, 2015). Unemployment rates among said adults stood at 16.5%, compared to 29.5% for those who left school without completing upper-secondary education. In Europe, too, the majority of young people complete upper-secondary education and enjoy the benefits this brings. Indeed, the proportion of people doing so continued to grow between 2000 and 2010 (Eurydice network, 2012, p. 171).

However, by no means everyone achieves this level. Many young people leave school before the end of the upper-secondary cycle. In Europe, estimates by some authors put the ESL rate as high as one in six young people (Walther & Plug, 2006). Of course, the rate varies from country to country. As the completion rate increases, naturally, the proportion of early school leavers falls. Evidence shows that this proportion fell across the EU from 14.3% to 12.7% between 2009 and 2012 (European Commission, 2013, p. 32). Latterly, the average value across Europe has been cited as 11.1% in 2014, with some countries higher (European Commission, 2015). For instance, in Malta it was recorded at 20.4% in 2014 (Cardona, 2015), exceeded only by Spain (21.9%). Across all countries, ESL affects males more than females (European Commission, 2015).

Reducing ESL is considered important in terms of improving outcomes for the individual and society (Borg et al., 2015). The likelihood of being unemployed decreases with educational level achieved (Przybylski, 2014). Moreover, low educational attainment has been linked to poor life chances and poor health outcomes (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007; Gallagher, 2011). For some researchers, therefore, ESL is a step on the pathway towards wider social exclusion (Bäckman & Nilsson, 2016; Jahnukainen & Järvinen, 2005; Wilkins & Huckabee, 2014). The first step starts with problems at home or at school. The second step is failure at school that leads to dropping out. This leads to the third step: poor status in the labour market and exclusion from work. This increases the risk of entering the fourth step in social exclusion, which involves being part of a deprived subculture in society. This in turn increases the risk of the fifth step of social exclusion and becoming part of a deviant subculture, e.g. involved in crime or drugs.

There are particular issues for children and young people categorised as having disabilities and/or SEN. The challenges many of these young people face in doing well in school and then securing access to high-quality employment make the



completion of upper-secondary education doubly important. Children with SEN are at greater risk than many of their peers of experiencing poor psycho-social outcomes (Humphrey, Lendrum, Barlow, Wigelsworth & Squires, 2013). Meanwhile, those with emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties are more likely to experience the kinds of negative transitions and poor life chances set out in the previous paragraph (Kern et al., 2015). In principle, the development of more inclusive forms of provision in many European countries might be expected to act as a protective factor, encouraging young people to remain in education and preparing them for transition to the labour market and the adult world. On the other hand, some might argue that the abandonment of segregated settings exposes young people with SEN and disabilities to greater risk and increases the chances of ESL.

Given the crucial importance of educational achievement for all groups, governments in many countries are taking action to reduce ESL rates. At European level, the EU has set a goal of reducing ESL to 10% in all member states by 2020 (European Commission, 2010, p. 9). It is important, therefore, that both policy-makers and practitioners have access to the best evidence as to how this might be achieved.



## AIMS OF THE REVIEW

In this context, this report sets out the findings of a review of the research evidence on ESL in Europe and beyond, with particular reference to young people identified as having SEN and/or disabilities. The definition of ESL used here is that adopted by the EU. Early school leavers are:

*... 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).*

As shall be seen shortly, however, this technical definition conceals a complex range of related phenomena. These result in some groups of young people having significantly curtailed educational experiences and achievements in comparison to the majority of their peers.

There is a relatively substantial body of research literature on ESL in general in Europe. However, the literature on young people identified as having disabilities and/or SEN is much less extensive. This is despite the fact that there are good reasons to suppose that such young people might be particularly vulnerable in relation to ESL. Moreover, for many years there have been moves across Europe and, indeed, in countries across the world to educate young people with disabilities and/or SEN in inclusive settings. This is exemplified in the influential Salamanca and Dakar agreements (UNESCO, 1994a, 1994b, 2000). It is important to know whether such moves towards inclusive education reduce or increase the risks of ESL and, if risks are increased, what steps can be taken to counteract or reduce them. The brief for the review, therefore, identified three focus areas:

- *ESL in general*: The phenomenon itself, how it is defined, studied, and with which results. Whether there are any evidenced causalities leading to ESL; evidence on influencing factors/variables impacting on ESL. What could serve as an evidence base in ESL. General data on ESL.
- *ESL and SEN/disability*: Research outcomes on the link between ESL and SEN/disability. Data on ESL with regard to SEN/disabilities.
- *ESL in inclusive settings*: Research outcomes on studies of ESL in inclusive settings. Data on ESL in inclusive settings.

Although the review is particularly interested in ESL in relation to SEN, disability and inclusion, it recognises that these terms are often contested. In particular, they are used in a range of ways in different parts of the research literature and in policy and practice in different system contexts. As with the term 'early school leaving',



therefore, the authors have not sought to arrive at single, precise definitions of these terms, but have understood them to refer to broad groups of students and to a broad approach to educating those students. As shall be seen, there are many overlaps in relation to ESL between groups of students who are formally identified as having a disability or SEN. Likewise, there are many policy and practice responses to those students that have inclusive elements, even if some inclusion advocates might not regard them as fully inclusive.

The review focuses on the research evidence in this field. However, this is far from extensive. Therefore, research has been defined broadly to include both empirical work and more theoretical or argumentation-based pieces of scholarship. The review focuses primarily on published material that relates directly to the situation in one or more European countries. The starting point was not to review the literature in other parts of the world, though inevitably European-focused literature often reviews and refers to literature from elsewhere. The review was extended to include some non-European literature where the European sources themselves were limited (please refer to Methodology). The review also focuses on literature published in English. This means that the review is somewhat biased towards countries in Northern and Western Europe, where publication in English is more common. The focus on research evidence has led to the exclusion of other kinds of texts, including policy texts and guidance, except where these usefully supplement the research literature. The review, therefore, makes no attempt at a systematic account of policy responses across Europe. It does not report the kinds of statistical data on ESL that (in principle at least) national monitoring systems generate. However, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education has commissioned a related review of policy documents and system statistics which will be published alongside the current report.



## METHODOLOGY

The literature search was conducted using several search engines (Scopus, Google Scholar, British Medical Journal online, BMC Public Health). It looked in the first instance at peer-reviewed literature in English and from Europe, which:

- Is relevant to the issue of ESL, defined as the phenomenon of young people aged 18 to 24 who have achieved no or low levels of qualification (ISCED levels 0–3c short – i.e. no more than secondary level qualifications which do not provide access to tertiary education) and who are not in education or training likely to raise their achievements. (Thus, students studying in level 4 programmes are excluded, as are those with relatively high achievements who are in employment; but low achievers not participating in education and training are included, as are low achievers who are in education or training provision that is unlikely to raise their achievements).
- Illuminates:
  - the current state of affairs regarding ESL in one or more European countries *and/or*
  - the groups of at-risk students (including *but not restricted to* those identified as having SEN and/or disabilities) and the characteristics which place them at risk *and/or*
  - the characteristics of education and training systems and practices placing students at risk *and/or*
  - the interactions between population characteristics and systems in generating risk *and/or*
  - the relationship (if any) between inclusive practices in compulsory schooling and ESL *and/or*
  - the policies and practices adopted by (European) countries in tackling ESL, with evidence for their success or otherwise *and/or*
  - the collection of data and the development of indicators on ESL.

The following sources were excluded:

- Non-research literature (e.g. policy texts without an explicit research base).
- Literature relating to students who were relatively high achievers pre-18 and/or those between 18 and 24 who are in education and training programmes likely to raise their achievements.



- Literature relating to learners where there are no viable system responses which might raise their achievements to level 3 (for instance, those with profound and multiple learning difficulties).

Search terms started with 'early school leaving' and SEN. On reading through the literature, it became apparent that different countries use different terms to describe this group of students. As a result, the following terms were added to the search: early school leavers; dropout; drop-out; ease-out; fadeout; fade-out; opt-out; pullout; pull-out; pushout; push-out; NEET; not in education, employment or training. The range of terms used by different authors is interesting in itself. As shall be seen, it implies different attitudes about agency and power in determining how students become early school leavers.

Search terms for SEN included: special educational need; SEN; SEND; disability. Further terms introduced towards the end of the search process included: immigration; disadvantage; risk factors; second-chance education.

The number of papers found in each search was limited. For example, PsychInfo yielded only nine papers using the search term 'early school leaving'. Of these, only one dealt with this phenomenon in Europe. Therefore the number of sources was supplemented by following up on key references within located documents, following 'cited by' on the databases, following hunches and adding information from projects in which the present authors had been directly involved. In particular, initial searches found only a limited range of literature dealing explicitly with the relationships between SEN/disability, inclusive education and ESL. In a second phase of searching, therefore, the scope was extended to include non-European research literature – predominantly that from the USA. There are, of course, significant challenges in transferring findings from the educational and social context of the USA to that of Europe. Nevertheless, these are not different in kind from the challenges of transferring findings between the very different contexts of countries within Europe. Finally, this was supplemented further through personal contacts with academic colleagues working in Europe who had published comments about their work related to ESL on social media (Facebook and LinkedIn).

The review was necessarily undertaken with limited resources and with a view to producing findings that would be useful for policy and practice. The authors have therefore chosen to look for patterns and themes in the literature rather than to attempt a comprehensive search for, and report of, every text that might be relevant. The focus is on identifying the policy and practice implications of the literature rather than, for instance, assessing the quality of research methods or attempting formal meta-analyses of findings.



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## EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: EVIDENCE ON THE PHENOMENON

### Issues of definition and conceptualisation

Early school leaving has been identified relatively recently as a problematic issue for European countries. European ministers of education only agreed on a definition in 2003 (European Commission, 2011). Not surprisingly, therefore, the European research literature on ESL per se is relatively limited. However, the term 'ESL' as used in Europe is only one of a number of related terms that are found in the research literature (Cederberg & Hartsmar, 2013, p. 378). These terms imply different factors acting on students that either encourage them to stay in school or to leave. It is worth pointing out that the terms are often used as a shorthand for ESL and as such are not always used consistently or with refinement in definition. As some authors point out, 'dropout' is commonly used as a synonym for ESL (Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013; Frostad, Pijl & Mjaavatn, 2015; Lundetræ, 2011). So too are 'push-out' (Cederberg & Hartsmar, 2013; Doll et al., 2013; Frostad et al., 2015; Jugović & Doolan, 2013) and 'pull-out' (Cederberg & Hartsmar, 2013; Doll et al., 2013; Frostad et al., 2015; Jugović & Doolan, 2013). Other terms also appear: 'falling out' (Doll et al., 2013), 'opt out' (Cederberg & Hartsmar, 2013; Jugović & Doolan, 2013), 'fade out' (Cederberg & Hartsmar, 2013; Jugović & Doolan, 2013) and 'ease out' (Jugović & Doolan, 2013). In South-Eastern Europe, the terms also include 'early departure', 'non-completion', 'dropping-out' and 'leaving' (Jugović & Doolan, 2013). One distinction that is worth mentioning is that some terms seem to refer to ESL as an outcome, e.g. 'dropout', while others refer to ESL as a process, e.g. 'push-out', 'pull-out' or 'fall-out'. This distinction will be examined later.

None of these terms has agreed definitions across national contexts and between researchers. In relation to 'dropout', for instance:

*Different studies work with different definitions. As an example, Fitzpatrick and Yoels (1992) define dropouts as students leaving upper secondary education without graduating within four years, whether or not they return to school and graduate later. Lundetræ (2011) defines dropouts as students who have not completed upper secondary school within five years. In Norway, about 30% of all students starting in upper secondary education is included in this group ... These students can be divided into three different categories: those who leave school early (during the first five years), those who are still in upper secondary education in the sixth year, and those who fail to graduate. (Frostad et al., 2015, p. 110).*

It is understandable that both researchers and policy-makers wish to resolve this definitional uncertainty by adopting a single definition with clear criteria. As with the European Commission's definition, for instance, it makes it possible to identify





simply and unequivocally young people who leave school ‘early’, to monitor what happens to them and to monitor changes in the ESL ‘population’ over time. However, it is useful in this context to call upon Estêvão & Álvares’ (2014) distinction between formal and functional dropout of education. Formal dropout emphasises the legal aspect of leaving school before completing compulsory education. It should be relatively easy to measure through cohort headcounts, although comparison between countries will still remain difficult due to the variation in school leaving ages. However, this is not quite the same as functional dropout, which refers to leaving school without adequate skills and qualifications to enter successful employment, irrespective of age at leaving. It is important for governments and researchers to measure what can be measured in this complex field. Nevertheless, the more important issue – and more difficult to capture accurately in national statistics – is that some young people leave school inadequately equipped for adult life.

The reality is, however, that what looks like definitional confusion in fact points to two important aspects of ESL. First, it is a multi-faceted phenomenon; there are different forms of ESL impacting on different populations of young people. Second, ESL as an event occurring at a particular point in a young person’s life cannot be understood separately from the processes which lead up to that point. It therefore needs to be conceptualised as a process – or, more accurately, as a set of interrelated processes – rather than simply as an outcome.

### **ESL is a multi-faceted phenomenon**

Depending on how it is defined, ESL encompasses different groups of young people who disengage from formal education in a range of ways and at a range of different points. As Frostad et al. (2015) indicate, these groups include those who fail to complete upper-secondary education, those who fail to graduate, and those who remain in education without graduating. Indeed, for some purposes, the issue is not so much the young people who leave school early as the young people who do not engage with productive pathways as they approach adulthood. In England, for instance, the statutory school leaving age is 16, there is no formal graduation process, transition directly into employment has, until very recently, been regarded as acceptable, and there are multiple pathways beyond secondary schooling (HMG, 2015). The issue therefore is not that young people may not be in school, but that they may be NEET (Janmaat, Hoskins & Franceschelli, 2015; MacDonald, 2011; Mirza-Davies, 2015; Sadler, Akister & Burch, 2015). Other countries, such as Italy and France for example, sometimes identify similar groups for attention (Agrusti & Corradi, 2015).



However, the NEET category is not a simple alternative to ESL. It has its own definitional problems as official policies switch between counting certain age groups or not counting them (Furlong, 2006). Moreover, the population of NEETs is not homogenous (MacDonald, 2011). Malta, for instance, where the NEET category is also used, distinguishes between ‘transition’ NEETs who are moving from one productive activity to another, ‘floating’ NEETs who move in and out of NEET status, and ‘core’ NEETs who face long-term challenges (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2015, p. 14). The situation in Malta also highlights the subtle differences between the ESL and the NEET population. Malta has a higher than EU average of ESL but lower than EU averages of youth unemployment and NEETs (Cardona, 2015).

Hence the ESL and NEET phenomena are closely related but not identical, just as Estêvão & Álvares’ (2014) ‘formal’ and ‘functional’ dropout are related but not identical. ESL is therefore best regarded as part of a complex set of interrelated problems facing young people and education systems. This is particularly the case since the phenomenon of ESL rarely occurs in isolation from other problems. Most strikingly, in the case of severely marginalised groups in European school systems – notably Roma – ‘leaving’ upper-secondary education is just one part of a much wider problem of limited access to and achievement within schooling (FRA – European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). More generally, there are strong links between ESL and wider issues of social and educational disadvantage. The research literature on ESL is more or less unanimous in seeing social background – and, more specifically, disadvantaged social background – as a risk factor for ‘leaving’ upper-secondary education (please refer, for instance, to Borg et al., 2015; Cardona, 2015; Dale, 2010; Fernández-Macías, Antón, Braña & De Bustillo, 2013; Lyche, 2010; Markussen, Frøseth & Sandberg, 2011; Schoon, 2015; Staff et al., 2015; Vallejo & Dooly, 2013). Social background is a significant factor in many kinds of educational achievement and failure (Raffo et al., 2010). Even well-resourced systems, such as those in much of Europe, generate highly unequal outcomes for learners from different backgrounds (OECD, 2012).

The implication is that, while it makes sense to define ESL precisely for monitoring purposes and, perhaps, to create a focus for policy action, such definitions may limit wider understanding of the phenomenon. In particular, there is a case for seeing ESL, as defined by the European Commission, as a specific instance of a wider phenomenon of learners leaving or otherwise failing to engage with formal education. This itself is often part of deep-seated social processes which disadvantage certain groups of learners throughout their educational careers. From a policy point of view, this means that specific actions to counteract ESL in the upper-secondary years are important. However, they might need to be linked to



more broadly-based actions to counteract other forms of social and educational disadvantage.

### **Early school leaving can be conceptualised as a process**

ESL – and related phenomena – are the result of complex causal processes. They can, moreover, be conceptualised in different ways depending on how these processes are understood. While, therefore, ‘dropout’, like ESL, implies a single event, the closely-related terms of ‘push-out’, ‘pull-out’ and ‘falling out’ are typically used to characterise long-term processes which lead up to the event of leaving school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Dekkers & Claassen, 2001; Doll et al., 2013; Jugović & Doolan, 2013; Lindsay, 2007; Markussen, Frøseth, Sandberg, Lødding & Borgen, 2010; B. Persson, 2015; E. Persson, 2013; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009).

Moreover, each of these terms implies a slightly different process to be explained in terms of different causal factors that might then be acting on different populations.

*Push-out*, therefore, implies forces acting within the school system which marginalise or alienate the student and ultimately result in ESL. The way that the school is organised creates the conditions that lead to the student being pushed out of education (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Examples of factors here include:

- Unaddressed poor attendance
- School discipline policies
- Consequences of bad behaviour
- Being expelled from the school
- School being perceived as too dangerous
- Tests (e.g. not doing well enough in exams to continue, failing in studies, poor grades)
- Poor teaching
- Low teacher expectations of the student
- Courses of study that are too hard
- Poor relationships between students and teachers
- Drug- and alcohol-related problems
- Transport to school being too difficult.

The use of testing regimes – including international comparisons, such as PISA – is argued to have an adverse effect on students with SEN and increase the risk of dropout by promoting teaching to the test (Smith & Douglas, 2014). However, Smith and Douglas also argue that accountability systems can increase all students’



performance. In using the term ‘push-out’, the school is seen as the primary agent in removing the child from the education system (Doll et al., 2013). So, being grade-retained, having discipline problems, having high absenteeism or having a disability increases the risk of dropout, particularly when there are low teacher expectations or teachers feel unable to cope with students they find problematic (De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot & Maassen van den Bri, 2013; Wehby & Kern, 2014). On the other hand, schools with good standards of teaching and high teacher quality reduce dropout risk (De Witte et al., 2013). So too do interventions that aim to improve social relationships within the school (Ingholt et al., 2015).

However, students can be *pulled out* when factors outside the student divert them from completing school. In this case, the student (or, more accurately, the student’s situation) is the primary agent in the process (Doll et al., 2013). These factors can be financial worries, employment outside of school, family needs (such as caring for relatives), changing family circumstances (such as childbirth), and illnesses that prevent the student from attending school. In Doll et al.’s USA study the factors identified included: getting married; wanting to go to work; financial difficulties at home and the student having to work to support the family; enlisting in the armed forces; becoming pregnant; being able to get a job without further qualification; poor health; friends leaving school; and being involved in gang activity. Factors can even include illnesses, as these cause students to put a greater value on something outside of school, and therefore they do not complete school. (Doll et al., 2013, p. 2). A systematic review of the international literature found mixed results for teenage pregnancy and marriage, while there was a higher risk if employment alongside schooling exceeded 20 hours. A lower risk of dropout was evident if jobs were scarce or salaries were low (De Witte et al., 2013).

*Falling out* is a term from a Canadian study of students with English as a second language. They lacked personal support, became apathetic, did not like school, did not complete schoolwork, had poor study habits, had negative attitudes towards homework, or had insufficient educational support, leading to a gradual disengagement with school (Watt & Roessingh, 1994). However, the term is now widely used to refer to other similar processes of disengagement (Doll et al., 2013; Lamote, Speybroeck, Van Den Noortgate & Van Damme, 2013; Lindsay, 2007; B. Persson, 2015; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). Falling out has been described as a gradual loss of interest in school activities and goals (Pijl, Frostad & Mjaavatn, 2013). Doll et al. (2013) identified a series of factors as risks for falling out: moving to another city; changing school; lack of access to course of choice; lack of feeling of belonging to the school; low student expectations of payoff from staying in education; and parents not being interested in the student’s education. Prince and Hadwin (2013) have also identified low school belonging as increasing the risk of dropout. Lack of parental interest, poor relationships with peers and lack of



educational support have also been identified as factors that affect students with SEN (particularly those with specific learning difficulties or general learning difficulties) and contribute to increased risk of dropout (Pijl et al., 2013; Winding & Andersen, 2015). Some authors suggest that neither the school nor the child is the primary agent in falling out (Doll et al., 2013). However, this point is contentious since the way that school is organised can lead to improved support or conditions that improve student motivation. Likewise, student motivation has also been linked to theories of self-determination (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011). Students with higher levels of self-determination have been found to be less likely to drop out of school. Yet Alivernini and Lucidi (ibid.) found that students who reported that school was supportive of developing autonomy (measured on the Relative Autonomy Index) were less likely to drop out of education (even after controlling for the effects of socio-economic status (SES) and academic performance). Lamote et al. (2013) suggest that if teachers are sensitive to student disengagement early on, they are better able to intervene and reduce the risks for dropping-out. While these different processes may not be entirely distinct, the terms usefully draw attention to different groups of students and different causal processes. These differences may appear subtle, but they have significant implications for the kinds of policy and practice responses which they legitimate. So, *push-out* calls for action to improve schools, *pull-out* calls for efforts to tackle factors in students' out-of-school lives, while *falling out* calls for action to increase students' academic success and motivation.

What this implies is that these differences are not simply matters of terminology. ESL can be conceptualised and its underlying processes understood in many different ways. These differences can have significant implications for policy and practice. For instance, Ross and Leathwood seek to:

*... problematise the whole notion of 'early school leaving' (ESL) in European policy. We suggest that the concept of ESL embodies a rather simplistic generalisation that masks both the nature of educational trajectories and the relationship between education and the labour market (2013, p. 405).*

They argue that conventional conceptualisations of ESL assume that there is one route to the successful completion of an education. Leaving school early is seen to matter because it condemns young people to educational failure and consequent struggles in the labour market. However, such conceptualisations overlook the possibility that multiple pathways exist and/or could be created. Similarly, they assume that tackling ESL is the principal way to address youth unemployment. They ignore the multiple other drivers of unemployment and mask the links between ESL and other forms of social exclusion which beset certain social groups throughout their lives. The implication, therefore, is that the emphasis of policy should not be



on tackling ESL as a stand-alone problem. Rather it should address the wider forms of educational and social marginalisation, of which ESL is a particular manifestation.

Downes likewise offers a fundamental critique of the orthodoxies of European policy, though from a somewhat different perspective. Current policy texts, he argues:

*... offer no explicit account or analysis of the voices of children and young people. Neither do they outline any concrete basis for an accountability framework or research agenda for listening to children and young people's voices regarding their experiences of school and their suggestions for school reform (2013, p. 346).*

Instead, he argues for a reconceptualisation of ESL as the outcome of a process of 'blocked systems of communication' (ibid., p. 357) within European education systems. In these systems, student voices are silenced and learners are systematically excluded from active participation in their schooling. He calls, therefore, for a major refocusing of policy on the unblocking of these communication systems and the promotion of genuine dialogue with students. This position finds empirical support in Tanggaard's (2013) study, in which Danish students at risk of dropout were asked for their own explanations of those risks. They see dropout as created both by educational institutions through the way that resources are allocated to some students or are withheld from them and by students' individual inaction or lack of perseverance. Tanggaard, like Downes, argues that new responses to the dropout 'problem' could arise from listening to the voices of students.

Similarly, some researchers' findings challenge the view that ESL necessarily condemns a person to a life of further disadvantage. The processes appear to be more complex than that. In an English study, Schoon & Duckworth (2010) found that despite leaving school early, most adults reached financial independence by age 34. Dropping out of school can, moreover, be seen as an active move on the part of the student to improve their negative experiences of school. A Dutch study following up early leavers into young adulthood (Dekkers & Claassen, 2001) found that about half of them had played truant prior to deciding to leave school early. A year after leaving school, most were happier with their circumstances and were either in work or had returned to studies. A year later, some of those who had been in employment had left work or had changed jobs several times. Five years on, two thirds were in employment and 80% were content with their situation (ibid., p. 347). In contrast, a study in Malta showed that students who left school early were significantly less satisfied with their health, job, standard of living, social life and economic situation (Borg et al., 2015). ESL, therefore, does not, as often presented, inevitably place young people on a conveyor belt to lifelong disadvantage. Rather,



ESL has different effects on different individuals and these depend on how well the individual is able to turn around situations like ESL that are initially problematic (Schoon, 2015). Again, the implication is that the policy focus needs to be broader than a concern with ESL as a stand-alone event.

The point here is not whether one or other of these conceptualisations is preferable. It is that the naming of the issue carries with it multiple assumptions about how the issue arises, why it is important, and what might be done about it. Using a label such as 'ESL' is perhaps unavoidable. However, as Estêvão and Álvares (2014) argue, policy and practice responses cannot be properly formulated if they are 'captured' by labels and indicators. They must not ignore the different ways in which the issue can be conceptualised and its relationship to other issues in social and educational equity.

### **Risk factors for ESL**

There is widespread agreement in the research literature on the factors that are associated with young people's risk of ESL, however defined, and therefore as to which groups are most likely to be at risk. Although the literatures on ESL and ESL-like phenomena taken together are substantial, a number of recent reviews synthesise the Europe-focused literatures (though typically in combination with literature from elsewhere) and reach broadly similar conclusions (please refer, for instance, to Bradley & Lenton, 2007; Dale, 2010; De Witte et al., 2013; Lyche, 2010). These are usefully complemented by briefer, but still substantial, literature reviews in journal papers (please refer, for instance, to Cederberg & Hartsmar, 2013; Frostad et al., 2015; Traag & van der Velden, 2011).

Dale usefully summarises current knowledge of the factors implicated in the generation of ESL:

*ESL always occurs in particular contexts that produce and shape it in specific ways. It has both individual and institutional determinants. It results from interaction between family and social background, and school processes and experiences. It is the culmination of what is usually a long process that often begins before a young person enters school (Dale, 2010, p. 5).*

The key here is the interactive nature of determinants. ESL does not arise *simply* because of individuals' psychological make-up, or their family background, or the characteristics of the schools they attend and the school systems in which they participate. Rather, it is because of the interaction of these factors at particular times and in particular contexts.



For this reason, De Witte et al. argue against exploring the predictors of dropout separately from one another, on the grounds that:

*... they are inextricably bound up with each other. It makes no sense to view these characteristics isolated from each other, as they interact in countless ways. Neither student attributes, nor family or school characteristics can be seen apart from society at large. Attempting to disentangle their effects from each other by means of ever more sophisticated statistical modelling, may thus not only prove to be a tremendous challenge, perhaps it is not even always worth the effort (2013, pp. 18, citations omitted).*

Different studies illuminate different aspects of these interactions. Some focus on the way in which national policy creates more and less responsive school systems. Hall (2009), for instance, analyses Swedish education reforms of the 1990s. These sought to extend the length and demands of vocational programmes to make them more similar to those of academic tracks. Despite the aim of creating a more comprehensive, and hence more equitable, system, it resulted in increased dropout among low achieving students. A USA study found school-level differences between those with high and low dropout rates. These included attendance rates, academic achievement and behaviour (Christle et al., 2007).

Other studies focus on family and social background. Boudesseul, Grelet & Vivent (2013), for instance, note the association in France between differing levels of ESL and differing socio-economic conditions impacting on families. A study of over 9,000 young people in Italy found that parental educational levels and parental support are protective factors that can significantly reduce the likelihood of becoming NEET (Alfieri, Sironi, Marta, Rosina & Marzana, 2015). Similarly, a study in the USA found that greater parental support improved transition from middle to high school and reduced the risk of dropout (Chen & Gregory, 2009). Specifically, parental expectation that students would attain academic success was found to improve engagement. A second USA study also found that parental involvement from parents on a low income in education had a positive impact on reducing dropout rates (Englund, Egeland & Collins, 2008). Parental unemployment and educational failing has been described as a 'family legacy' that contributes to ESL (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Family migrant background may also be a factor in some contexts. De Graaf and Van Zenderen (2009), for instance, report a high incidence of dropout among second-generation immigrants in the Netherlands.

Other studies focus on how individuals' psychological and learning characteristics might predict ESL. For instance, students' reports of feeling 'lonely' are good predictors of whether they intend to leave early (Pijl et al., 2013; Ramsdal, Gjørsum & Wynn, 2013), presumably because they indicate a low sense of belonging. Similarly, low levels of reading skills have been cited as a good predictor of ESL, since





poor reading may contribute to disengagement from learning (Vaughn, Roberts, Schnakenberg et al., 2015; Vaughn, Roberts, Wexler et al., 2015). This effect may be particularly significant for some groups, since poor literacy levels have been cited as a contributing factor to dropout for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Lane & Carter, 2006). Behavioural, affective and cognitive indices of engagement have also been linked to dropout (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009).

The range of risk factors identified in this way is extensive and, to some extent, baffling. Reviewing the international literature on dropout, Lyche concludes that:

*... causes for early school leaving are highly complex and very much interrelated. From an individual or social point of view, educational performance, such as low grades, and certain types of student behaviours, such as absenteeism, lack of motivation, or delinquent behaviour are solid predictors of dropout. These factors are also very connected to the student's background, be it past experiences in education (e.g. whether participation in pre-primary education), or family background (e.g. living with one or two parents, family SES, and parental engagement). School structure and size as well as certain school practices (e.g. a highly bureaucratic and impersonal environment) influence the process of disengagement. In combination with a set of systemic factors, such as the use of year repetition or the lack of apprenticeship places in apprenticeship systems, all the above mentioned factors have an impact on the dropout rate as well as an impact on each other (2010, p. 25).*

With this in mind, a current Dutch longitudinal study is attempting to explore the influence of 19 factors split across six domains on dropout. Though it excludes students with cognitive impairments, it may go some way to identifying each factor's relative impact (Theunissen, van Griensven, Verdonk, Feron & Bosma, 2012). Other authors (for example, Lundetræ, 2011; Schoon & Duckworth, 2010; Wade & Dixon, 2006; Winding, Nohr, Labriola, Biering & Andersen, 2013) also tend to split the risk factors across three areas:

- Family factors (parental social economic status, parental educational level, parental support and interest in their child's education, household composition, family stability, being looked after or in care, material resources in the home, single parent, and immigrant).
- Individual factors (academic ability, future aspirations, school motivation, low self-esteem, academic self-concept).
- Wider social factors that tend to be focused on school (school composition, supportive teachers).



Again, however, the possibilities for conceptualising ESL in different ways have to be borne in mind in understanding these ‘risk’ factors. For instance, Nielsen & Tanggaard (2015) have questioned the general acceptance that learner motivation is important. They interviewed Danish students and reframed the issue as one of a lack of trust in which the education system fails to fulfil students’ expectations. They break this down into a number of themes:

- ‘Primary schools are educationally irrelevant’ represented the views of students who felt that the primary curriculum was boring or did not meet their expectations of helping them when they got to vocational education.
- ‘Other students as [being] problematic’ represented the views of students who felt that they had ended up being with other students who did not value education.
- ‘Lack of work placement spaces’ represented the views of students who were unable to get an apprenticeship because of a lack of opportunities.

Moreover, behind the standard typologies of risk factors lie multiple specific risks that arise in particular contexts, and multiple interactions between different kinds of risks. For instance, a study of parental education as a risk factor in the USA and Norway revealed both differences in the way that risk appeared to operate in the different systems and an interaction between parental education and basic skills (Lundetræ, 2011). Among young people not completing upper-secondary education or training within five years, a disproportionate number in both systems had parents with low levels of education. However, in the Norwegian data it was only maternal levels of education that were significant in the analysis. Low maternal education was twice as likely to lead to dropout compared to high maternal education and this effect disappeared once the students’ basic skills were accounted for. A study in Italy (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011) likewise suggested an interaction between students’ psychological characteristics and their school contexts in shaping their intention to drop out. Those students who perceived the school context as supporting their autonomy had higher levels of perceived competence and self-regulation and were least likely to say that they intended dropping out of school. Self-determined motivation accounted for intention to drop out even after academic performance and SES had been controlled for in the analysis.

A study in Italy (Barone & O’Higgins, 2010) found a somewhat surprising factor in risk of dropout: a strong positive correlation between being obese or overweight and ESL. Again, though, there were complex interactions between factors. The effect for girls was stronger than for boys, but boys were more susceptible at lower levels of excess weight. Similarly, a study in Denmark showed a correlation between body mass and not completing secondary education (Winding et al., 2013). The



Danish study also found that other health indicators were implicated and that children with poor health were twice as likely to drop out of education. A Norwegian study (De Ridder et al., 2012) found that school dropout increases future dependence on health benefits or other social benefits. Compared to school completers, dropouts had a 21% increased health risk or disability in young adulthood (De Ridder et al., 2013). A study of Dutch students found no link between general health and dropout rates. However, those who had more contact with their family doctor about psycho-social problems (such as ADHD) were more likely to drop out of school (Uiters et al., 2014).

In understanding the operation of complex risk factors, it is important also to consider the impact of place. Put simply, risk factors may operate differently in different geographical contexts. In this respect, a study by Sadler et al. (2015) of risks for ESL in a rural area in England is illuminating. All of the standard risk factors are at work in this area, but, Sadler et al. argue, they have a distinctly local flavour. The area's limited transport links reduce opportunities, they suggest. Meanwhile, its proximity to much more affluent areas increases the psychological dissonance experienced by young people between what they are encouraged to aspire to and what they can actually achieve. This study also usefully reminds us that in England, where data on ethnicity is collected routinely in the education system, risk factors operate somewhat differently in different ethnic groups.

A further contextual factor is the degree of tracking within national education systems or within local variants of those systems. Tracking in this sense refers to the structural pathways that are available for students to follow through their education systems. For example, students may attend general schools or selective schools, such as grammar schools in the UK, *lycée* in France, *liceo* in Italy, and *gymnasium* in Germany. These different types of schools may embody more academic or more vocational pathways. One study suggests that the effects of tracking may be ambiguous in that they may improve literacy and educational attainment but may also increase the risk of social exclusion (Brunello & Checchi, 2007). In their cross-country analysis, Brunello and Checchi found that early tracking often reinforces family background effects and increases the probability of dropping out of education (ibid., p. 837). They suggest that when tracking is used it should be as late as possible in the child's education.

There is also some evidence that the nature of vocational tracks may be a risk factor for ESL. The way in which vocational tracks are organised has been compared across four Nordic countries (Bäckman, Jakobsen, Lorentzen, Österbacka & Dahl, 2015). Denmark and Norway combine workplace apprenticeships with school-based learning, while Finland and Sweden have school-based vocational learning. The study found that the number of dropouts was decreasing in Finland but increasing in



Norway. In England, a general trend found between 1985 and 1994 was that the fewer academic qualifications a student had, the more likely they were to be in a vocational track and the more likely to drop out of post-compulsory education (Bradley & Lenton, 2007).

There may be a relationship between the education system's structural segregation and the kinds of relationships which students form with their teachers and peers. A Danish study (Winding & Andersen, 2015) shows that the ability to form good friendships and positive social relationships is important in reducing the probability of dropout. It found that poor social relationships with family and friends explained a minor part of the dropout rates, but a larger effect was noted from poor social relationships with teachers and classmates. Similarly, a Belgian study (Lamote et al., 2013) found, in line with other studies cited earlier, that low engagement with school placed students at increased risk of dropping out. There was, however, an interaction with school structure: students in a remedial class were 2.73 times as likely to be in the low engagement group compared to students in a regular class. The corollary is, of course, that efforts to reduce structural segregation in school systems may work to reduce dropout (Allan & Persson, 2015; E. Persson, 2013).

Extensive as this enumeration of risk factors is, it is worth bearing in mind that it might not be comprehensive. Research tends to have focused on factors in the individual, the family and in school practice. As De Witte et al. point out:

*... the role of the economy, politics, and society in general is often left out of the picture. Moreover, school systems' organization and its effect on early school leaving is also still underexplored (2013, p. 26).*

This caveat is important because it highlights the limitations of current research evidence. Moreover, the focus on what may be called proximal factors may mislead practitioners and, especially, policy-makers into believing that limited interventions with children and schools will be enough to tackle ESL. This issue will be examined in greater detail.

### **At-risk groups**

In some ways, it is easy to read off from the evidence on risk factors which young people are most at risk of ESL. Dale (2010, p. 15) identifies such groups as those who:

- come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds;
- are male rather than female;
- come from vulnerable groups, such as the 'Looked After', those with disabilities, those with SEN, teenage mothers and those with physical and mental health problems;



- have had a history of disengagement from school;
- have achieved poorly in school;
- come from minority or migrant backgrounds;
- have experienced high rates of mobility and/or;
- live in areas of concentrated disadvantage.

However, the numerous risk factors and the complexity of their interactions mean that, while such lists make sense at a general level, they are by no means definitive. In fact, they become progressively less useful when they are applied to particular populations in particular contexts, let alone to individuals. As Fernández-Macías et al. explain:

*... no single risk factor can accurately predict who is at risk of dropping out. Dropouts are not a homogeneous group and dropping out is often described as a long process of disengagement that starts early, with factors building and compounding over time ... [Other studies have found] that patterns varied across subgroups, regions, and locations, making it essential to collect local data to best predict who will drop out in a particular locality and identify the contributing factors (2013, p. 152).*

Clearly, early leavers are not a homogeneous group. Moreover, as De Witte et al. point out, neither are they sharply differentiated from those who remain in education. The task therefore is:

*... to move away from investigating whether a certain factor increases the risk of non-graduation in students in general, and to explore instead when and in whose school careers [such factors] are more likely to exert a positive or negative influence. This requires more complex, longitudinal and/or retrospective studies on dropping out as a long-term process of disengagement (2013, p. 26).*

De Witte et al. express this as a task for researchers. However, it is, of course, equally a task for policy-makers and practitioners. They can only plan interventions effectively if they develop a deep understanding of the dynamics of ESL for their populations and in their contexts. An important corollary of this, moreover, is that not all young people who are at risk of ESL will actually leave school early. For some young people, risk factors will be mitigated by supportive factors in other aspects of their environment. These may be parents committed to education, for instance, or supportive teachers, or supportive schools and flexible school systems. It may be useful for policy-makers and practitioners to think about what might be done in respect of 'at-risk groups'. Nonetheless, it is also important that they think about how the balance of risk and protective factors works in the lives of individuals, and



how that balance might be shifted. A sensible policy aim might be to create ‘resilient individuals’ (Bartley, Schoon, Mitchell & Blane, 2007; Schoon, 2006), as well as to tackle risk factors at group level.

By definition, ESL can only become manifest in the upper-secondary phase. Nonetheless, as Fernández-Macías et al. (2013) suggest, it is typically the result of a lengthy process. Multiple factors interact over time to project the individual into becoming an ‘early leaver’. This is a further implication of the complex determinants of ESL. As Lyche puts it:

*Defining dropout through its measurement only paints part of the picture, namely dropout as a status or educational outcome. In order to understand why dropout occurs, it is important to see dropout as a cumulative process of disengagement or withdrawal that occurs over time (2010, p. 14).*

So, for instance, young people who become early leavers may have achieved poorly throughout their school career, or regularly fallen foul of schools’ behavioural expectations, or spent time following a curriculum they find alienating, or have grown up in economically-stressed families where the pressure to find paid employment exceeds the pressure to succeed in school. They may also live in societies where there are constraining gender roles or where they have experienced long-term marginalisation. It is entirely possible that there will also be specific triggers for leaving education at a particular point in time. However, such triggers would be unlikely to work unless these long-term processes had created the right conditions.

### **Generalising research on risk**

A key question for any review of research evidence for a cross-European readership is the extent to which findings can be generalised across contexts. This is particularly significant given that most of the literature examined deals with specific national – and in some cases, local – contexts. However, an answer can, in fact, be derived from the model of identification just set out. Insofar as ESL can be explained in terms of broad risk factors and broad groups of at-risk students, it seems likely that findings are transferable across national and system boundaries. Lundetrae’s (2011) comparative study of the impact of parental education levels on the risk of dropout in Norway and the USA is particularly illuminating in this respect. Despite the considerable differences in social policy between the countries, she concludes that:

*Social inheritance seems to obstruct equal educational opportunities in both welfare regimes, as parents’ educational level was found to influence drop-out in both Norway and USA (2011, p. 634).*



Similarly, there is often a significant problem in transferring research findings from the social systems of Northern and Western Europe – where much of the research originates – to the very different systems in Southern and Eastern Europe. Yet studies by Downes (2011) and Jugović & Doolan (2013), which look particularly at the South and East, both find broadly similar patterns of risk to those reported in the literature from the North and West.

However, as the evidence presented might suggest, the situation is more complex than this. Beyond the broad risk factors, context matters. While the USA and Norway have many similarities, Lundetræ argues, the social democratic policy regime of the latter produces somewhat different outcomes from the liberal regime of the former. Specifically:

*... the educational system in the social democratic welfare regime is more successful in levelling out social differences and heritage than the educational system in the liberal welfare regime (2011, p. 634).*

Similarly, Jugović & Doolan (2013) find similarities between South-East and North-West Europe. However, they also point to distinctive factors at work in the former. These include high risks for Roma young people across the region and for girls in some parts of the region. One might add to this what has been seen about local variations in area disadvantage impacting on ESL in France (Boudesseul et al., 2013), national education reforms' impact in Sweden (Hall, 2009), the distinctive situation of Roma in central European countries (FRA – European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014), and the local flavour of risk factors in rural parts of England (Sadler et al., 2015). All of these underline the importance of context, and suggest that considerable care is needed when transferring research findings from one context to another. There is no substitute for policy-makers and practitioners' knowing their own contexts. More positively, of course, the importance of local factors suggests that policy and practice do indeed make a difference and that ESL is anything but an inevitable outcome of international processes.

### **Actions to combat ESL**

This suggestion raises the question as to what kinds of actions might be effective in combatting ESL. There is considerable evidence on this, but it is of somewhat different types. Some of it comes from evaluations of interventions targeted specifically at reducing ESL rates. For example, one paper reviewed 19 studies, mainly in the USA. It found the three main interventions are: mentoring, disability-specific targeted interventions, and class setting and exit options (Wilkins & Huckabee, 2014). In fact, the present review found relatively little of this kind of evidence. This may be because such interventions are rare and/or because the rigorous evaluation of interventions (and publication of findings) is not common



and/or because publication tends to be in the 'grey' literature and in languages other than English. Fortunately, however, there are more extensive literatures which evaluate policy efforts (rather than targeted interventions) by tracing the impact of policy changes on outcomes for children and young people, or which (as in the studies cited above) compare the outcomes from different policy configurations in different countries. There is then a third kind of literature which sets out to explain the determinants of ESL in particular cases, identifies the contribution of policy and practice to these determinants, and thereby implicitly or explicitly illuminates how they might need to change to reduce ESL (please refer, for instance, to Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2014; Fernández-Macías et al., 2013; Jäppinen, 2010; Markussen et al., 2011).

As this third kind of literature makes clear, much of how ESL might be combatted can be deduced from what is known about the risks for ESL and the interactive processes through which it is produced. If ESL arises from multiple factors operating over time, in addition to more local factors, then the implication is that a comprehensive, long-term strategy to tackle these factors is needed rather than single-strand, short-term interventions alone. As Lyche puts it:

*Reviewing the literature on measures aiming to reduce early school leaving in upper secondary education and training does not yield a simple answer. As causes of dropout are interrelated, achieving higher rates of completion involves complex solutions to a complex problem ... [A]ddressing several risk factors simultaneously is part of the answer and success is more likely if interventions involve action both within and outside of school simultaneously (2010, p. 36).*

With this in mind, it is illuminating to look at the evidence on what has proved a particularly attractive approach from a policy point of view – the development of 'second-chance' educational opportunities of various kinds. These are schemes which seek to re-engage early school leavers by providing them with opportunities outside of schools and other established pathways. The findings of a survey of second-chance schemes for the European Commission (Day, Mozuraityte, Redgrave & McCoshan, 2013) highlight their potential and point to a set of features which seem likely to make them more successful. These include positive relationships between teachers and students, personal support for students, a high level of multi-professional working, learning outside of the classroom, an adult 'ethos', and flexibility of organisation. While underlining the importance of these schemes' presenting themselves as distinctive from mainstream education, however, the researchers also emphasise the extent to which initial education systems might learn from these characteristics. Polidano, Tabasso & Tseng (2013) share an observation from Australia that is useful in thinking more critically about second-





chance education. Namely, it seems to favour students who left school initially for employment or alternative study (pull-out factors), rather than those who were disengaged through academic failure or did not like school (falling-out factors). As Coffield asked when the idea of second-chance schools was first mooted in Europe:

*... why is the response to failure in education so often the expensive creation of extensions to the system (in this case, 'second chance schools' with specially-qualified and more highly paid teachers, working with fewer pupils) rather than using the same additional resources to reform the schools which have failed to educate so many young people during their 'first chance'? (Coffield, 1998, p. 50).*

This critique reinforces Lyche's (2010) contention that, instead of single-strand solutions, it might be more useful to think of a range of actions which need to be undertaken in a co-ordinated manner and with sensitivity to local circumstances. Among the measures she lists (2010, pp. 36ff) are:

- Preventive measures starting early, including the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, parents' involvement, provision of social support to child and family and the development of social bonds
- Transition support in lower-secondary schools, high expectations of students, substance abuse programmes, peer tutoring, extra-curricular activities, programmes to tackle risky behaviour and the development of school-community links
- In upper-secondary school, individual support and mentoring for students who are struggling, high-quality vocational tracks, and the continuation of a substance abuse curriculum and extra-curricular activities
- At system level, the formulation of coherent ESL programmes across educational phases. This involves the development of supportive learning environments and increasingly intensive interventions for those young people most at risk.

Dale (2010, p. 7) offers a similar typology of actions. These include:

- Pre-emptive strategies undertaken early, such as good-quality early childhood education and care
- Strategies addressing the system-structural factors, such as the social composition of school classes
- Additional targeted support for at-risk students
- School-wide strategies such as the development of attractive curricula with vocational content and responsive forms of school organisation.



The Council of the European Union presents a further list of approaches (Council of the European Union, 2011; Przybylski, 2014):

- Prevention policies that remove obstacles to educational participation and success (e.g. providing high-quality early childhood education and care; increasing education by providing education and training beyond compulsory education; promoting inclusive policies and providing additional support for schools in poorer areas; supporting children from different ethnic groups and linguistic diversity; improving parents' involvement in education).
- Intervention policies to improve how schools work (e.g. 'Transforming schools into inspiring and comfortable environments which would encourage young people to continue education' (Przybylski, 2014, p. 160); monitoring students at greatest risk of ESL; developing networks to involve parents and the local community; supporting teachers to work with students at risk and in tailoring their teaching methods to individual student needs; providing mentoring support for students with SEN; providing financial support for learners from low SES backgrounds).
- Compensation policies for learners who left school early (e.g. second-chance education; transition classes to enable re-entry to school; validating informal education acquired while out of school; providing social, financial, educational and psychological support).

These three strands have been implemented in part in Malta, with an overall reduction in ESL (Cardona, 2015, slides 27–31).

The ESL literature reviews cited here offer further details of approaches and programmes that have proved to be effective. However, the review that focuses most directly on interventions reaches an interesting conclusion:

*Overall, results indicated that most school- and community-based programs were effective in decreasing school dropout. Given the minimal variation in effects across program types, the main conclusion from this review is that dropout prevention and intervention programs, regardless of type, will likely be effective if they are implemented well and are appropriate for the local environment. We recommend that policy makers and practitioners choosing dropout prevention programs consider the cost-effectiveness of programs, and choose those that fit best with local needs as well as implementer abilities and resources (Wilson, Tanner-Smith, Lipsey, Steinka-Fry & Morrison, 2011, p. 10).*

This is not to say, of course, that 'anything goes'. Some interventions fail. For instance, one study of a programme of support for literacy and mathematics to reduce dropout in Finland found that it was unable to effectively break the trend that leads to learners dropping out (Hakkarainen, Holopainen & Savolainen, 2015).



Likewise, a USA study that examined the impact of policies aimed at increasing the school leaving age in order to tackle dropout (Landis & Reschly, 2011) found that they had not had any discernible impact. Paying students to remain in education or return to education through the provision of an 'Education Maintenance Allowance' had mixed results in England (Maguire & Rennison, 2005). A number of reasons might explain these kinds of failure. As Wilson et al. (2011) make clear, quality of implementation is crucially important. Likewise, as suggested throughout this review, matching interventions to local and individual circumstances matters, rather than adopting blanket approaches to 'at-risk' groups. Interventions also have to take account of the long-term and deep-seated nature of risk factors. The authors of the Finnish study, for instance, point out that the intervention did not start until the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade. This may well be too late to make a difference (Hakkarainen et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, the typologies of actions in the research literature suggest that there is broad agreement about the focus of action and a high chance that action will have some effect, even if there are no guarantees that any particular action will succeed. Moreover, what is striking about these typologies is how similar they are to other prescriptions for tackling educational disadvantage in general rather than ESL per se. It is, in particular, illuminating to compare them to the OECD's advocacy of 'ten steps to equity in education':

### **Design**


1. *Limit early tracking and streaming and postpone academic selection.*
2. *Manage school choice so as to contain the risks to equity.*
3. *In upper secondary education, provide attractive alternatives, remove dead ends and prevent dropout.*
4. *Offer second chances to gain from education.*

### **Practices**

5. *Identify and provide systematic help to those who fall behind at school and reduce year repetition.*
6. *Strengthen the links between school and home to help disadvantaged parents help their children to learn.*
7. *Respond to diversity and provide for the successful inclusion of migrants and minorities within mainstream education.*

### **Resourcing**

8. *Provide strong education for all, giving priority to early childhood provision and basic schooling.*



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9. *Direct resources to the students with the greatest needs.*

10. *Set concrete targets for more equity, particularly related to low school attainment and dropouts (OECD, 2008, p. 6).*

This shows similar emphases on early intervention, increasingly intensive support for learners who are struggling, parental involvement, differential resourcing and the development of responsive upper-secondary education. The present authors assert that this is no coincidence. As suggested earlier in this review, ESL is best regarded as simply one instance of a much wider phenomenon of limited educational achievement and participation. It is itself related to underlying patterns of social and educational disadvantage. Consequently, it seems reasonable to suppose that measures to tackle ESL should form part of a wider strategy to combat educational disadvantage and the underlying social disadvantage out of which it arises. This underscores the conclusion that ESL should not be seen as a stand-alone issue. With this in mind, it is worth noting the conclusion reached by a review of ESL strategies in Europe undertaken in the 1990s:

*Measures to combat early school-leaving derive, at least in theory, from perceptions of the causes of the problem. Factors such as levels of social inequality, fluctuations in the labour market and labour legislation on the protection of children and adolescents are crucial to an understanding of early school-leaving. However, they are not, in general, the target of interventions, though variables such as the extent to which access to and involvement in education is structured by socio-economic status and family and individual characteristics often are. By and large, causes that can be identified in the organisation and operation of the educational system and the surrounding support services are the focus of intervention (Mac Devitt, 1998, p. 41).*

The studies reviewed suggest that this emphasis on actions within the education system remains the case – and that it parallels the similar emphasis noted by De Witte et al. (2013) in the literature on risk factors. However, if ESL really is part of a more fundamental social problem, the actions to address it ought to match the determinants. They should, therefore, include the kind of macro-level social and economic actions at which Mac Devitt hints.



## EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING, DISABILITY AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

As with other terms used in this literature review, the term 'special educational needs' is not used consistently across European countries. This makes comparison difficult. For example, some countries have very low numbers of children defined as having SEN in mainstream education. This *may* be because they have a tighter definition of the category SEN, more closely linked to low-incidence, medically-diagnosed disabilities. For example, only 1.5% of the school population in mainstream education in Slovenia is regarded as having SEN (European Agency, 2014, p. 11). In other countries, the majority of children with SEN are educated in mainstream education. These countries may have a broader definition of SEN that also covers high-incidence needs resulting in underachievement at school. However, the literature does not always make clear this distinction in how SEN is defined. Another problem with the definition of SEN is that it can cover a wide spectrum of very different difficulties. These range from visual impairment, to autism, or from learning disabilities, to emotional and behavioural difficulties. Yet the term tends to be used in the literature as if the group were homogenous, rather than reflecting its true heterogeneity.

Even allowing for these definitional difficulties, the present authors have found relatively little research literature from Europe which deals in any detail with the relationship between ESL, disability and SEN. As noted in relation to research on disability and youth transition in the UK:

*Policy-related research ... typically revolves around issues of disability or issues of youth in transition, but little research strongly connects the two streams of research, thus providing little direction to policy development focusing on the specific issues facing youth with disabilities (Crawford, 2012, pp. i-ii).*

However, there are somewhat more substantial literatures from beyond Europe, particularly from the USA. Therefore, this section draws on these, alongside the European literature.

There is consensus in the literature that students with disabilities are at much greater risk of dropping out of education than their peers (Kemp, 2006; Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002, p. 4; Wexler & Pyle, 2012). They are more likely to end up classified as NEET (European Agency, 2014, p. 29; Hakkarainen, Holopainen & Savolainen, 2016). To some extent, this is explicable in terms of the strong correlation between (low) academic achievement and the likelihood of being regarded as having SEN in many education systems. In Norway, for instance, 90% of students in the top 10% of the ability spectrum complete secondary education. This is compared with only 15% of the bottom 10% of the ability spectrum (Myklebust, 2012). There are, however, differences within the SEN population. For instance,



young people with learning disabilities are more likely to be NEET than those with physical difficulties (European Agency, 2013, p. 9).

However, as already seen, young people with SEN are subject to some of the same risk factors for ESL as the general population. Overall, studies tend not to find different factors that explain ESL in the two populations (please refer, for instance, to Doren, Murray & Gau, 2014; Pijl et al., 2013; Thurlow et al., 2002; Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012). In the population with SEN, as in the general population, ESL is explained by a range of interacting factors rather than by any single factor. As Bear, Kortering and Braziel (2006) conclude in a study of students with learning disabilities in the USA:

*... there is a host of reasons why a student may drop out of school, and these reasons vary from individual to individual (Bear et al., 2006, p. 298).*

In particular, regarding SEN or disability as a characteristic of individuals does not *in itself* offer an adequate explanation of ESL. Instead:

*... alterable variables such as students' individual behaviours, skills, dispositions and experiences within the contexts of families and schools may be more important determinants of school dropout than are fixed attributes and traits (Doren et al., 2014, p. 155).*

However, this broad conclusion needs to be nuanced in a number of ways. Students with SEN are, by definition (and depending on the type of SEN), more likely to have lower attainments in school, have poorer relationships and have emotional and behavioural difficulties. Students with these types of difficulties are more at risk of ESL (Hakkarainen et al., 2016) whether or not they are recognised as having SEN. SEN status may not offer an explanation of ESL over and above that provided by other risk factors, but nonetheless it is closely associated with those factors. In other words, students who are identified as having SEN are disproportionately more likely to experience factors that are risks for ESL. One reason is that it is well established that SEN are not distributed randomly across the population in Europe (or, indeed, in other parts of the world). Rather, some social groups are disproportionately more likely to be identified as having SEN (Berhanu & Dyson, 2012). These groups include those with migrant or minority ethnic backgrounds, those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and boys, with significant interactions between these groups. These risk factors are, of course, also risk factors for low educational attainment (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Dyson & Kozleski, 2008) and overlap with the risk factors for ESL identified elsewhere in this report. When, therefore, the ESL literature identifies groups who are at risk of ESL, it is *de facto* identifying groups who are also at risk of being identified as having SEN.



In addition to the broad association between social background, SEN and ESL, there are some more specific ways in which risks for SEN and risks for ESL overlap. Some of these seem to centre on the social and emotional correlates of SEN and disability. There is evidence, for instance, that the extent to which, and ways in which, all students engage with their schools is closely related to the risk of ESL. However, students with SEN are more likely than their peers to experience low levels of engagement, or to experience rapid decreases in engagement, and hence to leave school (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot & Pagani, 2008). There is also some evidence that, even where the differences in levels of engagement are small, students with SEN are particularly vulnerable to the effects of lower engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, there is evidence that young people who experience social and emotional difficulties are also at risk of ESL. While not all of these young people will be formally identified as having SEN, they seem more likely to be identified than their peers. Daniel et al. (2006) found that students with poor reading ability were more likely than their peers to show suicidal tendencies, and that these tendencies and school dropout were strongly associated with each other. Stoep, Weiss, Kuo, Cheney & Cohen (2003) and Quiroga, Janosz, Bisset and Morin (2013) likewise find a strong association between psychiatric difficulties and failure to complete school. Finn, Fish & Scott (2008) find an association between misbehaviour in school and failure to access or complete post-secondary education. Students who are bullied or teased are more likely to be at risk of dropout compared to peers (Cornell, Gregory, Huang & Fan, 2012). In the USA, 65% of students with emotional or behavioural difficulties drop out of education (Wexler & Pyle, 2012).

This seems not to be simply a matter of social and emotional difficulties placing young people at risk of ESL. The process is more interactive in that how schools support students and whether those students feel themselves to be supported also impact on risks for ESL. In line with the findings of Pijl et al. (2013), Dunn, Chambers & Rabren (2004) found that whether students with mild disabilities feel that they have a supportive teacher and supportive classmates, and whether they feel they are being prepared for life after school impacts on the likelihood of their dropping out. Moreover, for students with disabilities, the quality of relationships with teachers and the ability to form trusting relationships have been shown to contribute towards better life adjustment and engagement with school across four American states (Pham & Murray, 2016).

It is not always clear from these studies how much students' sense of belonging or alienation depends on their own capacity to form relationships or their teachers' and schools' capacity to relate to them. However, the latter factors are clearly



important. A USA study and a study in Ireland both found that when students commented on contributing factors to dropping out of mainstream education, they cited poor teacher attitudes as well as their own behaviour and attitude towards education (Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Squires, Kalambouka & Bragg, 2016). Slightly stronger language is used in reporting the views of Australian students ‘who had a robust self-image of themselves and who were self-assuredly assertive in challenging what they perceived to be the academic injustices of schooling’ (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 406). Other studies also find that students who fail to complete mainstream schooling may feel that they have been inadequately supported by their schools (please refer, for instance, to Harðardóttir, Júlíusdóttir & Guðmundsson, 2015; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Although studies of how young people with SEN who leave school early have been supported by their schools are hard to find, there are indications elsewhere. For instance, Downes (2011) draws attention to the paucity of provision for mental health issues and for emotional support in most countries, and the likely impact of this on ESL rates. It is not unreasonable to suppose that those most affected by this lack of services are the very people who need them most. Many of these people are likely to be identified as having SEN in relation to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Likewise, Keith and Mccray (2002) identify a series of ways in which school systems let down young people with SEN, who then go on to become young offenders.

There is also some evidence from the literature on youth transitions, which deals with school leaving as part of progression towards adulthood. Studies typically find that some young people with disabilities or SEN find the transition process challenging (Aston, Dewson, Dyson & Loukas, 2005; Burchardt, 2005; Crawford, 2012; Dewson, Aston, Bates, Ritchie & Dyson, 2004; Elffers, 2012; Hatton & Glover, 2015; Morris, 1999; Young, Squires, Hartley, Oram & Sutherland, 2015). Among the problems they encounter are:

- High unemployment rates and difficulties in securing work experience and effective contacts with employers during the school years
- High rates of dropout and lower levels of qualification relative to other students
- Difficulty in arranging accommodations and ensuring curriculum access
- Problems in developing effective transition planning with an emphasis on student self-determination
- Difficulties in securing effective collaboration and co-ordination among stakeholders, including poor linkages between child and adult health and social services





- A failure to take adequate account of the impacts of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and disability on the transition process (adapted from Crawford, 2012, pp. ii–iii).

As in the literature more specifically on ESL, these difficulties arise from multiple factors (for example, please refer to Wagner, Kutashi, Duchnowski, Epstein & Sumi, 2005). As Aston et al. (2005) put it:

*Four sets of factors seem important in determining the outcomes of the transition process: young people's capacities and characteristics; the purposefulness of familial support; the nature and effectiveness of local support systems; and, the range of local opportunities available to young people, such as college courses, employment and training options. Not surprisingly, outcomes are diverse and unpredictable given the multiple interactions that may occur between these factors (Aston et al., 2005, p. xiii).*

The key issue here is that young people's 'capacities and characteristics' – including their disabilities and special needs – do not in themselves explain the difficulties they have in transition. It is the interaction between those characteristics and the other factors – including the nature of support and opportunities available from schools and elsewhere in the local context – that generates the difficulties. Young people's disabilities and special needs may call for forms of support and opportunity that are different from or more intensive than those needed by many of their peers. Nevertheless, the failure of schools and the support system more generally to make appropriate provision is heavily implicated in the difficulties young people face:

*The issue for these people is whether the mainstream 'systems' within which they operate, including the education system and the labour market, are sufficiently powerful to overcome the (sometimes significant) difficulties that these young people face. There is considerable evidence already that this may not be the case (Dewson et al., 2004, pp. xii–xiii).*

This work on transition reminds us that, as with the general population, ESL is part of a wider set of issues. These relate to the potential marginalisation of young people with disabilities and SEN and to the lifelong disadvantages some of them face. One USA study, for instance, examined the adult employment rates of people who were regarded as having severe emotional and behavioural difficulties (Zigmond, 2006). It found no significant differences between those who graduated school and those who dropped out; around half of both groups were employed. The implication is that tackling ESL *alone* may not improve life chances unless it is part of a wider set of measures to tackle disadvantage and marginalisation.



## **Actions to combat ESL among young people with SEN and disabilities**

The picture of the school and post-school experiences of young people with SEN and disabilities is a somewhat gloomy one. However, there is also evidence that policy and practice initiatives can go a long way towards mitigating the risks these young people face.

Not surprisingly, given the substantial overlap between ESL in the general population and among young people with SEN and disabilities, the strategies for tackling ESL in both groups are broadly similar. In a review of evidence-based dropout prevention programmes in the USA, for instance, Pyle and Wexler conclude that:

*Research on evidence-based components of drop-out prevention suggests that schools can prevent students from dropping out, including students with LD [learning disabilities] and emotional disabilities, by using data to identify which students are most at risk for dropping out and then providing these students with access to an adult advocate who can implement academic and behavioral support in a school climate that promotes personalized and relevant instruction. It is possible to identify, monitor, and intervene based on students' risk indicators to maximize student engagement, thereby increasing students' ability to progress in school, stay in school, and complete school (2012, p. 297).*

Here, as in other studies, careful individual monitoring emerges as an important basis for action. Zablocki and Krezmien (2012), for instance, recommend the adoption of a data-based system referred to as the 'Early Warning System' for identifying students with learning disabilities who are at risk (for details on how this is being implemented in school districts in the USA, please refer to Bruce, Brigeland, Fox & Balfanz, 2011; Heppen & Therriault, 2008; Herzog, Davis & Legters, 2011). The use of similar systems in Europe can inform school-based interventions (Nouwen, Clycq, Braspenningx & Timmerman, 2015). Such early warning systems generally include cognitive and behavioural measures, but could also include emotional wellbeing (Nouwen et al., 2015, p. 2). One of the strengths of special education in many countries, of course, is that it is based on the careful monitoring of individuals. Therefore, there are good reasons to believe that the established practices of special education could be adapted to identify students at risk of ESL. As Bear et al. argue:

*... there is a host of reasons why a student may drop out of school, and these reasons vary from individual to individual. We see the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process as an ideal way to address individual differences, including factors that are likely to influence an individual student's decision not to complete school (2006, p. 298).*



Beyond monitoring, the repeated finding that the factors implicated in ESL are not primarily related to the fixed characteristics of young people with special needs and disabilities is significant. As Doren, Murray and Gau discovered:

*... the most salient predictors of school dropout included a set of malleable individual (grades, and engagement in high-risk behaviours), family (parent expectations), and school (quality of students' relationship with teachers and peers) factors (2014, p. 150).*

The idea that the appropriate intervention can change the difficulties facing students is, of course, another characteristic of effective special education. Significantly, therefore, there is advocacy and some evidence in the literature that the characteristics of individuals placing them at risk of ESL can change if teachers and others take the right action. As seen, for instance, the social, emotional and behavioural correlates of SEN and disability are important factors in ESL, but may also be 'malleable' in Doren, Murray and Gau's (2014) sense. Hence, Cobb, Sample, Alwell and Johns, reviewing the evidence on cognitive behavioural interventions, conclude that:

*The findings of this review strongly support the efficacy of the use of cognitive-behavioral interventions across educational environments, disability types, age groups, and gender in the reduction of dropout and correlates of dropout (2006, p. 259).*

However, the 'right action' may come straight from the toolkit of special educators. Since low attainment is, as seen, a risk factor for ESL, the efforts of special educators and their colleagues in schools to raise attainments may be particularly important. As Bost and Riccomini argue:

*Although researchers have clearly connected dropping out of school to prolonged low achievement, and many dropout prevention programs contain academic components, to date, effective teaching practices are largely absent from the milieu of interventions and programs employed by schools to address dropout prevention. As such, effective instructional design and delivery as a focus for keeping students with disabilities in school appears to be an inconspicuous strategy for dropout prevention (2006, p. 302).*

Some evidence for this approach comes from a USA study (Christle & Yell, 2008). It found that increasing school programmes to improve literacy may help to reduce dropout. In turn, this decreases the likelihood of ending up in the criminal justice system.

Likewise, there is evidence for the effectiveness of interventions to tackle problems with relationships and school belonging, to which, as seen, some students with SEN are particularly vulnerable. In the USA, a programme called Check and Connect aims



to improve school engagement by providing a mentor. One study found that improved relationships between students and mentors reduced the risk of ESL (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair & Lehr, 2004; Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr & Anderson, 2003). When the programme was used in alternative schools for learners with emotional and behavioural difficulties, similar improvements were found (McDaniel, Houchins & Robinson, 2016). In the case of this group of students, it would appear that strong relationships between students and mentors translate into improved engagement in school, better attendance, and so into reduced ESL rates (Sinclair, Christenson & Thurlow, 2005).

The use of mentors is a specific example of approaches to tackling ESL that involve not only working with the young people themselves, but also with the school and family contexts with which they interact. The aim is both to develop the personal capacities of young people and to provide them with maximally supportive environments. In turn, these supportive environments increase young people's resilience in facing the risks for ESL. In one model, for instance, parental expectations and teacher expectations on school engagement or dropout are seen as enhancing the young person's feelings of control and of school belonging and identification, and so reduce the likelihood of ESL (Fall & Roberts, 2012). As in the case of mentoring, a significant component of school and family contexts is the relationships young people form with supportive individuals. However, it is not necessary for designated mentors to play the supportive role, and there is evidence to suggest that special educators can play a similar part in preventing ESL (Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Wagner & Davis, 2006).

Moreover, it is not simply the identification of appropriate adults that is key to providing supportive environments. As Reschly and Christenson argue, what is needed is a series of linked activities:

*These activities may include providing additional help with academic or personal problems; offering greater opportunities for autonomy and participation in the school environment; and creating smaller, more personal environments, such as small learning communities or 'schools within a school', to facilitate interpersonal connections among students and between students and their teachers (2006, p. 290).*

Humphrey and Squires's (2010, 2011a, 2011b) evaluation of *Achievement for All* provides evidence that such a linked programme can be effective. Said programme aimed to simultaneously improve parental involvement in their child's education, improve teacher monitoring of children's academic progress and develop appropriate interventions for children who had identified SEN on academic progress and educational engagement. While not looking specifically at the effect on ESL, this study did find positive effects on the risk factors associated with ESL from education,



including academic progress, behaviour, bullying, and attendance. There was evidence of more personalised teaching for students with SEN and a shift in teacher attitudes with a better understanding of children's needs and how these might be addressed.

In some cases, efforts to provide more supportive environments for young people at risk of ESL have led to the establishment of 'alternative' schools of one kind or another. It seems that students often value the personal support they receive in such alternatives and that they can in some cases be effective in preventing dropout. Nevertheless, little is currently known about them and there are doubts as to whether they are able to provide a full range of services for young people with SEN and disabilities (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Moss, Strawhun & Peterson, 2014; Washburn-Moses, 2011). In the USA, some alternative schools have small classes with high teacher–learner ratios, offer remedial teaching and cater for students who primarily had discipline problems in mainstream education (Moss et al., 2014; Washburn-Moses, 2011). In these respects, they have the potential to create the small learning communities that Reschly and Christenson (2006, p. 290) advocate.

Similarly, there are examples of the kinds of 'second-chance' schemes referred to earlier having some positive impacts on ESL among young people identified with disabilities and SEN (Gallagher, 2011; Squires et al., 2016). In these cases, what appears to be effective in supporting students is a flexible, personalised and supportive approach. The implication is that it is not the structural separation of these schools from the mainstream that makes them effective. Rather, it is the way in which their leaders and teachers use that separation to enable them to respond to and support their students. At the same time, alternative placements need to be used with caution. As one Australian study has shown, they can lead to further marginalisation (Best, Price & McCallum, 2015).

### **Early school leaving and inclusion**

The move towards the inclusion of students with SEN and/or disability in mainstream education in many European countries raises important questions about the relationship between inclusion and ESL. In particular, do inclusive practices in upper-secondary education and earlier phases help to reduce dropout rates? Conversely, does the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools increase their tendency to leave education?

The European literature here is less helpful than it might be. There are, of course, well-known conceptual and definitional problems in deciding what counts as inclusion for research purposes. Moreover, the literature on the outcomes of inclusion is less well-developed than the advocacy literature. In any case, it tends to



focus on academic and social outcomes rather than on ESL (Lindsay, 2007). As a recent Danish review concludes:

*Inclusion has been discussed throughout the past 20 years or more. Nevertheless, it has been difficult to define exactly what successful inclusion requires or which interventions are effective for the individual pupil's scholastic and social development. Until a few years ago, discussions about how to develop more inclusive school cultures were primarily of an idealistic and ideological character, and the empirical focus has been limited (Dyssegaard & Larsen, 2013, p. 8).*

Certainly, there is a lack of longitudinal studies which might show how the experience of inclusion in various phases of education is linked to remaining in or leaving education in the upper-secondary phase.

Insofar as evidence exists, it is ambiguous about the relationship between inclusion and ESL – at least if inclusion is interpreted narrowly as education in mainstream settings. Doren, Murray and Gau (2014), for instance, find that poor-quality inclusion, where inadequate supports are provided for students, is actually a risk factor for dropout. Likewise, Myklebust (2002) finds that for students with general learning difficulties, placement in an ordinary class produces higher achievement, but more dropout than placement in special classes.

Taking this with the evidence on second-chance schools and the wider evidence on the relationship between ESL and the context provided by the school, it seems reasonable to conclude that the structural arrangements of schooling are less important than the processes they sustain. In other words, it may matter less whether students are in a mainstream setting than whether they find that setting supportive. On a wider definition, of course, inclusion is not simply about placement; it is also about creating precisely such supportive educational settings. Particularly illuminating in this respect is an intervention to combat ESL, developed by Ingholt et al. (2015) in Danish vocational schools. The intervention is based on the theoretical assumption that 'students develop their participation and their habits in communities of social practice' (ibid., p. 4), and that strengthening this participation ties students more closely into their schools. With this in mind:

*The intervention thus aims to shape the conditions for the students' development of social relations by reshaping the school structure regarding their participation in vocational school life. The basic idea is to integrate the development of positive social relationships with learning and training. As shown, this requires changing many practices in everyday vocational school life. Students' experiences of positive social relationships promote general well-being within the school context and might lead to positive focus on school. In*



*the longer term, improving social relations might influence the students' completion of the educational programs ... (ibid., p. 11).*

While the outcomes of this intervention are not yet known, it is difficult not to see this as an attempt to create a more inclusive school. Indeed, as seen earlier, much the same could be said about the characteristics of the best 'alternative' and 'second-chance' schools.

In the absence of more direct evidence, it may also be possible to extrapolate from the literature on inclusion. Despite the limitations of that literature, there is widespread agreement that, under certain circumstances and for certain students, inclusion can indeed produce positive academic, social and personal outcomes (please refer to Lindsay, 2007; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). Where this happens, it may therefore be that inclusion is able to counteract risk factors for ESL, such as low attainment and disengagement from the education process.

An intriguing study from Sweden appears to provide an example of this process in action. Essunga is a municipality which has attracted considerable attention in that country because of its success in improving educational outcomes for students in primary and lower-secondary school. Researchers have argued that this success has been achieved 'through inclusion' (Allan & Persson, 2015; E. Persson, 2013). This is on the grounds that schools abandoned the segregation of students identified as having SEN, while teachers were encouraged to engage with research literature focused on ways of enabling all children to succeed in their classrooms. Of particular relevance to the issue of ESL is that Essunga students are currently being followed up in their upper-secondary schools (all of which lie outside the municipality). There is evidence that they retain a strong commitment to education, an enhanced confidence in themselves as learners and a commitment towards supporting each other.

The implication is that inclusive practices earlier in the school system can produce young people who are higher achievers, more confident in themselves as learners, and therefore more likely to remain in the education system at upper-secondary level and beyond. However, there are some caveats. The first is that the upper-secondary provision attended by these students has tended to be less supportive and inclusive in its orientation than their previous schools. This has had a negative effect on them – particularly on the second cohort to be tracked (Allan & Persson, 2015; B. Persson, 2015). Inclusive approaches, it would appear, may get students off to a good start, but are not an effective inoculation against the effects of alienating upper-secondary provision. The second is that the assertion that the positive outcomes have been achieved 'through inclusion' needs to be moderated.



As Persson herself points out:

*It is not claimed that the improvement in academic results was directly brought about by moves to inclusion. However, the greater level of awareness about research, curriculum and teaching was said during all the interviews [with teachers] to be dependent on the idea of inclusion (E. Persson, 2013, pp. 2016–2017).*

In fact, the move towards inclusive practices seems to have been part of a package of developments. These consisted of an energising of the teaching force, an emphasis on research-based practices, the abandonment of ability grouping, the introduction of peer mentoring for teachers and so on. It is not clear from the available evidence which of these count as 'inclusive', let alone what the contribution of different elements in this package might be. The safest conclusion is that inclusive approaches of the kind adopted in Essunga are certainly compatible with the raising of achievement and with the development of positive attitudes among students that can persist into upper-secondary education. They may well do more than this and contribute to or even drive such improvements. However, it is not yet possible to be certain on this point.





## TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout this review, it has become clear that ESL is a complex phenomenon with multiple, interactive causal processes. It demands a multi-strand response from policy-makers and practitioners. Given this complexity, and the likelihood that, as seen earlier, most interventions will have some sort of positive impact, there is a danger of responding to ESL through random interventions rather than through a coherent, strategic response. As Prevatt and Kelly, reviewing the field of intervention strategies, conclude:

*Because of the complicated path that leads a student to drop out of school, it has been difficult to develop programs to stop the cycle. The present review confirmed that interventions have been implemented over the entire kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade range, with a variety of foci. Areas most frequently targeted include academic enhancement, mentoring and supportive relationships, psycho-social skills development, and teacher training in child behaviour management. More than a decade ago, Bickel (1991) commented on the state of dropout prevention programs. He concluded that 'A central weakness... (is) the lack of solid evidence about what is being accomplished by the program(s). We are strong on description and testimony and short on hard evidence' (p. 74). While some improvements in program evaluation and research strategies have been made over the past decade, many of the same conceptual, methodological, and design deficiencies still exist (2003, p. 389).*

In this situation, it seems important to bring some conceptual coherence to the issue of ESL, particularly as it affects young people with disabilities and SEN. One way to do this is to take a lead from Jahnukainen & Järvinen's (2005) analysis. In common with many researchers, they define the problem of ESL as one that often starts with poor socio-economic family circumstances in early childhood and proceeds through a series of steps to ESL. However, they point out that this process is not inevitable and that there are 'survival routes' which lead to successful employment. While there are the familiar risk factors associated with ESL, they argue that there is also a series of protective factors – they identify positive experience of school; long placement in one school (more than three years); participation in learning; and not being involved in crime during school placement. These are, of course, similar to those outlined elsewhere in this review.

What is useful in this study is the idea of being able to consider an individual student's chances of completing schooling in terms of both risks and protective factors. These different factors can be seen as forces acting in different directions – some pushing young people towards ESL, and some pushing them away. Understanding these different forces can lead to considering possibilities for action

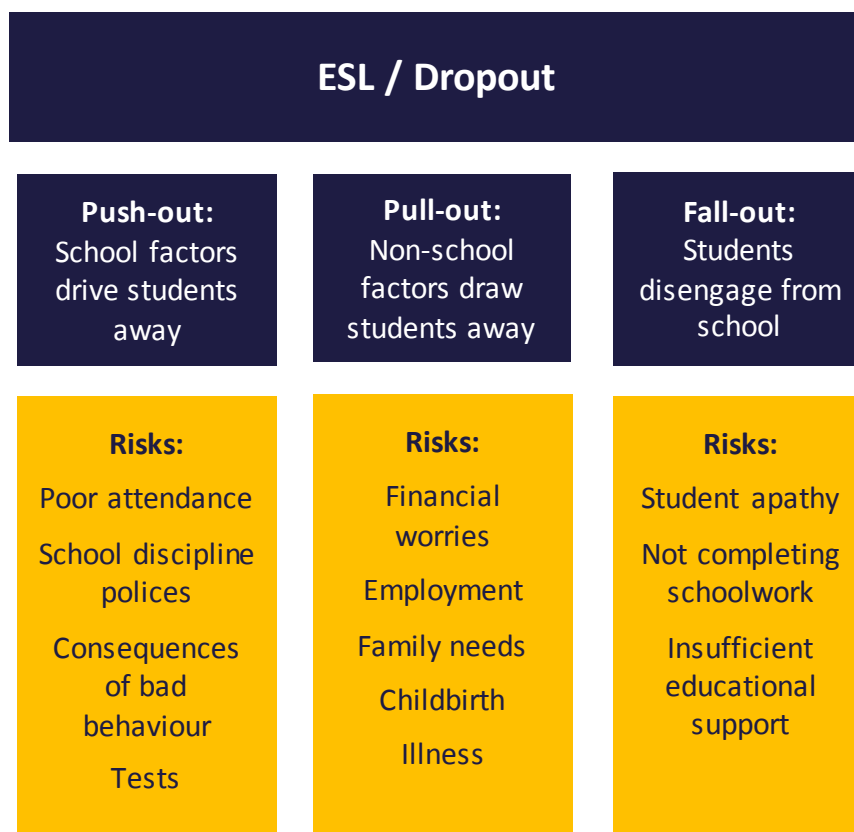


through a process referred to as Force Field Analysis (Allan & Persson, 2015; Lewin, 1943). The model can also be used as a way of understanding some of the interventions that have been tried over time in different countries. A refined model can have risk factors as forces acting in one direction, with protective factors in the opposite direction. To this can be added strategies to prevent, intervene or compensate. These will either oppose some of the risk factors by reducing risks or support protective factors by strengthening these factors (please refer to Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Force Field Analysis model**

This model can be used in relation to the different conceptualisations of ESL and the different labels – push-out, pull-out, fall-out – applied to those conceptualisations. Figure 2 shows some of the risks associated with each conceptualisation of ESL. Once these risks are identified, it becomes possible to consider what different protective factors might come into play and what different interventions might be called for. An analysis of this kind can be conducted in a more detailed and sophisticated form than shown here. It can be applied to a whole population of young people, or to a particular group, or at an individual level. In this kind of complex analysis, it is possible to get beyond broad SEN and disability labels. What matters is not whether a young person has been identified as having SEN, but whether that SEN or disability is associated with factors which place the young person at risk of ESL.



**Figure 2. Risks in different conceptualisations of ESL**

There is one further issue to consider. Talk of risk and protection may make it appear that young people are the helpless victims or beneficiaries of circumstances beyond their control. While there is, of course, an element of truth in this, some researchers also deal with the issue of how young people exercise agency in their lives. Lundahl, Lindblad, Lovén, Mårald & Svedberg (2015), in particular, seek to understand the decision of young people with cognitive disabilities in Sweden to drop out or remain in school in terms of ‘careership’ theory which:

*... treats young people’s career decisions as pragmatic-rational and conditioned by the context of uneven power relationships, with the young individuals having limited resources and horizons of action (Lundahl et al., 2015, p. 2).*

Put simply, young people do indeed take decisions and do so on a rational basis. That is, those decisions make sense to them in the contexts in which they find themselves and with the information they have available. However, young people with SEN and disabilities (and, indeed, other marginalised young people) often have only partial information on which to act and have only limited options for action. This perspective chimes with the notion of risks, but it reminds us that risks can usefully be seen as the limitations that are placed on the agency of young people.



The implication is that interventions should be about increasing the real possibilities for young people to make choices. This could be by, among other things, enhancing their understanding of their situations and the information available to them, and creating situations in which they have a more extensive array of choices available.



## CONCLUSIONS

Any review of the research literature on ESL, SEN and disability, and inclusion is necessarily beset by two problems. The first are definitional problems relating to what is meant by the key terms, and particularly by ESL and inclusion. The second are problems relating to the relative paucity of research evidence in this field. This review has tackled these problems by accepting broad definitions of terms and by extrapolating from such literature as is available. This weakens the certainty of any conclusions. The present authors are simply not in a position to say precisely how SEN and disability operate as determinants of ESL, nor what kinds of interventions work with what groups of young people and under what circumstances. Indeed, on this latter point, although the authors did not formally assess the quality of research, the impression is that much of the literature is descriptive and that much of the research has significant methodological limitations.

Nonetheless, it is possible to reach some conclusions, albeit at varying levels of certainty. Specifically:

- ESL should be seen as closely related to other forms of limitation in educational opportunities, participation and achievement, and as stemming in many cases from underlying social disadvantage.
- There is no single 'cause' of ESL. Instead, there are multiple risk factors which interact with each other and which operate at various levels of young people's ecologies. Factors relate to individual characteristics, family background, schools, education systems and wider social and economic conditions. They operate in different ways in different cases, and interact with local factors in each case.
- These factors operate over time, so that ESL is not a discrete event, but is the end point of a cumulative process.
- 'Early leavers' form a diverse group. They cannot be identified simply from their broad social characteristics. Instead, those at risk of ESL have to be identified through detailed knowledge of individuals and their circumstances.
- Young people identified as having SEN or disabilities are at particular risk of ESL. This is partly because the risks for ESL overlap with the risks for SEN. However, there are specific factors at work in some parts of the SEN population, where the need for support, adaptations and collaboration between service providers is important. In some cases, there may also be issues to do with the availability of appropriate upper-secondary education opportunities. Because SEN is itself a wide category, there may be differential effects for different sub-groups.



- Interventions to combat ESL need to be based on an understanding of its complex determinants and the factors that operate in particular cases. Interventions therefore need to address individual, family, school and school system issues in a co-ordinated way. It is also important that the macro-level social and economic determinants of ESL are addressed.
- Many forms of intervention are likely to be effective, though the quality of implementation and sensitivity to local circumstances are important.
- There is little research on the relationship between ESL and inclusive education. However, the attempt to build supportive and responsive schools and school systems can be seen as an attempt to develop inclusive provision.
- Given the significant gaps in the research knowledge on ESL, there is a clear need for more – or, more accurately – for better research. The understanding of the determinants of ESL in general and the broad strategies that might be used to combat it are developing well. However, more needs to be known about the relationship between SEN and ESL and about the relationship between forms of and approaches to SEN provision and ESL.

These findings also suggest some clear implications for action to reduce the incidence of ESL:

### **Understanding the determinants of ESL**

Policy-makers and practitioners need to develop a sophisticated understanding of the determinants of ESL in their contexts. At national and system level, it is inevitable that analysis will be at the level of broad risk factors and the identification of at-risk groups. Systems therefore need to develop the capacity to generate and analyse the data that will enable them to do this. However, it is important that the interaction between risk factors is also understood. This will guard against the risk of single-strand interventions which fail to tackle the complex web of causes, or the introduction of changes in one part of the system (such as new curricula or school reorganisation) which have perverse consequences in exacerbating the ESL problem. Analyses can become more fine-grained at a local level. This is because local-level data can be called upon, but also because the experience of front-line professionals and of young people themselves is available to flesh out the picture.

### **Identifying at-risk students**

In the same way, systems need data which enable them to identify young people who are most at risk of ESL. Again, at national level, identification may need to be at the level of broad at-risk groups. However, at local level it should be possible to call upon more detailed knowledge of individuals and their circumstances. One implication is that local actors (municipalities, school principals and the like) need to



have some freedom of action to use their local knowledge. They should not be constrained too much by national policies and initiatives. In considering which students are at risk, it is important not to see them as a homogenous group. Instead, they must be influenced by different types of factors, broadly divided into those which push out, pull out or lead to fade-out.

### **Taking action to reduce ESL**

ESL is not an inevitable product of education systems. Many types of intervention to reduce ESL are likely to work, if they are introduced with sufficient quality and sufficient attention to local circumstances. However, there is a clear message from the literature that single-strand interventions are not the most effective way forward. There is a need for a broad range of actions focused on students, their schools, their families and the opportunity structures which shape their choices. Moreover, this action cannot be restricted to the relatively brief period of time when the young person has left or is about to leave education. Action has to be taken well before then and, arguably, throughout learners' education careers or, indeed, throughout their life course.

In addition, the action necessary to reduce ESL is not essentially different from the action needed to combat educational disadvantage more generally. The implication is that strategies to combat ESL should not be seen as an additional task for policy-makers, but as part of wider efforts to reduce the impacts of disadvantage. Finally, actions to combat ESL are likely to be relevant to the at-risk population as a whole. While it is possible to target actions at particular sub-groups, risk factors interact in such a way that it is not sensible to see sub-group boundaries as fixed or impermeable. If anything, it is more useful to think in terms of ESL-specific actions as being likely to benefit all students and, therefore, as being part of general system improvement.

### **Reducing risks for young people with SEN and/or disability**

There are some specific factors that place young people identified as having SEN and/or disability at particular risk of ESL. Combatting these involves ensuring that:

- these young people have an appropriately high level of support;
- their transitions are planned carefully;
- their families are involved;
- there actually are appropriate, high-quality upper-secondary opportunities available to them.

However, these specific actions have to be seen as part of the wider set of actions to combat ESL. There are significant overlaps between the 'SEN' and 'non-SEN'



populations of those at risk of ESL, and between the risks which beset both groups. It follows that actions which reduce the risks for one group are likely to do the same for the other – and, indeed, as argued above, to improve the system for all.

### **Promoting inclusion**

If inclusion is understood narrowly as placement in mainstream as opposed to special schools, current evidence does not reveal much about its relationship with ESL. However, inclusion can be understood more broadly, as an approach that seeks to break down barriers facing students, to extend their opportunities and networks, and to ensure that their schools are welcoming and educationally effective. In that case, it can be concluded that inclusion is likely to be an effective part of strategies for combatting ESL. The implication is that policy-makers and practitioners should seek to develop inclusive provision in this broader sense.





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