Introduction and background

In 2015, the Department for Education’s (DfE’s) Workload Challenge reported that recording, inputting, monitoring, and analysing data were commonly tasks which contributed to unnecessary and unproductive workload for teachers in England. Since then, the department has introduced measures to reduce unnecessary workload in relation to data management. This has included the setting up of an independent review group on data management which published a report in March 2016. A Workload Advisory Group was also established to tackle excessive data burdens in schools. Their report, Making Data Work, was published in November 2018. In response to issues raised in this report, the DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research to explore the use and impact of pupil target setting on workload in schools across England. Sixty qualitative semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a range of school staff. The sample of research participants was split evenly by role, school phase and school type. Key findings are presented below.

Key findings

Target setting in schools

- Almost all of the 20 senior leaders, and three quarters of the 20 middle leaders participating in the interviews reported that they had some form of responsibility for data management, monitoring targets and/or tracking progress within their school. Seventeen of the senior leaders reported being the designated data lead for the school.
- Middle leaders tended to assume more operational duties such as recording, moderating, and checking data. They were also involved in quality assurance of targets and checking the appropriateness of targets for certain pupils.
- Several respondents reported that their school had a data manager whose work was perceived to support target setting functions, thereby helping to streamline processes to reduce workload.
- Types of targets differed by school phase, with more variation apparent across the approaches taken in secondary schools.
- Although a few respondents noted that formal targets set each academic year in primary schools only related to specific pupils (for example, where they were underachieving and required support), they were mostly related to national assessment points in early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2.
- In secondary schools, the most common approaches were targets for attainment being set in year 7 with progress to be followed by meeting annual targets through to year 11 (known as ‘flight paths’), or separate targets being set for each key stage.
- Targets were commonly set for each individual pupil. Nearly half of senior leaders at primary and secondary level also noted that targets were set for whole classes or specific cohorts within a school, such as those eligible for Pupil Premium (PP) funding, those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and those with English as an additional language (EAL).
- Staff in secondary schools were more likely to set individual targets for pupils upon joining the school, which generally remained until the end of key stage 4. By contrast, targets in primary schools tended to be set for pupils at the start of each academic year because rates of individual progress could fluctuate quite markedly throughout primary education.
- One secondary academy had introduced knowledge and skills milestones to support target grades. These milestones reflected what a pupil could do in each subject and identified what was required next to enable them to reach their target grade. A similar approach was adopted in some primary schools, where senior leaders set a long-term target for the end of a key stage, with progress towards this then monitored over time.
- At secondary level, most teachers said that they could, obtain the agreement of a member of the SLT to change target grades if it was thought necessary and they had
sufficient evidence. In primary schools, it was easier to move pupils up a level. Senior leaders in primary schools acknowledged that young children did not develop at the same rate, at the same time. Two secondary school senior leaders were considering changing their system to align it to that in primary schools, since they considered it better to identify progress over time, rather than trying to predict how pupils would perform several years in the future at key stage 4.

- Senior leaders reported using 5 types of data to set targets. These were: national assessments, data from teacher assessments; cognitive ability test outcomes; baseline assessment data for each year; and entrance exam data.
- All teachers and middle leaders stated that progress towards targets was monitored. In order to do this, assessments were carried out at regular intervals throughout the year (commonly 3 times a year, rising to possibly 4 or 5 for exam years). Middle leaders (both primary and secondary) reported that there was no additional data inputting required to carry out their leadership roles and responsibilities. They were able to use centrally held data or data inputted by class teachers to carry out monitoring and review functions.
- Interview feedback suggested that although secondary school teachers knew which data were used to underpin targets, they were not always aware of how targets had been decided.
- All 20 teachers interviewed reported that it was the work involved in reporting on progress, and implementing interventions, that created the bulk of their workload associated with targets (rather than the activity of target setting itself).
- Interviews revealed that a wide range of software packages were being used in schools to help manage work associated with the use of targets. Twenty different specialist software packages were used, and most were felt to be helpful.
- Targets were used in schools for: school development/action planning; monitoring school performance (including analysis of the performance of different cohorts); staff performance management; monitoring pupil progress; for recording, analysing and tracking targets and related attainment data.

The management and value of target setting

- Over three quarters of all interview participants reported that an appropriate amount of their time was spent on target setting and they did not feel that the target setting work itself was an onerous element of their workload. They felt that target setting (and the associated activities informed by those targets) were valuable and necessary in supporting teaching and learning, and in ensuring the academic progress of pupils. Almost half of all respondents reported that one of the most valuable aspects of targets was that the analysis of pupil assessment data allowed school staff to quickly identify pupils who were not making sufficient progress.
- However, most of the senior leaders who agreed that targets were worthwhile did so with caveats.
- Firstly, it was important for senior leaders to communicate clearly to staff, parents/carers, and pupils why targets were being used, and that they were only a guideline – an indicator of potential rather than an exact science. A target grade was not the same as a predicted grade, and this needed to be explained to pupils and parents/carers.
- Secondary senior leaders felt that although targets were useful for informing the work of teachers, care was required in how they were used with pupils. A few senior leaders felt that targets placed unnecessary pressure on pupils or hampered the creativity of teachers. In 2 cases, target grades were not shared with pupils or teachers at key stage 3 because of this.
- A small number of senior leaders highlighted that it was important to ensure that target setting considered a balance of quantitative and qualitative data to ensure that the skills and knowledge that sat behind the data were secure.
- Although targets were generally considered to be worthwhile, some participants reported burdensome aspects of target setting and monitoring. These included the number of formal assessments and data drops taking place in one academic year, pupil data analysis, and duplication in data inputting and written reporting requirements.
- In terms of the specific activities associated with, or informed by, target setting, classroom teachers all reported that it was the work involved in reporting on pupil progress, and implementing interventions (i.e. identifying pupils that need the most help and delivering this to them), that took most of their time.
- In comparison, middle leaders and senior leaders reported that meetings to review targets and progress (including the progress made through intervention work) created the bulk of the workload that they felt related to target setting. Workload management was supported by sufficient resourcing of activities, use of specialist software (across all participants, 2 separate software packages were mentioned), a reduction of data drops 3 across the year (reported by 24 of 60 participants), and streamlined report writing (13 of 60 participants).

Steps taken to minimise workload

- Most commonly, research participants reported a reduction in the number of data drops taking place in schools to inform target setting (typically from six to three per year). Participants suggested that not only did having fewer data drops reduce workload, but more meaningful interventions could be implemented as a result.
- Other examples of action taken in schools to minimise the workload of target setting (and associated activities) included: reducing the amount of report writing, reducing the amount of data required, consistent data collection and analysis, use of specialist software and collaborative approaches to target setting (for example small groups of teaching colleagues working together to set or discuss targets).
- In terms of ways in which the work associated with target setting could be streamlined in future, interview participants suggested adopting centralised systems, allocating sufficient timetabled time for staff to carry out activities related to target setting, enabling target setting to be adapted to meet departmental/subject needs, and collaborative working between teams of staff.