Exploring the relationship between teacher workload and target setting

Research report

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CooperGibson Research

Contents

List of tables

Executive Summary

In 2015, the Department for Education's (DfE's) Workload Challenge[1] reported that recording, inputting, monitoring and analysing data was one of the most frequently mentioned tasks contributing to unnecessary and unproductive workload for teachers in England. Since then, the department has taken action to reduce unnecessary workload in relation to data management. This includes establishing an independent review group on data management and publishing their report in March 2016. A Workload Advisory Group was also established to tackle excessive data burdens in schools and their report, Making Data Work, was published in November 2018. In response to issues raised in Making Data Work, DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research to explore the use and impact of pupil target setting on workload in schools across England.

Aims and approach

This project focused on the reported impact that the process of target setting had on school staff workload, particularly among senior leaders, middle leaders, and classroom teachers. This included activities associated with pupil target setting (such as data inputting and analysis, and managing interventions for pupils who require support), as well as the process of setting targets itself.

Sixty qualitative semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a range of school staff. These explored:

- Roles and responsibilities of different levels of school staff in relation to target setting and data management.

- Time spent in schools on work related to target setting, and its impact on teacher workload.

- Perceived value of targets and target setting activities, and how these could be improved in the future.

The sample of research participants was split evenly by role (senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers), school phase and school type.

Impact and value of target setting

The main purpose of target setting reported by research participants was to set targets for individual pupils. However, most time spent in relation to target setting was not reported by participants to be employed on setting the targets themselves, but on

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[1] In October 2014, the DfE launched its online Workload Challenge consultation. This ran for one month, and asked three open questions about the unnecessary or unproductive tasks teachers carry out, strategies used to manage these, and what more should be done by government, schools or others to help address teacher workload. Over 44,000 people responded to the consultation. DfE (2015), *Workload challenge analysis of teacher consultation responses*.

monitoring progress against those targets, for example: identifying and planning for interventions to support pupils' learning and progress, analysing pupil data, and meetings with colleagues to discuss target setting. These activities are referred to throughout this report as 'activities associated with target setting' (see section 3.3 for detail on each).

All middle leaders and the majority of senior leaders said that target setting itself was a worthwhile activity. Most were also in agreement that although data did not tell senior leaders about the context behind the targets, those targets were a very useful catalyst for dialogue with school staff (and parents/carers and pupils) about performance and progress. However, just over one quarter of all interview participants said that they were required to duplicate data inputting, often recording the same information several times across a range of formats.

Teachers were less positive as to whether or not targets were valuable. Like middle leaders, they raised concerns about the potential negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people if they felt pressured to achieve specific grades.

Responsibility for generating targets and overseeing data

Over three quarters of the forty senior and middle leaders reported that they had some form of responsibility for data management, monitoring targets and/or tracking progress across the school. Senior leaders were responsible for strategic oversight of data management and target setting, whilst middle leaders' responsibilities tended to be more operational and included: recording and analysing data and monitoring, moderating and checking the accuracy of data and targets. Target setting itself was most commonly carried out in accordance with school or academy trust policy, and was completed centrally for the whole school or trust, either by a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) or a designated data manager. In small schools, or primary schools, targets were generated by individual class/subject teachers.

Types of targets set

The types of targets set tended to be for individual pupils, and differed by school phase.

- **In primary schools,** long-term targets were set for pupils to reach a prescribed level of attainment by the end of a key stage (for example, a specific outcome in a national assessment, or category of teacher assessment), with progress monitored over time.

- **In secondary schools,** there was more variation within the schools, but 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 the end of each key stage.

Additional targets were also set for whole classes or specific cohorts, such as different gender groupings, pupils eligible for Pupil Premium (PP) funding,[2] those with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND), pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL), pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), and pupils from forces families. Setting targets across different cohorts of pupils was reported by research participants in both primary and secondary schools.

Target setting processes

Five types of data were reported by senior leaders to inform target setting processes (see section 2.3 of the main report for a summary of each), with a combination of data sources collated to inform targets. Most commonly these were outcomes of national assessments, and national benchmarking data. Target setting tended to be regarded as a collaborative and group-based activity, involving dialogue with class teachers and regular review meetings between middle and senior leaders.

Use of targets

Targets were reported to be used for a range of activities. These were: school development and action planning, monitoring school performance, staff performance management, monitoring and tracking pupil progress, reporting to stakeholders, identifying and monitoring interventions, and raising pupil aspirations. In all schools there were multiple uses for target setting data, but the prevalence of these differed by staff type. Senior leaders' use of targets was generally reported to inform strategic planning, whilst teachers and middle leaders most commonly said that they used targets to support pupil progress. Middle leaders were most likely to note that staff performance management processes were informed by targets (see section 2.4).

Management 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. However, during the course of the interviews, some participants did go on to report on burdensome aspects of these activities.

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

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[2] For information on Pupil Premium funding, see: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium

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, 20 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 and future improvements

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) – see section 4.1 for details.

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. It should be noted that each of these suggestions were made by small numbers of interview participants overall.

Key Messages

This research has highlighted that:

- The number of formal assessments and data drops taking place in one academic year, pupil data analysis, duplication in data inputting and written reporting requirements (to both parents/carers and external stakeholders such as governors), were reported to be time-consuming in the context of target setting and areas that would benefit from further streamlining.

- There is a need for staff training at all levels of the workforce (and the time provided to be able to access that training), so that data is accessed and analysed effectively and efficiently.

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[3] Data drops refer to the times of year where staff record current levels of attainment by pupils, either using specialist software programmes, spreadsheets or other reporting templates used by the school.

- Planning, resourcing and delivering intervention work (section 3.3.1), whilst thought to be valuable, was taking significant time to complete. The research suggested that schools could learn from good practice examples where efficient planning, development and delivery take place.

- The different types of reporting in schools were described as overly time consuming; it was suggested that a reduced number of data outputs could be used for different stakeholder groups (governing bodies, academy trust boards, local authority (LA) representatives, and Ofsted[4]).

- Meetings related to different activities associated with target setting were valued, but interview participants suggested they could be streamlined.

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[4] Under the new inspection framework (implemented from September 2019), Ofsted will not ask to review internal school data. However, senior leaders reported that they used these data to inform their own reporting and knowledge of their school context.

1. Introduction

In 2015, the Department for Education's (DfE's) Workload Challenge[5] results reported that recording, inputting, monitoring and analysing data was one of the most frequently mentioned tasks contributing to unnecessary and unproductive workload for teachers in England. Following this, in March 2016, the independent review group report on data management was published. In 2018, the Workload Advisory Group considered how to remove unnecessary workload associated with data collection and analysis in schools; informing the Making Data Work report published in November 2018 alongside the government response. This found that, in relation to targets and target setting, there was little evidence relating to the impact of setting attainment targets on students and staff.

The Government's response to the Making Data Work report accepted all the recommendations in full. These included a commitment to commission research into the use and impact of target setting in schools across England. To address this, DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research to undertake a qualitative research study to explore the use and impact of target setting on teacher workload in schools across England.

1.1 Aims

This project focused on the reported impact that the process of target setting has on school staff workload, particularly among senior leaders, middle leaders, and classroom teachers. This included activities associated with pupil target setting, as well as the process of setting targets itself. In particular, the research explored the:

- Roles and responsibilities of different levels of school staff in relation to target setting and data management.

- Time spent in schools on work related to target setting, and its impact on teacher workload.

- Perceived value of targets and target setting activities, and how these could be improved in the future.

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[5] In October 2014, the DfE launched its online Workload Challenge consultation. This ran for one month, and asked three open questions about the unnecessary or unproductive tasks teachers carry out, strategies used to manage these, and what more should be done by government, schools or others to help address teacher workload. Over 44,000 people responded to the consultation. DfE (2015), *Workload Challenge: Analysis of teacher consultation responses.*

1.2 Method and sample of participants

The research comprised of 60 qualitative semi-structured telephone interviews with a range of school staff. The sample of research participants was split evenly by role, school phase and school type (see Table 1).

Table 1: Sample breakdown by interview participant type

	Primary LA maintained	Primary Academies	Secondary LA maintained	Secondary Academies	Total
Teacher	5	5	5	5	20
Middle leader	5	5	5	5	20
Senior leader	5	5	5	5	20
Total	15	15	15	15	60

A sample of 420 schools was randomly selected from Get Information About Schools, stratified evenly between primary and secondary academies and local authority (LA) maintained schools (105 of each type of school). The DfE provided contact details for this sample of schools.

These schools were contacted via email to invite them to participate, targeting the quota of schools across key characteristics outlined in Table 1 and either senior leaders, middle leaders or teachers. The sample was boosted by using a snowballing technique, whereby schools passed on details of other schools (with differing contexts) to contact or where known schools fitting the criteria in Table 1 were contacted.

The school sample was monitored to ensure a reasonable spread across other key characteristics, such as region, urban/rural locations, size, deprivation levels and Ofsted outcomes. The sample of staff taking part was also monitored for reasonable coverage across range of experiences (years in teaching and current role, gender, working hours (full-time/part-time) and main subject taught).

Senior leaders included headteachers, deputy and assistant headteachers. There was a spread of roles amongst the middle leaders interviewed. This included Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), safeguarding lead, subject/key stage lead, progress and achievement lead, Head of Department, and Head of Year.

Details of the sample achieved are provided in the Appendix.

2. Target setting in schools

This section provides an account of the roles and responsibilities that interview participants had in relation to target setting, the processes that they reported following during data collection activities, how they used targets in day-to-day practice and the perceived value of those targets.

2.1 Responsibility for data management

Senior and middle leaders were asked about any responsibility they had for data management in their schools. All but one of the twenty senior leaders, and three quarters of the twenty middle leaders participating in the interviews reported that they had some form of responsibility for data management, monitoring targets and/or tracking progress across the school (see section 3.1 for their views on the amount of time these activities took).

Seventeen of the 20 senior leaders were responsible for strategic oversight of data management and target setting, and several mentioned that this work meant that they were the designated lead for data in the school.[6] This meant that senior leaders were responsible for driving strategy, performance management of personnel (often informed by pupil attainment targets), reporting progress against targets to governors, monitoring the impact of intervention work (i.e. identifying pupils that need the most help and delivering this to them), and ensuring the quality and accuracy of target setting processes across the whole school (for example, by meeting regularly with middle leaders and data managers to review data, and identify disparities between targets set and outcomes achieved).

Responsibilities for middle leaders tended to be more operational and included: recording data (including assessment and progress data) and ensuring that others within their responsibility area did so as well, monitoring, moderating and checking the accuracy of those data, conducting analysis, monitoring progress, and quality assuring target setting within individual year groups and departments. The latter included checking the appropriateness of targets for individual pupils, as well as validating data entry to ensure that information submitted by teachers was accurate. A small number of middle leaders were responsible for reporting on progress data to the school senior leadership team (SLT) and to governors.

Interview participants also made clear that other members of school staff aside from those included in the research sample (i.e. those not in leadership or teaching roles) were involved in target setting. Several interview participants, predominantly those

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[6] Other roles were also mentioned, for example, designated lead for monitoring achievement, assessment coordinator or subject leadership.

working in academies and/or secondary schools, mentioned that they were supported by a data manager who ran the day-to-day aspects of target setting.

> 'All of the systems that run and underpin [target setting] are taken care of by our data officer and we have a central team as well, as part of the trust, who do all of our data analysis. I am really the school point of contact for the process, but most of it runs in the background behind me'. *Senior leader, secondary academy*

The work of data managers was spoken about positively as they were perceived to support target setting functions, thereby helping to streamline processes to reduce workload ([section 4](#)). Senior leaders in small schools and primary schools sometimes noted that responsibility for data and targets was shared between a small SLT (and in some cases, overseen by the headteacher alone). Generally, however, target setting was described as a collective practice carried out in collaboration with colleagues.

2.2 Types of targets

Most interview participants reported that the main purpose of target setting was to set targets for individual pupils, so that their progress could be monitored over time. Within this, however, types of targets differed by school phase, with more variation apparent across the approaches taken in secondary schools.

- **In primary schools:** In the majority of primary schools, targets would be long-term and relate to pupils reaching a prescribed level of attainment by the end of a key stage (for example, a specific outcome in a national assessment, or category of teacher assessment); or to maintain progress at the same rate as they had been doing in previous years. A few participants 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), otherwise targets were related to national assessment points in early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2.

- **In secondary schools:** Targets were set in various ways, including setting targets for GCSE attainment when in year 7 and annual grades being set (and assessed against) to determine a target for progress up to year 11 (known as 'flight paths'); just having one target grade for attainment in year 11 (without annual targets to meet); separate targets per key stage, such as a grade or band corresponding to GCSE grades (calculated in the same way as annual targets, but set only for end of key stage); a percentage of 'I can' statements that a pupil should be able to evidence against over the course of the year (for example, in subjects such as physical education). 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. More detail on target setting processes is provided in section 2.3.

Nearly all senior leaders and all of the middle leaders interviewed noted that targets were set for each individual pupil. Nearly half also noted that targets were set for whole classes or specific cohorts within a school (the latter was more commonly noted among senior leaders than middle leaders in primary schools, but this type of target setting across different cohorts of pupils was reported to be taking place in both primary and secondary schools). These additional cohorts commonly included those pupils eligible for Pupil Premium (PP) funding, reflecting the statutory requirement for schools to report on the nature and impact of PP expenditure.[7] Other cohorts that were commonly monitored included those with SEND, EAL, those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), pupils from forces families, and gender. One senior leader of a secondary school also stated that they would look at other factors, which they would change each year, to see if any patterns in progress could be identified (for example, among pupils with summer birthdays).

2.2.1 Milestones

There were patterns identified by school phase among the milestones for target setting. Staff in secondary schools were more likely to set individual targets for pupils upon joining the school,[8] which were to remain until the end of key stage 4 (and these targets were reported by senior leaders not to change during that time except in exceptional circumstances), or they would set new targets for pupils at the start of each key stage. In comparison, staff in primary schools were more likely to have a system where new targets were set for pupils at the start of each academic year (reported by nearly all primary senior leaders), generally because rates of individual progress could fluctuate quite markedly throughout primary education. For example, outcomes from Early Years Foundation Stage assessments were used to set targets for the end of key stage 1. However, for key stage 2 targets, staff in primary schools tended to use internal systems to set targets for the end of each year through to year 6.

Senior leaders in 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. Whilst an attainment target for the pupil was fixed at the start of year 7, staff and pupils worked with a progressive matrix of smaller and specific knowledge and skills targets, thus identifying clearly how the pupil could progress towards the ultimate year 11 (key stage 4) attainment target. It was felt by the senior leader interviewed that this

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[7] For information on Pupil Premium funding, see: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium
[8] For details on staff members responsible for target setting, see section 2.2.3.

approach to milestones promoted a more holistic approach to target setting, rather than focusing solely on attainment data.

> 'Understanding their learning journey and the depth of the subject, rather than it just being a numerical quantitative score, is more important…We have given the staff free rein around what best fits their teaching, their learning journey and their schemes of work'.
> *Senior leader, secondary academy*

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. One senior leader reflected that this was a practical approach at primary level due to the changing needs of children and young people.

> 'Sometimes children obviously have underlying needs, that may not [be easily identified in young pupils] for a few years, particularly with…[for example] a child who has had a traumatic background, you just don't know sometimes. It is just not possible to ensure that [a target is achievable] at the age of seven'. *Senior leader, LA maintained primary school*

Indeed, for the majority of staff in primary schools, targets were not numerical targets that had to be achieved by the pupil by the end of the year, but a broad level of progress over a period of time (typically either a year or key stage). Two senior leaders did not believe that this equated to setting targets, but was more focused on measuring progress towards the particular year's expected outcome. In these cases, targets were only formally put in place for those children who were at risk of/were not achieving the prescribed level of progress over the course of the year.

2.2.2 Changing targets

All middle leaders reported that progress towards the targets was measured by teacher assessment or testing through the year. However, being responsible for reviews of progress towards targets did not mean that the target itself could be changed at middle leadership level. Changing targets was generally undertaken in liaison with senior leaders, rather than middle leaders (see below). Indeed, less than one quarter of middle leaders (4 of 20) said that they were able to change any pupil targets following progress review. In comparison, most teachers said that they could, with sufficient evidence, obtain the agreement of a member of the SLT to change target grades if it was thought necessary.

To ensure there were robust controls in place for target monitoring, there were generally strict rules in place for changing targets (following school/trust policy – section 2.3).

However, this was felt to be more possible in primary schools. In these schools, pupils could, with the agreement of senior leaders, be moved up a level. This was important for senior leaders as they acknowledged that young children did not develop at the same rate, at the same time. Two secondary school senior leaders were considering changing their current system to adopting an approach more akin to that in primary schools. They felt that it might be more accurate to identify progress over time, rather than trying to predict how pupils would perform several years in the future at key stage 4.

One middle leader commented that the headteacher was happy to change targets following a review of progress, as targets were regarded as flexible. Two said that they could change the targets of specific pupils at the end of the year. For one, this was because their school had onsite specialist provision for young people with SEND and sometimes it was necessary to revise targets. Any changes were carried out in consultation with staff, parents/carers and the pupil. For the other middle leader, targets could be raised for pupils with English as an additional language (EAL).

> 'Some EAL pupils might have their targets raised, their targets might be low to begin with because [the pupils] don't [join the school with] any key stage 2 data. In these instances, we do raise targets'. *Middle leader, LA maintained primary school*

2.2.3 Responsibility for generating targets

There were four approaches identified by senior leaders in terms of the individuals responsible for generating targets in their schools. Most commonly, this was a central process rather than a task undertaken by individual teachers or members of staff.

- Targets were set centrally by a member of the SLT (primary and secondary schools).
- Targets were set centrally by a data manager/data lead (secondary schools only).
- Targets were decided collaboratively by whole school or a year group team (primary schools only).
- Targets were decided by individual class/subject teachers (primary schools).

Reflecting the collaborative nature of target setting, in cases where individual class or subject teachers were ultimately responsible for generating targets, it was noted by senior leaders that this was completed in conversation with a line manager (generally a member of the SLT). This was often the case in primary LA maintained schools, where the majority of senior leaders either reported that teachers generated the targets in agreement with their line manager, or that senior leaders generated targets with input from teachers.

Nearly all teachers (18 of 20) reported that they were involved in setting targets for individual pupils. Some primary teachers (in both LA maintained and academy schools) worked with targets that were set for their class as a whole. These tended to be targets such as a specified proportion of the class being required to achieve age-related expectations or above.

Most teachers in secondary schools worked with targets that were set for their exam classes only, and again tended to relate to pupils individually achieving specified grades or standards. Targets were provided to teaching staff, generally by data managers, and the teachers were responsible for maintaining the level of progress from year to year.

A few teachers mentioned measuring progress for distinct pupil cohorts (for example, gender, SEND, Pupil Premium, and EAL) – see section 2.4.

2.3 Target setting processes

The majority of senior and middle leaders noted that target setting was driven by school or academy trust policy. One trust was reported to play a mentoring role for one primary academy. School staff were required to submit targets and predictions to a central team in the mentoring trust, who then worked with the school to look at school improvement informed by the data.

> 'It is a really useful process to make sure that you are on track with your development priorities, any concerns you have got…. So, we have always got that somebody…to keep you on track with what you need to be doing, not just with your targets'. *Senior leader, primary academy*

2.3.1 Data used to inform targets

There were five types of data reported during the senior leader interviews as being used to set targets in schools:

- **Attainment on national assessments**. This was reported by most senior leaders, and particularly those at secondary level. Where primary schools used prior attainment data, these tended to relate to targets set at key stage 2, which were informed by early years and key stage 1 outcomes. For secondary schools, key stage 2 data was used to inform targets. Where a school had a sixth form, the GCSE scores were the basis of targets. Half of twenty senior leaders, including nearly all of those based in secondary schools, reported using national benchmarking tools to analyse attainment data and set targets.

- **School's own teacher assessment**. These were also reported by most senior leaders, at both primary and secondary level, and related to the collation of outcomes from informal assessment activities undertaken throughout the school year.

- **Cognitive Ability Test outcomes**. Reported by a small number of secondary senior leaders in LA maintained schools, and used to assess ability in verbal, quantitative and non-verbal skills. These outcomes were used for target setting in conjunction with key stage 2 attainment data, to enable targets to be set across all subjects (and not just English and Maths).

- **NFER scores and baseline assessment data on entry to each year.** These were both reported as being useful in primary schools.

- **Entrance exam data.** One secondary academy used entrance exam data as a basis for target setting if no prior attainment data for key stage 2 were available.

All data tended to be collated centrally, with teachers and middle leaders reporting that they had little or no role in collecting data related to national assessments, benchmarking or testing (as this is managed nationally). Over half of primary school teachers (6 of 10) were responsible for inputting data to school systems – this included baseline assessment data and teacher assessment data generated through the course of the year and used to inform progress monitoring.

All teachers and middle leaders stated that progress towards targets was monitored. To monitor progress, assessments were carried out at regular intervals throughout the year (commonly three times a year, rising to possibly four or five for exam years).

Teacher-generated data at primary and secondary level were moderated throughout the year; internally by senior/middle leaders, and externally by colleagues from other local schools or from within the same academy trust – this tended to take place before data were uploaded by teachers onto school systems.

All 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.

2.3.2 Decision-making

The majority of the 60 interview participants (of all types) stated that a combination of data was used as the basis for target-setting decisions. This was commonly prior attainment on national assessments, outcomes from informal teacher-led assessment activities, plus progress made in the previous year and/or baseline assessments at the start of each year (the latter was felt to be particularly useful in primary schools).

From the range of data collated, school staff looked at attainment at set points or milestones achieved, and calculated whether the pupil was working towards, above or below the school's expected level of progress/attainment (as pre-defined through the targets, informed by the datasets listed in section 2.3.1). If a pupil was not reaching their expected level of progress at the various milestones, then the school would set in place targeted interventions.

The majority of teachers (14 of 20) and middle leaders (19 of 20) reported that targets were decided using the above process of collating data and calculating targets (with the majority using specialist software purchased by the school). This meant that there was a set method by which they or senior leaders generated targets for each pupil or class/year group/cohort. Most primary teachers and some primary middle leaders said that whilst this standard process was used to create targets, there was some element of case-by-case discussion involved, for example checking with the previous teacher whether a target was realistic. It was felt to be important to have 'frank and honest' conversations with colleagues about the targets being set. However, very few schools in which participants worked used case-by-case review as the sole method for deciding targets. Instead, commonly, it was a collaborative and group-based approach.

In terms of awareness, 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. This reflected the more common use of centralised data managers to set and distribute targets across secondary schools.

Two middle leaders in secondary schools emphasised the usefulness of national benchmarking data for target setting, as this was perceived to provide a robust guide for creating realistic levels of aspiration for pupils. In one school, national data were used to create different targets for different departments (for example where some departments were outperforming others, they could use different levels of benchmarks to inform decision making).

2.3.3 Progress reporting

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). Furthermore, all of the teachers described similar processes that they were required to follow. Progress was reported by teachers to senior and middle leaders, with teachers inputting data at each progress data drop. Then, underachieving pupils, gaps in skills and knowledge, anomalies, and underperforming staff/departments could be (and were expected by senior and middle leaders to be) identified following data drops. Pupil progress meetings and reports were written by teachers and discussed with senior leaders. Interventions for pupils, training needs for staff (for the delivery of quality teaching and learning), and extra

support required by both could be determined, put in place and then reviewed at the next progress data capture point. Teachers reported that these were the most time-consuming elements of working with targets.

Half of all middle leaders (10 of 20) were required to meet with senior leaders regularly to review progress data against targets (this tended to take place following each data drop). These meetings were used to discuss data analysis, identify trends, and highlight pupils/cohorts where support strategies or interventions were required. The impact and effectiveness of those interventions would then be reviewed in subsequent meetings. These progress meetings between middle and senior leaders were also used to inform continuing professional development (CPD) and staff training needs.

All middle leaders and teachers were responsible for reporting progress to parents/carers. This was commonly completed via a combination of verbal feedback at parents' evenings and written reports (see section 4 for examples of practice to minimise workload in this area) and gave a target grade, current attainment, and an indicator of a pupil's level of progress towards their target (working towards, expected or exceeding).

2.3.4 Use of software to support target setting and associated activities

During the interviews with middle leaders and teachers, it was evident that a wide range of software packages were being used in schools to help manage work associated with the use of targets (see section 3.2). In addition to generic software for word processing and numerical analysis, interview participants referenced 20 different specialist software packages that they used for recording, analysing and tracking targets and related attainment data.

Overall, these software packages were reported to be helpful by both teachers and middle leaders. A range of functions were specifically mentioned as saving time or enabling staff to conduct sophisticated analysis quickly, for example:

- Exporting/importing data between other analytical programmes.
- Filtering data to identify trends and patterns over time, and individual progress through the year.
- Accessing specific reports alongside data, for example, behaviour logs.
- Automatic conversion of data into markers of progress.
- Automatic comparative analysis, for example, against national benchmarks, previous year's data, between groups/cohorts.
- Improving accessibility of data across the school.

However, challenges related to the use of software were sometimes mentioned by interview participants (section 3.2.1).

2.4 Use of targets

All interview participants were asked how targets were used in their schools (Table 2). Senior leaders' use of targets was generally reported to be strategic and related to school development and action planning, monitoring school performance and keeping track of pupil progress. This contrasted to some extent with teachers and middle leaders, who most commonly said that they used targets to identify, deliver and review the impact of interventions for pupils and to track how well pupils perform. Middle leaders were also most likely to note that staff performance management processes were informed by targets (and whether or not these had been achieved); this likely reflected the roles undertaken by middle leaders (for example, head of department) in terms of line managing members of teaching staff.

Table 2: Use of targets by different staff types

School development/ action planning	The majority of senior leaders stated that targets were used to help identify priorities for the School Development Plan (SDP). This then fed into action planning at both whole school and departmental level. A small number of middle leaders (as well as senior leaders) said that by identifying these SDP priorities, staff training and development needs were also highlighted. One quarter of teachers and nearly half of middle leaders also felt that targets helped to inform next steps planning for teaching and learning.
Monitoring school performance	Nearly half of senior leaders (predominantly those in secondary schools) said that targets were used to monitor whole school performance. This had been particularly important for a school graded Inadequate by Ofsted. A small number of teachers and middle leaders noted that targets were used to analyse the performance of specific cohorts of pupils (for example, disadvantaged, Pupil Premium), or to track progress of individual subjects/key stages/departments.
Staff performance management	Just over one quarter of senior leaders, three quarters of middle leaders and nearly half of teachers said that targets were used as part of staff performance management processes. However, it was noted by senior leaders that they were careful not to make a judgement based on one teacher's classes without looking at the full relative progress made in a comparative subject area or school. Furthermore, if the teacher could show evidence of the work undertaken to try to ensure pupil/class targets were met, and any mitigating circumstances, this was also acceptable. This included running interventions during lunchtimes or after school.

	'The teachers are aware that their job is to get the best progress out of the children…. our school is in a very challenging context, you can't control all of the factors. So if [teachers] have done everything within [their] power, that is great with me. I can't ask any more'. *Senior leader, primary academy*
	A small number of teachers interviewed were Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) and, therefore, had not yet undergone the same performance management processes as more experienced teachers. Eight teachers reported that they did not have pupil attainment target data as one of their performance management targets.
	If a numerical target was set for performance management, they were of the style: 'X% of pupils to be at age related expectation/secure by the end of the year'. This was a comparable situation for middle leaders, who reported targets such as a certain percentage of pupils required to reach a specified level of attainment/value-added, or a reduction in attainment gaps by factors such as gender or disadvantage. A small number of middle leaders talked about targets being necessary for the improvement of the department and staff as well as pupils. They felt that targets made accountability clear and placed ownership of progress onto the people responsible for driving it.
Monitoring pupil progress	Nearly all middle leaders, three quarters of senior leaders and the majority of teachers said that targets were used to ensure that individual pupils were on track. They were also used to monitor progress of whole classes or year groups. Several interview participants said that benchmarking progress against national data was a valuable process for focusing teaching practice, and maximising potential across a pupil cohort.
Reporting to stakeholders	Around half of senior leaders and middle leaders commented that they used targets as a tool to inform reporting to different stakeholder groups (parents/carers, governors, LA, academy trust, Ofsted). Although most teachers said that targets were used to inform reporting to parents/carers, a small number emphasised that they found them particularly helpful for this work.
Identifying and monitoring interventions	Three quarters of teachers, nearly all middle leaders, and just over half of senior leaders said that targets helped them to identify and track interventions. Interventions could either be academic or pastoral, for example, if a pupil was not meeting targets across a range of subjects. This also included targets being used to inform dialogue with parents/carers and pupils about those interventions,

	and find potential solutions easily and quickly to any support needs required for a pupil so that they made rapid progress.
Raising pupil aspirations	A small number of senior and middle leaders identified targets as being an important lever for motivating their pupils and raising aspirations, for example where pupils were from disadvantaged background or parental engagement was low.

3. Impact of target setting

This section presents the feedback that interview participants gave in relation to the value of setting and using targets, the impact of target setting and its associated activities on their workload.

3.1 Perceived value of targets and target setting activities

All middle leaders and the majority of senior leaders said that target setting was a worthwhile activity, due to the information it provided for tracking progress and monitoring any necessary interventions.

> 'I would not be an effective… practitioner if I did not assess the pupils and inform them so that they know where they were going wrong and inform them what they needed to do to improve. It is an essential part of our job. I cannot think of another way around it'. *Middle leader, LA maintained secondary school*

Most were also in agreement that although data produced as a result of target setting did not tell senior leaders about the context behind the targets, those targets were a very useful catalyst for dialogue about pupil performance.

> 'I think the data allows me to be curious about what may be going on in teaching and learning. Patterns in particular. It is interesting looking at the patterns and the stories it tells starts to kick my curiosity then about what is going on there. So the data does have a benefit in lending itself to allowing you to ask the questions'. *Senior leader, primary academy*

3.1.1 Perceived value of targets

Targets were considered necessary by three quarters of those in leadership roles (senior and middle leaders), as pupils needed to know what they were aiming towards and how to get there, whilst schools needed measurable data to keep track of progress and ensure that any additional support was identified and implemented effectively. Middle leaders regarded targets as a valuable tool to inform planning for future lessons or revising planning for the next teaching block or year.

Nonetheless, most of the senior leaders who agreed that targets were worthwhile did so with caveats attached:

- 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. This included an acknowledgement that targets were an indicator of potential and by no means an exact science. Thus, a target grade was not the same as a predicted grade, and this needed to be explained to pupils and parents/carers.

  'They can never be 100% accurate and as long as you keep that in mind it gives you an opportunity to have good discussions with children and parents and have a good idea of what they are aiming to achieve. Really it is more about children achieving the best that they can achieve, not necessarily their targets'. *Senior leader, secondary academy*

- All secondary senior leaders felt that targets were useful for informing the work of teachers, but care was required in how they were used with pupils. At key stage 3, targets were felt by a few senior leaders to place unnecessary pressure on pupils or hamper the creativity of teachers. In two cases, target grades were not shared with pupils or teachers at key stage 3 as a result (see section 3.2.2). For key stage 4, senior leaders reported that targets were helpful in roughly guiding teachers as to where their lessons should be pitched and what support was needed, but that they were not as important to pupils as they were all trying to pass their key stage 4 assessments regardless of targets.

- 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.

- It was felt by a small number of primary senior leaders that targets should take account of the local context and not just national benchmarking.

  'Targets are biased towards the national picture and predictions are more realistic for the local context. We have to show that we are acknowledging what the national picture is… But I will not [criticise my teachers] if they cannot get a [challenging] cohort of children to where that national picture is'. *Senior leader, LA maintained primary school*

Over half of teachers (13 of 20) thought that having targets was probably worthwhile. They noted benefits such as enabling teachers to ensure that no pupils were left behind, aiding lesson planning, ensuring that necessary skills were embedded, allowing necessary interventions to be identified, and holding teachers and schools accountable (for example, to line managers/senior leaders, governors, local authorities and Ofsted).

3.1.2 Perceived value of target setting and associated activities

Almost all of the 60 interview participants (57/60) reported that activities associated with pupil target setting were valuable and necessary to support pupil progress and achievement. The three main reasons given for why the activities were perceived to be valuable were: the opportunities provided for discussion with colleagues (and parents/carers) about pupil progress and achievement, identifying groups of pupils and individual pupils who were not making progress, and informing formative assessment discussions with pupils.

Almost half of all respondents reported that one of the most valuable activities associated with having targets was that the analysis of pupil assessment data allowed school staff to quickly identify pupils who were not making sufficient progress. This information allowed teachers to plan their lessons more effectively and to consider if certain pupils or groups of pupils required additional support. It also meant that middle leaders such as heads of year and SENCOs were better informed as they were drawing on accurate data during discussions with parents/carers. This was important for all groups of participants when analysing data at school, subject, class and pupil level.

> 'We are asked to look at [the data analysis software used by the school] so that we can identify underperforming pupils in our classes. That is really useful as it gives me an idea where the pupils are and what they need to do to move forward. It informs my planning'.
> *Teacher, LA maintained secondary school*

Meetings and less formal discussions held with colleagues in relation to target setting processes and outcomes were valued for many reasons. Firstly, apart from the opportunity to discuss data findings related to pupil achievement and progress, these discussions allowed staff to share practice and explore how classroom planning and teaching might be quickly adapted to respond to gaps identified for individual pupils and/or groups of pupils. Secondly, it was an opportunity to identify any additional resources required by middle leaders, such as heads of department and teachers to better support pupils' learning. For senior leaders, these meetings were an opportunity for 'joined up thinking' across a school on, for example, the nature of interventions being offered.

> 'I would say the most valuable bit is problem-solving issues in the classroom. In our school we are not looking at it as like an appraisal thing with a stick, it is more let's work together, what is going on? Do you want a SENCO to come in and observe? Do you need one of us as SLT to come in and look at it? Or let's look at this child's action plan, their engagement plan, see how we are addressing it. So they are very useful conversations. The staff go away with things to try

and that helps them cope. I think that is helpful in well-being'. *Senior leader, primary academy*

Finally, class teachers and middle leaders reported that targets and specifically the results of pupils' assessments were an opportunity to inform feedback for individual pupils. After a data drop, teachers often used lesson time to provide individual written and verbal feedback to pupils and have two-way conversations with them as to what went well and how their learning might develop moving forward.

> 'The biggest use of my time is talking to the children; that verbal communication with them about individual targets and on how they can improve their work. It can be time consuming, but it is the most useful tool that we have got'. *Teacher, primary LA maintained school*

3.2 Management of target setting

More than three quarters of the 60 interview participants (including all twenty senior leaders) reported that the amount of time spent on target setting and associated activities was appropriate. Where it was not felt to be appropriate, challenges were identified by class teachers and middle leaders – see section 3.2.1. The majority of schools where participants worked had, in the past two to three years, reviewed their target setting processes and this was reported to have led to a subsequent reduction in workload (for details on how workload was minimised see section 4). They generally explained that these changes had been influenced, in the most part, by three interrelated factors: 1) the national teacher workload policy agenda, 2) a renewed focus on the importance of teaching and learning in the classroom, and 3) subsequent reviews undertaken by schools to ensure all activities were of ultimate value for pupils and parents/carers.

> 'I think we have honed it right down now as it is manageable. It all links in with teaching and learning now, the staff understand it and their intervention groups, everyone has a role to play in [target setting], rather than just [producing] numbers'. *Senior leader, LA maintained primary school*

3.2.1 Challenges for managing target setting

A small number (7/60) of participants reported that too much time was spent on target setting and associated activities and that it was not a manageable element of their workload. Of this group the respondents were evenly mixed between class teachers and middle leaders working in primary academies. No senior leaders reported that too much time was spent on target setting and associated activities. The explanations for the excessive workload were varied and tended to focus on activities that were required in order to obtain the data used to set and track targets: duplication of data entry, too many

assessments, and too frequent reviewing of targets. They also noted that activities associated with target setting took time away from planning and teaching and the preparation of engaging resources, which were seen as more valuable activities in contributing to pupils' learning.

> 'Work is not manageable… fortnightly assessment and, therefore, review of targets. Four targets per child for reading and writing every two weeks'. *Teacher, primary academy*

Six interview participants mentioned challenges with using software packages related to target setting. They suggested that specific packages were not as user friendly as others, were not intuitive to use, or it was not possible to import/export data between different packages. This led to the use of software being time-consuming and adding to workload, for example if specific types of data were difficult to identify or process, or data had to be manually inputted more than once into different systems. A small number mentioned that the use of specialist software required lengthy staff training (for example, drop-in sessions running throughout the year) to ensure that the most proficient use was being made of these resources. Where this had been achieved however, it was noted that the use of such software enabled data analysis to be carried out effectively by individual staff members without the support of the data lead.

3.2.2 Activities least valued by school staff

Most of the participants spoke of there being very little that they were asked to do in relation to target setting and the use of targets that was not valuable to their work.

> 'I can see value in all that we do to do with this. No there is nothing that is unnecessary'. *Middle Leader, primary academy*

However, some participants, mixed evenly across primary and secondary settings, did perceive some activities related to target setting as not being a valuable use of their time. The main concern reported by class teachers and middle leaders was the requirement to input and record the same data more than once (23 of 60).[9] Examples included: being asked by department leaders to provide data in a separate format to that already inputted to the central school system; populating a document to track targets in class and then entering that same data into the central system; entering data such as progress towards a target and grades on attitudes and homework and then being asked to record the same set of targets in several different places.

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[9] Principles for evaluating data use in schools are available for reference at: DfE (2018), *Making data work: Report of the Teacher Workload Advisory Group*, p.5

> 'Some things we are asked to record more than once…. for example, I have to record reading in the personal reading record, in the target record, on the group target record, on the record for parents and the in-school record. That is more than four places I have to record the same piece of information.' *Middle leader, primary academy*

Due to the complexity and extent of data available to schools, there was often a pressure for school leaders to present the same data in adapted formats to suit the needs of different audiences, such as school governors or executive leaders. This was often because the way in which the school system presented data meant that they were not easily accessible or manageable for lay readers of those data, or those without contextual information to hand.

Two of the twenty senior leaders (both in secondary schools) were very clear that target setting was not in their opinion worthwhile due to the potential negative impact on pupil mental health and wellbeing, or potential risk of disengagement with education. They had both reduced the amount of work related to target setting that occurred in their schools as a result.

> 'If you look at research on [target setting] you get the idea that targets can cap a pupil because you are categorising. It is demotivating... Or they look and see that their target is a B, they know that they got a B in their last piece of work and so they stop bothering…. We also found that it's good for the kids to not know too often the grade that they are working at because they don't concentrate on anything else, they don't read the comments or work to improve, they fixate on the grade'. S*enior leader, LA maintained secondary school*

Some middle leaders also thought that although targets were useful, the potential impact on pupils needed to be considered, particularly if pupils reacted negatively to a perceived pressure to perform at a certain level. A small number (less than one quarter of middle leaders) also noted that it was important to ensure that all data being used to inform target setting were robustly moderated and quality assured for accuracy, and this was why they appreciated being able to access national benchmarking tools.

Teachers were less positive than middle or senior leaders as to whether or not targets were valuable. Like middle leaders, they raised concerns about the potential negative impact on young people.

> 'It can be advantageous because high targets mean that a pupil is put into a high set and pushed. It is disadvantageous if you have a low target and so…there are low aspirations. Targets cause pupils to be prejudged'. *Teacher, secondary academy*

Finally, although not a discrete activity, a small number of participants spoke of the demands of feeling the need to justify their professional judgements related to target setting and specifically around the progress that pupils made against targets. The school data, for example, might have highlighted the under achievement of boys in a year group and time would need to be spent on detailed exploration and justification for why this had happened. Some reported that this work was at times excessive, as it was carried out with a range of stakeholders external to school staff – including parents/carers, LA representatives, governors, and Ofsted inspectors. Another element included having to have a range of evidence to justify a target judgement and that this had in some ways replaced, or there was a perceived lack of trust in, a teacher's professional judgement.

> 'Lots of time is spent justifying your professional judgement. You cannot say that a child is at a particular level unless you have three pieces of evidence to prove it'. *Middle leader, primary academy*

3.3 Impact of target setting on role

All of the interview participants were asked how target setting affected their role and what tasks associated with target setting took the most time. Due to the similarity in responses across both questions, the findings have been combined to identify where most time was reported to be spent in relation to target setting and its associated activities. These were (in order of frequency mentioned):

- Identifying and planning interventions for pupils (individual and groups).
- Meetings with colleagues.
- Data analysis.
- Planning, marking and assessment.

3.3.1 Identifying and planning for interventions

Over half of the 60 interview participants reported that identifying and planning for interventions to support pupils' learning was one of the main activities associated with target setting. These were predominantly middle leaders and teachers, split evenly across primary and secondary schools. No senior leaders in primary settings reported intervention planning as a significant aspect of their work.

The participants spoke of the challenges of, for example identifying specific interventions that would meet the needs of individual pupils or groups of pupils and the management of the logistics of delivering an intervention including the availability of resources and staff, which could be time consuming. Teachers and middle leaders often kept weekly notes of progress against the interventions, as well as meeting with pupils to discuss progress against the interventions. Finally, time in meetings with colleagues was spent on

analysing the impact of interventions at individual, class and school levels in terms of pupil progress and, for example, whether they had delivered value for money (these were separate to the meetings regarding data analysis and reviewing progress, as noted below).

3.3.2 Meetings and conversations with colleagues

Just over half of the 60 participants, predominantly senior and middle leaders, reported that most of their time in relation to target setting and the use of targets was spent meeting with colleagues (formally and informally). As noted in section 3.1.2, these meetings were commonly valued by interview participants. The purpose of the meetings often focused on the results of data analysis and specifically on reviewing progress against targets at whole school, class, subject and pupil levels. This then led to discussions as to how resources across the school might be utilised to support next steps following the analysis of data, which might involve mentoring for staff or deciding how best to deploy support staff such as home-school link workers.

> 'I have lots of conversations around the data with heads of departments. It creates a lot of meetings for my form tutors because they have to have individual meetings, so you are looking at around 30 meetings which are 5-10 minutes each. Then I have to have meetings with the form tutors before and after they have had those discussions to see how they have got on. I also have meetings with my academic pastoral head to discuss anything with him'. *Middle leader, secondary academy*

3.3.3 Pupil data analysis

More than one third of the 60 interview participants reported pupil data analysis as the activity that they spent most time on. Almost half of this group were middle leaders, with fewer teachers reporting this activity compared with those in leadership positions. In addition, three quarters of this group were staff based in secondary schools. Senior leaders most commonly reported spending time using such data to gain an understanding of the whole school context, as well as to compare it with national benchmark data from schools in the same local context. For middle leaders, time was spent analysing a specific cohort for trends in the data at year group/departmental (rather than whole school) level. The main purpose of data analysis activity was to identify if any specific pupil cohorts, such as those in receipt of Pupil Premium, were not making the expected progress and to identify interventions required. This activity usually took place after each data drop in a school.

3.3.4 Planning, marking and assessment

For teachers, target setting activities were integral to lesson planning, marking and moderating pupils' work. Class teachers emphasised that these activities, even if time consuming, were valuable, because they supported pupil learning and progress. Across responses from all 20 teachers, it was clear that those working in secondary schools described mock examination times as a 'busy period' related to target setting. In comparison, primary school teachers spoke most commonly about the impact of target setting on lesson planning.

> 'The results do inform the pupils' next targets for the following two weeks and my planning for their lessons. It does create a lot of marking and planning.' *Teacher, primary academy*

> ' …a lot more standardisation and assessment goes into those periods, whereas what was happening before, was there was more data going in, but there wasn't so much moderation of it, so we want to change our emphasis, it is about quality not quantity really'. *Teacher, secondary LA maintained school*

3.3.5 Staff wellbeing

When asked if they had additional comments to make about target setting and its impact on staff workload, the most common feedback offered was related to a detrimental impact on staff morale/wellbeing. Specifically, they reported pressures felt by staff when performance management processes were linked to achieving targets. A small number recognised that this was also dependent on the approach taken by senior and middle leaders to line management.

> 'It does depend on the line manager, how the line manager views target setting and monitoring progress. If you have a line manager who is a very ambitious member of SLT they do put more pressure on. If it is a line manager who is looking after you, who sees their job as looking after staff and supporting them, then they put a lot less pressure on you with regard to data'. *Teacher, primary academy*

Staff in academies mentioned the potentially detrimental impact of target setting on staff wellbeing more commonly than those in LA maintained schools (9 compared to 3 respectively).

4. Steps taken to minimise workload and future improvements

This section summarises the practice that interview participants reported being implemented recently in schools to minimise teacher workload in relation to target setting and associated activities. Some also provided suggestions as to how this could be streamlined in future.

4.1 Practices used to minimise workload

Interview participants were asked if they were aware of practice taking place to minimise teacher workload in relation to pupil attainment target setting. In particular, they were asked to describe any recent actions taken specifically by their school.

Overall, the most common action reported was a reduction in the number of data drops required from staff throughout the school year. More than one third of all participants (24 of 60) said that there were fewer data drops to complete, most commonly reducing from six or four to three (i.e. half-termly to termly). This tended to be noted by participants in LA maintained and secondary schools; and the majority were in leadership roles (senior or middle leaders). This was because the extension of time between data drops allowed for a clear indication of the level of progress being made by pupils as a result of interventions, and for amendments to interventions/new approaches to be applied accordingly.

> 'We have reduced the number of times we are asking staff to upload data. It shouldn't just be about sitting and uploading data onto a computer, they should be questioning the data instead. We were in a situation where we were used to doing half term assessments, but the teaching suffers, because we are doing yet another week of assessments, when you…already know just from teaching a normal lesson how the children are doing. Teachers know that, you don't need to do a test to tell you what you know about your children. So that was important'. *Senior leader, primary academy*

Notably, half of teachers (10 of 20), and mostly those in primary schools, said that they had not seen any good practice being actioned in relation to target setting and associated activities.

Where teachers did recognise good practice, this tended to relate specifically to their own roles and reflected the practices mentioned by interview participants overall. Thus, the steps that were reported to be taken by schools are summarised below (noted by fewer than one quarter of all interview participants each):

- **Sufficient resourcing of activities:** Adequately resourcing target setting activity, in order to ensure that it was a manageable part of teacher workload, took many forms. It included personnel, such as having a full-time data manager (more commonly in secondary schools and academy trusts) or deputies in secondary subject departments who could support or take responsibility for target setting activities. Allowing sufficient time was also reported to be important, whether that be time allocated each week to middle leaders as part of their timetable, time allocated during department meetings, CPD time or periodic days off timetable to support target setting activities. In a small number of schools (both primary and secondary), this involved planning for approximately six days of cover staff whilst target setting activities were completed over the year. However, they acknowledged that this had budgetary implications.

  > 'We have a data manager [who] will produce the targets using the template, using the formula and the process we have in place. Our staff get to see those targets. Once you have got the process in place…that work is being done by administrators, not by me or my [teaching] staff.' *Senior leader, secondary academy*

- **Reduction in the amount of written reporting**, was particularly related to the end of term/year reports distributed to parents/carers. The amount of handwritten text had been minimised, so that key areas of achievement or focus were summarised, but in the main part, parents/carers would receive a copy of progress/attainment against the target. The detailed feedback was then retained for providing verbally at parents' evening or at other meetings where required. Schools were also reported to have moved towards reducing the qualitative element of report writing to focus on reporting achievement and progress numerically, which had made the process much quicker. One respondent commented that the introduction of additional software that kept parents/carers informed daily of what was happening in school had meant that parents/carers felt more involved with their child's education and, therefore, the report home could be shorter.

  > '**In the tutor reports, we no longer have to write paragraphs about targets and performance/progress. Now we have criteria, key areas that we comment on. It is more box ticking than paragraph writing and is much more manageable.' *Middle leader, secondary LA maintained school*

- **Reduction in the amount of data required,** was reported by ten interview participants (the majority of whom were teachers). This either related to less data being required (for example, just the current level of attainment/progress), or a reduction in duplication of inputting. As previously reported, many of the participants said that their school had recently reduced data drops from six to three

times a year. Not only had this change reduced workload, it was also reported that the approach was pedagogically more meaningful as it allowed more time to observe pupil progress. Senior leaders had timetabled data drops across a year to prevent any assessment bottlenecks.

> 'Yes, it is a manageable part of my role. This year we have cut down the number of data drops from five at key stage three to three. That means that the amount of time I spend doing data analysis has decreased. It is better, because it gives us longer to make an impact in terms of progress before the next data drop'. *Middle leader, secondary LA maintained school*

- **Consistent data collection and analysis,** was appreciated by ten interview participants who noted that processes had been streamlined across their school so that they were centralised and uniform across all key stages/departments or data were all recorded in one place rather than inputted several times.

- **Use of specialist software,** which had been recently introduced by the schools that nine interview participants worked in. This was perceived to have reduced the workload involved in inputting, analysing and tracking data and targets across individual pupils, year groups, subjects and specific cohorts. Software was felt to make an important contribution to ensuring that target setting was manageable. Apart from facilitating easier analysis, reporting and communication within school teams, software that generated targets was seen as particularly effective. Senior leaders felt that the targets set using software were reliable and allowed for greater planning time for how to achieve targets, rather than time spent devising the targets themselves.

> 'I think it is manageable now that we have got more technology. The issue is if you use more technology you need more staff training. With the staff training, staff feel it is excessive, because it is taking away from what they ordinarily do day in day out, but actually they do realise now that it is a more effective system, it has reduced workload and it is more meaningful'. *Senior leader, secondary academy*

- **Collaborative approaches** to target setting were reported by eight middle or senior leaders as having improved practice within their schools. This included departmental/data review meetings, and meetings between schools, to discuss the results of data drops and progress being made as a result.

4.2 Streamlining

Interview participants provided a range of suggestions as to how pupil target setting and its associated activities could be streamlined in future to reduce workload.[10] These often reflected the activities reported in [section 4.1](#).

- **Adoption of centralised systems:** This was mentioned by 12 of 60 participants, the majority of which were in secondary schools. They commonly noted that this centralisation had been achieved through the employment of a designated data manager who oversaw the target setting process, prepopulated databases for staff to access, and ensured that templates for completion were as clear and straight-forward as possible. A few participants also highlighted that they found it beneficial where their school referred to national benchmarking data, such as that produced by the Fischer Family Trust (FFT). This helped them to quickly identify trends and compare progress against schools in similar contexts.

- **Allocation of staff time:** Eight participants in leadership roles (senior or middle leaders) noted that it was important that members of staff were allocated time in their timetables for target setting. This suggestion was slightly more common among those in primary schools. One senior leader reported that the school allocated six days per year to be covered by supply staff whilst target setting was carried out. Others allocated staff meeting time to tasks associated with target setting.

   'I set aside time for staff to do data drops, so I don't ask people to do that in their own time. That is important. Anything to do with school improvement things like that, I try and do that wherever possible in school time. It goes a long way with goodwill. [It says to staff that] I am prioritising [target setting] enough that I think it is important enough for [them] to do it in the school day'. *Senior leader, primary academy*

- **Tailored approaches**: Six interview participants felt that setting targets to reflect department or key stage needs was a beneficial way of reducing the workload involved or making the work more effective and efficient. Most of these were staff in secondary schools or academies. For some, this was preferable to whole school approaches, particularly in relation to the marking and assessment against targets.

   'We are working on marking in the school at the moment to try and do marking that is appropriate whereas we had a system …[which] was regimented across the whole school. Now…each subject will be marked slightly differently, as things that are suitable in art, won't be

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[10] Eleven participants stated that they were not aware of any good practice, or recent changes made by their schools in relation to target setting.

suitable in French. [SLT] have asked [departments] to create schemes of assessment so that we can work out when we assess our pupils and what we are assessing them on, so that we can then check that we are assessing a range of skills'. *Middle leader, secondary academy*

- **Collaborative working**: Five interview participants said that collaborative working had been useful. This included working in teams within a staff group to discuss data trends and highlight pupil cohorts where interventions may be required. One noted that collaborative meetings took place between a cluster of local schools, to compare data and benchmark progress being made across the local area. It was reported that team working for target setting also helped teachers to be able to interpret and apply data outcomes effectively to support pupil progress:

  'It is better if staff can collaborate and sit down in year nine for example and see what progress has been made throughout key stage three. You can then look at where the pupil should be moved onto [for key stage four], and have a conversation with SLT about whether the grade that you have come up with in discussion with your colleagues is or isn't aspirational enough…[Teachers are able to] explain why a particular target is chosen'. *Teacher, LA maintained secondary school*

Interview participants in primary schools most commonly said that they could not think of ways to streamline target setting, although they generally did not provide a reason why (8 of 30). Other suggestions were given by five participants or fewer each. These included:

- Reducing the number of data drops, or the amount of data inputted (as per [section 4.1](#)).
- Setting group or class targets rather than asking staff to assign targets to each individual learner.
- Reducing reporting to governors.
- Establishing a central system to be used across all schools, for example, a piece of software that all schools should use in order to standardise target setting; it was suggested that this would also help to streamline areas such as teacher training and transition processes for pupils.

5. Conclusion

Most time spent in relation to target setting was not reported by participants to be employed on setting the targets themselves, but on the following associated activities: identifying and planning for interventions to support pupils' learning and progress, analysing pupil data, and meeting with colleagues to discuss target setting. The majority of participants reported that they spent an appropriate amount of time on target setting and that the different tasks were both necessary and valuable in terms of supporting pupils' progress and achievement. There was a small group of interview participants, in primary settings, which reported that too much time was spent on target setting. These tended to be the schools where target setting was still carried out by individual teachers across classes/key stages, rather than being managed centrally by senior leaders or designated data managers.

Senior leaders generally had strategic oversight of targets, used them to inform reports of whole school progress to external stakeholders (for example, governors, LA, Ofsted), and ensure quality assurance processes were robust so that target setting was accurate and meaningful.[11] Middle leaders and teachers, in comparison, had much more operational roles related to the day-to-day management of targets including: inputting and analysing data, reporting progress to internal stakeholders (for example, pupils, parents/carers, line managers), and implementing and tracking interventions for individual pupils or specified cohorts requiring support.

Overall, interview participants were positive about the value of setting targets, and measuring progress against them. They identified several benefits of having targets in place, and although there was a sense that it took time to carry out certain activities related to target setting, these were central to their role as educators. Target and progress data were regarded as a positive starting point for lines of enquiry within the school. This information allowed interview participants to review the support in place for pupils, and whether this was appropriate, and to identify any training or development needs among teachers as well.

5.1 Key messages

It was evident that school leaders, cognisant of the workload agenda, had taken time to review and improve practice related to target setting, such as: reducing the number of formal assessments and data drops taking place in one academic year, reducing duplication in data inputting and minimising written reporting requirements.

However, despite a focus on reducing data, marking/assessment and planning, these

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[11] The fieldwork was completed in November 2019. Under the new inspection framework (implemented from September 2019), Ofsted will not ask to review internal school data. However, senior leaders reported that they used these data to inform their own reporting and knowledge of their school context.

activities and areas of responsibility were reported to be the most time-consuming in the context of target setting. There were common reports from middle leaders and teachers that duplication of effort occurred in relation to the inputting and analysis of data across different systems or formats. Others suggested that although specialist software packages were useful for reducing this duplication of effort (i.e. enabling all data to be inputted once and accessible by all in one central place), they required in-depth training over time to ensure all staff were proficient in how to use such systems. The research highlighted a need for schools to review data requests and reduce duplication, as well as consider additional staff training at all levels of the workforce (and the time provided to be able to access that training) so that data are accessed and analysed effectively and efficiently.

Planning, resourcing and completing intervention work to support pupils' learning, whilst valued, was reported to be a significant activity in terms of time use related to target setting. This included identifying appropriate interventions, managing the logistics in delivery, recording progress and holding conversations with pupils and colleagues. This project has identified that schools could learn from good practice examples where efficient planning, development and delivery of interventions can take place.

There were concerns raised by all participant types about the level of information required by different stakeholder groups, both internally and externally to the school. This included governing bodies, academy trust boards, LA representatives, and Ofsted. Several noted that they would report similar information, but in different formats depending on the stakeholder group. Again, this highlights the potential for increased streamlining of reporting activities in schools so that a reduced number of data outputs are used for a wider range of audiences.

Finally, it was common for senior and middle leaders to mention that their time was taken up with a variety of meetings that were all related to different activities associated with target setting. These included meetings to: review benchmarking data and set targets, review progress against targets following assessment points, quality assure intervention strategies that were put in place to address any gaps in progress, manage staff performance processes (often informed by targets) and identify priorities for school development on the basis of target setting and outcomes. Therefore, schools may appreciate support or examples of practice (for example, within future versions of the School Workload Reduction Toolkit) to help them find innovative and efficient ways to manage meetings.

Appendix: Sample details

Table 3: School sample characteristics

School type	Primary	Secondary	Total
LA maintained	15	15	30
Single academy	4	5	9
Academy trust	11	10	21
Total	30	30	60
Region	**Primary**	**Secondary**	**Total**
East Midlands	6	4	10
East of England	5	2	7
London	1	3	4
North East	0	1	1
North West	3	6	9
South East	1	4	5
South West	3	5	8
West Midlands	3	3	6
Yorkshire & Humberside	8	2	10
Total	30	30	60
Size (number of pupils)	**Primary**	**Secondary**	**Total**
<209	7	0	7
210-400	12	1	13
401-1000	11	16	27
1001+	0	13	13
Total	30	30	60
Urban/Rural	**Primary**	**Secondary**	**Total**
Urban	25	27	52
Rural	5	3	8
Total	30	30	60

Per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals	Primary	Secondary	Total
Low	16	18	34
Medium	10	10	20
High	3	1	4
Not available	1	1	2
Total	30	30	60
Ofsted Rating	Primary	Secondary	Total
Requires Improvement	6	6	12
Good	16	15	31
Outstanding	6	4	10
Not available	2	5	7
Total	30	30	60

Table 4: Participant sample characteristics

Gender	Primary	Secondary	Total
Male	6	16	22
Female	24	14	38
Total	30	30	60
Years in current role	Primary	Secondary	Total
Less than one year	3	4	7
1-2 years	8	3	11
3-5 years	7	14	21
6-9 yeas	5	7	12
10-15 years	5	1	6
Over 15 years	2	1	3
Total	30	30	60

Years in teaching profession	Primary	Secondary	Total
Less than one year	2	0	2
1-2 years	1	0	1
3-5 years	2	3	5
6-9 yeas	5	4	9
10-15 years	6	12	18
Over 15 years	14	11	25
Total	30	30	60
Working hours	**Primary**	**Secondary**	**Total**
Full-time	22	28	50
Part-time	8	2	10
Total	30	30	60
Main subject taught	**Primary**	**Secondary**	**Total**
Arts subjects	1	0	1
Science	0	7	7
English	0	5	5
Humanities subjects	0	5	5
Mathematics	0	4	4
Social sciences	0	1	1
Physical education / sports	1	2	3
Commercial and business studies / education /management / economics	0	3	3
Religious education	0	2	2
Primary (no specific subject)	22	0	22
Other (no teaching)	6	1	7
Total	30	30	60

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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