

A DISCUSSION PAPER ON:-

PURPOSES AND ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND TARGET SETTING

Target setting has been adopted at policy level because it is seen as the mechanism through which standards are audited, benchmarked and raised. The collection of data is therefore crucial at every level of operation of the educational system and at its interface with social, health and welfare agencies.

The interlocking nature of targets means that there is a necessary connection between grand targets at national level and targets at the level of the individual pupil, mediated through teacher, department, school, authority as well as the other agencies who work with schools, young people and families. It is in their inter-relationship that the challenge to the system lies. Targets can be disempowering as well as empowering, overused as well as underused, arbitrary as well effective. The test facing policy makers is to make them relevant and integral to learning and teaching, embraced by teachers and pupils because they are seen to serve a useful and formative purpose.

The ultimate beneficiary of target setting is the individual learner. Targets therefore have to take as a starting point what we know about learning and about change.

What we know about learning

Learning is most effective when:

- it has a purpose for the learner
- there is a goal, end point or target to be achieved
- the goal is set, understood, or 'owned' by the learner herself
- it is seen as worth investing effort in
- it is neither too ambitious to be worth investing effort in, nor so unambitious that it can be achieved without effort ('the zone of proximal development')

But also

- when it is spontaneous and surprising

- when it sets off for one goal but achieves another
- when it asks critical questions of its own premises

In other words, learners are generally helped by targets but can also be surprised into learning. Much learning is also unconscious, informal and latent, sometimes stored and retrieved at a later point. Learning is not always, indeed not often, linear but multi-layered, capricious, regressing as well as progressing. It is sometimes 'ruthlessly cumulative', often requiring unlearning, deconstructing, abandoning a known answer in favour of a perplexing question. We also are discovering more about intuitive and emotional learning and about the nature of 'flow'. Research into the optimal experience identifies 'an inner game', sometimes described as 'being in the zone' when conscious effort to do better or improve is actually dysfunctional. There is some evidence that learning at gut level, 'enteric' learning, can in fact bypass the higher thinking centres (Gorshon, *The Second Brain*, Harper Collins, New York, 1998).

While none of this invalidates the target setting agenda it does require that it be put into a context of best knowledge about the learning process and that context and fitness for purpose be scrupulously observed.

What we know about change

Change may be presented as 'development' or 'improvement' or 'raising' standards but it is intrinsically about a move away and a move to. It implies a move away from established routine to a different way of doing things and a different way of thinking about things. A considerable body of literature on change tells us that change:

- Creates turbulence
- Generates dissent and conflict
- Is resisted by some and embraced by others
- Affects organisational culture
- Goes through a fairly predictable cycle
- Cannot be mandated or legislated
- Is facilitated by expert and sensitive leadership

The introduction of target setting is exemplary of such a process.

Principles of target setting

It is widely accepted that targets ought to be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-contained). However, this is not the whole story nor necessarily uncontentious. Following these precepts religiously may be prove, in practice, to be mechanistic and ultimately dysfunctional. Over-emphasis and overuse but demotivate rather than the opposite. Stress on the measurable may too easily lead to a narrowing focus on the quantitative. Indeed it may be argued that the relationship between the measurable and the important is an inverse one. For example moral, spiritual, social, intellectual and aesthetic development lend themselves least well to quantitative measurement and specific targets.

Therefore, drawing on what we know about learning, about change –and about human nature - we can conclude that for targets to be accepted and embraced by teachers and school managers they must be:

- Meaningful
- Owned
- Context-related
- Embedded
- Discussable
- Feedback sensitive

Teaching and learning is underpinned by a constant effort to make meaning. When teaching loses its meaning teachers leave the progression (a key factor in the recruitment and retention ‘crisis’) or struggle on in collusion with disengaged pupils whose learning has also lost meaning. There is no sense of ownership of the process on either side and teachers complain that management, or government, has failed to understand the context of their work and that targets set are not open to discussion. Addressing this situation, which is the reality in many Scottish schools and classrooms, means helping teachers to embed targets in their ongoing work in ways that are meaningful to them and their pupils, that are always sensitive to context, and which are part of a cycle or feedback loops. ‘Double loop’ learning as described by Chris Argyris requires a constant step back move from the target-achievement loop to a critical reflection evaluation loop in which the target, the achievement, or their inter-relationship is re-examined or reframed

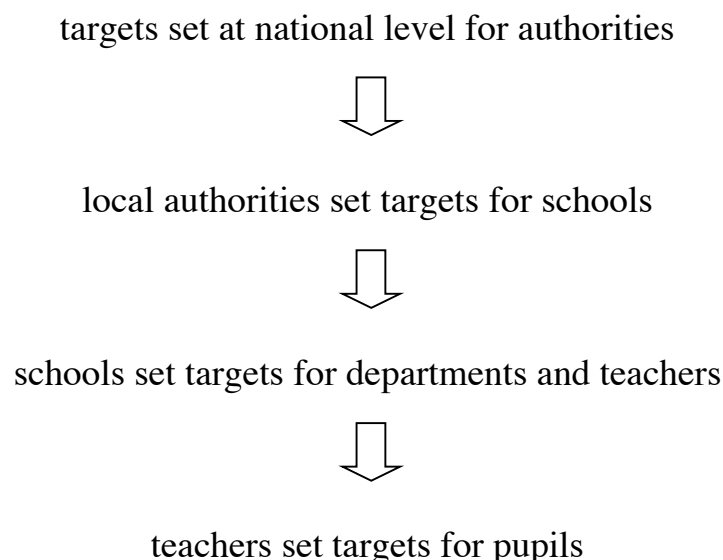
These principles apply equally to management and to pupils as well as teachers and need to be constantly in the forefront of the thinking of national policy-makers. In one version of the relationship between national targets the government relies on teachers to ‘deliver’ results in line with targets set. An alternative way of describing this (as the Prime Minister appears to be acknowledging in recent speeches) is to see teachers as the ultimate gatekeepers of change and, as respected professionals, to mediate rather than to deliver. That means to set their work within a national context acknowledging a set of national priorities and targets as balanced, relevant and in which they have a genuine stake.

It may be said that the longest distance in the world is the distance between a national target and what goes on in the mind of a child. In between these stands the classroom teacher, not as the only mediator but as one of the key actors in building that bridge from microscopic individual experience into macroscopic achievement.

*“A man’s reach should exceed his grasp or what’s a heaven for?”
(Robert Browning)*

These principles may be tested against two models of target setting:

1. Top down

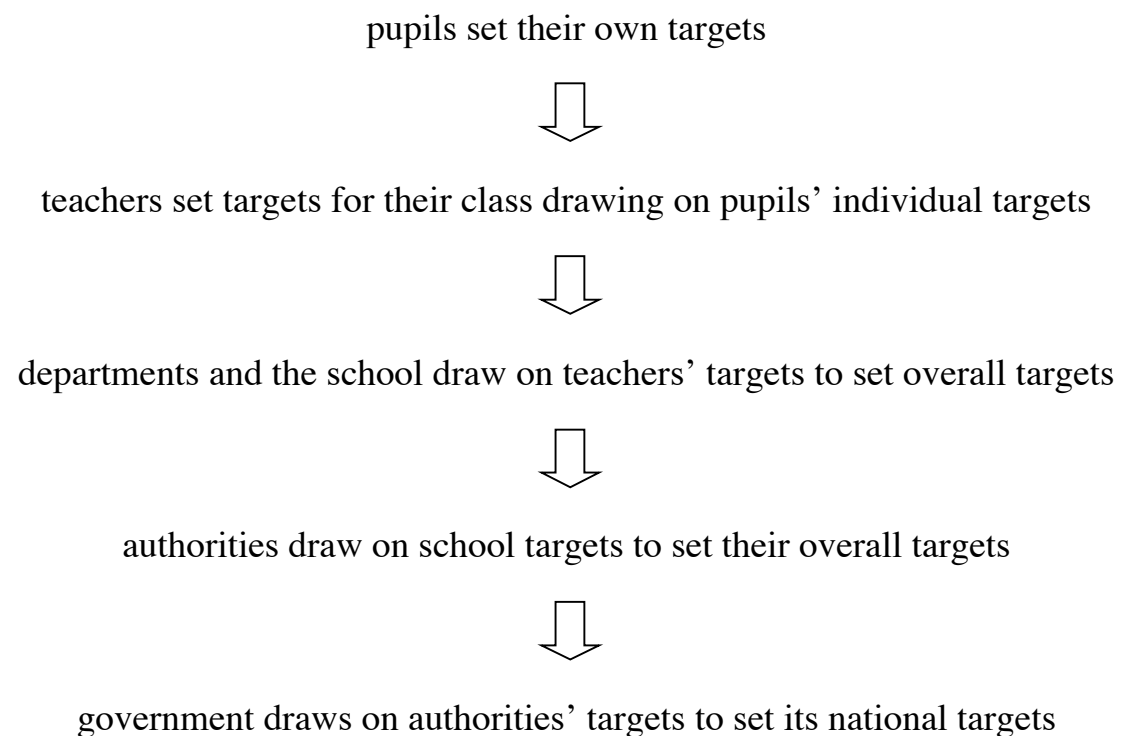


This downward pressure has significant drawbacks. It is not only disempowering at every level but carries a strong hidden message about the nature of hierarchy, the nature of learning and the nature of social and

educational change. It is difficult for top down imposition of targets to honour the set of principles set out above.

2. Bottom up

Bottom up target setting reverses the process. It looks like this:



Perhaps bottom-up target setting described an ideal world in which people act rationally, critically and with excellent flow of communication. The problem with the model is, however, its idealistic nature and its workability only in the best of possible worlds.

Top down	Bottom up
hierarchical disempowering relatively easy to realise in practice generalisable subject to monitoring accountability driven	democratic empowering difficult to realise in practice almost incapable of generalisation hard to monitor development driven

Most commentators agree, therefore, that the pragmatic as well as the educational paradigm is a combination of bottom up and top down, a synergetic and negotiated process.

So, at national level, targets are framed over time, transparently, with a listening ear to the concerns of teachers, signalling an appreciation of the context in which they work and the challenges they face and describing their own accountability to the profession which precedes the profession's accountability to them. It pays more than ritual lip service to what is important because it is not the rhetoric of good intentions that teachers hear and read but the impact of what comes first. In other words if teachers are presented with a holistic array of priorities but in practice the most easily measurable attainment targets always come first it will simply serve to reinforce a cynicism about what, when the chips are down, really matters.

The challenge to any government serious about its commitment to what matters educationally is to be radical in breaking the cycle, bringing an element of surprise, of inspiration and breadth to what will all too easily be seen as a remorseless grind, allowing yet again the urgent to drive out the important.

The challenge lies, therefore, at least in part in the presentation of targets. While this is crucial it is important to bear in mind that this is also the rock on which governments perish. When policies fail or there is resistance it is generally assumed by politicians to be a failure of presentation rather than of substance. It is, however, often a failure of congruence -congruence between the political and educational motives, between short term political imperatives and long term educational benefits.

So presentation has to be smart as well as slick, with a transparent integrity between purpose and practice, aligning values and accountability. Its tone may be questioning and self-critical as well as assertive, signalling a desire and openness to learn from the profession, promising a joint venture to realise which put to the into the forefront of national concern a balanced array of priorities.

Achieving balance and integrity

In pursuing the five national priorities the issues of balance and integrity have to be to the fore.

A balanced presentation not only affirms that we think all these five areas are of equal significance but vouchsafes their equal treatment. It covenants that they will be given equal weight and equal prominence in policy development and in practice. It recognises the challenge, that few have yet successfully mastered, of target setting in areas such as creativity and citizenship that, by their very nature, seem to defy such a process. But it begins to exemplify how those might be tackled in new and imaginative ways, and describes the kind of commitment that will be needed over the next few years to realise that ambition.

Integrity has to be present in both its senses. Integrity carries the meaning of parts coming together into a coherent whole. The five national priorities run risk of being seen as separate disparate strands, perhaps even in competition – equality set against standards, creativity as against attainment, individual needs versus common goals. There is a real danger of them being treated not only mechanistically but separately. However, the more the separation and the greater the pursuit of singular targets, the less integrity in the second sense – a congruence of belief and behaviour.

There is a third sense in which we may describe integrity. It rests not in a complementary set of documents, owned and propounded by government. It is manifest not in polished data or exemplary development plans but is played out in the resolution between top down and bottom up change. It is in this process that lies the creation of social capital. That is, the reservoir of experience, the shared expertise, the collegial morale and good will that characterises a vibrant and forward looking profession, making the links between macro policy and micro practice. That might not be seen by everyone as an apt descriptor for teachers in the year 2002. But if the process of setting and realising targets is to have currency it will have to be underwritten by such a goal. Indeed the building of social capital can, and must be, the prior goal of the Scottish Executive.

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