

## Target Setting

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Since the mid 1990s Education in line with the rest of the public services has been subjected to a culture change and now functions in a working environment that is framed by targets. This target culture is a top down approach focused on measurable outcomes. It has been promoted with a messianic zeal and has succeeded in largely shutting out other pathways to improvement.

In education the target culture has impacted on every aspect of the system from the curriculum taught, to the amount of time allocated to each subject, to determining how effective lessons are right up to facilitating decisions around who are the good teachers, school leaders and schools. It is easy to understand why, what is fundamentally a management tool [setting a target] has mushroomed into a soulless management ideology. It has happened because it allows the educational administrations that appear to inhabit a world of black and white to impose a meaning on the world of the classroom teacher. This is a world where there are numerous complex realities and the certainties the administrators see are absent.

For educators, the problems target setting creates range across the entire spectrum of school experience from the philosophical to the practical. The imposition of targets at the system level promotes a view that all schools share the same aims, delivering a one size fits all education. Such an education fails to take account of the various learning styles of the pupils and teachers, the environmental factors that contribute both adversely and positively, or not, to their learning or the fact that teachers have moved from a prescriptive curriculum to one that seeks to offer alternative learning pathways and is deliberately constructed to allow teachers and pupils to enjoy investigating phenomena that arise in the normal course of their learning. In a nutshell target setting constricts the learning available to the pupils.

Also, at the system level, the administrators cannot allow a target to be missed. This means that when this occurs what happens is that they simply re-cast the target. The classic example of this is the now infamous New Labour target regarding the number

of people aged 18 to 25 enrolling in third level education set at 50% of this population segment. When it was missed it became, 50% of the population as a whole enrolling in third level education and when this was missed it became 50% of the population having followed part of a university course and was revised again following this failure to be, 50% of the population having some experience of university setting. What this illustrates is that the achievement of the target becomes more important than the reality of the learning experiences of the pupils. Their educational experience is being morphed into an exercise in delivering a measurable statistical outcome as opposed to something that shapes the individual in very particular ways.

For the classroom teacher the setting of targets and the servicing they require; the planning, the monitoring, the evaluating, the recasting have all serious workload implications. This is on top of the numerous initiatives and “new approaches” being visited upon schools with an alarming regularity. In addition the targets provide a means to draw superficial conclusions as to what is and who are the effective teachers. This is something teachers have all been sucked into.

The Irish News publishes league tables at the system level that tell us who are the successful schools, DENI, the ETI and the employing authorities examine unwieldy School Development Plans for school targets and interrogate school results to see if we are succeeding. Senior teachers and Principals in schools use them to force increased levels of performance out of a workforce that is demoralised and tired.

In the experience of too many of our members, targets represent a management culture that is being developed to manage people and is unable to evolve to meet the facts on the ground. What has been allowed to become institutionalised in schools, is a management culture focused around the avoidance of blame. This is completely the opposite of what makes a good teacher. She/he is one who takes responsibility for the pupils’ learning and is there to open exciting new vistas for their pupils. Now this is only possible if the targets are met first. The target is more important than the learning. This is not what pupils deserve or what teachers were employed to do.

Setting targets should be seen in relation to what is being added to the child. When benchmarking the focus is on what is happening in similar sized schools. It does not

take account of where the children have come from educationally. This needs to be looked at. The setting of school targets should be done in relation to the individual class group, therefore the targets can go up and down.

The accuracy of the results at end of key stage also needs to be examined. At present how many schools can stand over the results that are sent to CCEA. As is more and more apparent from recent ETI inspections, good end of key stage results do not always reflect what is happening at a particular school. What happens in the home can work to inflate results, where people have enough disposable income to tutor children. It is in these schools where results are most affected.

There are of course other ways of achieving what those who first embraced the target setting culture set out to do, which in the case of education, I imagine, was to improve the life chances of all the pupils (ESAGS) in our schools. Partnerships of the kind paid lip service to in “Every School a Good School” and the “Review of Special Educational Needs” offer a more sustainable way forward than a management culture that is already being rejected in many of our public services. Addressing the environmental factors impacting on the pupils’ learning is an essential.

Pupils who are coming to school from homes where education is not valued or where they are denied the opportunity to engage with their learning due to cultural differences and or socio-economic problems are always going to struggle to learn at a rate those children from more favourable socio-economic and cultural circumstances will enjoy. It seems that a long-term strategy aimed at addressing these environmental factors involving all the agencies with responsibilities around the child would allow in time a new reality to be constructed. This reality would allow for all children to begin their learning at the same place and to largely move forward together. It would however require a complete re balancing of the System’s focus and a genuine commitment on the part of Government to invest in our children to a greater degree than present.

At the school level we need to be moving away from targets imposed from above. We need to deconstruct the pupils’ learning and address those factors within our control, which are impeding learning and cultivate those that enhance learning.

Teachers prior to the spawning of the target setting culture did this routinely but this has been eroded as we have succumbed to the demands of delivering the target. Teachers need to be supported to take back control of their profession; we need to foster an understanding that the target culture is not a quick fix. The centuries of time currently being consumed by the Target Culture in our schools could more effectively be used by schools to develop those management systems and teaching strategies which are specifically tailored to meet their particular circumstances and pupil profile. This sounds suspiciously like ESAGS speak because it is what ESAGS was intended to be about as opposed to what it has become.

I understand that what is being advocated here is not new but it does offer a different way to achieve real and meaningful improvements for the pupils and teachers. Its time we stopped facilitating Rachael House in its slavish pursuit of policies that have been tried and seen to fail in England and Wales. We need to be opposing them at every turn. Our members will support us. The pupils they teach will appreciate our efforts in the future. To date our efforts to engage in policy development have received little acknowledgement and made no significant impact on what is emerging from the policy development unit at DENI. Our genuine attempts to engage with them have served to only inform them of our objections and alternatives thereby allowing them time to develop their counter argument.

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