Data has become a dirty word. The one universal experience I seem to share with all teachers everywhere is that of sitting through apparently endless Powerpoint presentations about "performance data", while wishing that I was spending the time more productively planning lessons, marking books or, frankly, doing anything else. We're all interested in our pupils doing better; it's just that the data drive seems so impersonal, so unconnected to the pupil-teacher relationship and so… uninspiring.

But it needn't be so. In an ideal world, this information would aid teachers by helping to motivate our pupils, inform our teaching relationships and evaluate the strengths of our teaching. I want to suggest how we might use the mysterious Fischer Family Trust (FFT) estimates for all three.

## What the FFT?

Roughly speaking, FFT takes the Key Stage 2 results of a student and tells us what pupils with those results, from similar backgrounds and at similar schools have achieved in their GCSEs.

| C | B | A | A* | FFT | FFT+1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9.5% | 27.9% | 41.1% | 20.5% | A | S |

The table above is for one of my current Maths students. So, for example, 27.9% of students with the same KS2 results, from similar backgrounds and at similar schools, achieved a B grade in their Maths GCSE. The FFT column shows the grade which 50% of similar students achieved or bettered (also highlighted in orange). So the student above is more likely than not to get at least an A. FFT+1 (also in green) is pretty self-explanatory.

## Motivating our pupils

There is a good deal of suspicion about target-setting, and much of it is well-placed. Hastily dashed-off targets, little understood by parents and not discussed with students either before or after being set are at best ineffective and at worst pander to complacency or insecurity. But the research is relatively clear: when done properly, target setting is effective in raising grades.

Of course, we all want to motivate pupils with a deep love of learning and of our subject. I come from the school of thought that education is about drawing out the best in pupils as whole human beings, not just the best test results. But both we and, more importantly, they will be judged in part on exam grades and so it is our job to ensure that this overlaps with all-round education and is not presented as an either-or choice.

So how can target grades make a difference? And how might FFT estimates fit in with this? The research says that targets should be:

- **Realistic**: our professional discretion should mean that targets are not unreachable and hence demotivating; but do we really want our students to *target* being in the bottom 50% of students with the same KS2 results?

  - The FFT estimate should typically be the minimum we choose for a target grade.

- **Aspirational**: better to ask a student to aim for a higher grade than settle for a lower one;

  - Err on the side of FFT+1 rather than the FFT estimate

- **Negotiated**: we are trying to assist our pupils to be reflective, ambitious and independent learners;

  - Talk through what the difference probably was between pupils with the same KS2 results but who got the higher and lower GCSE grades; then discuss with pupils where their work shows that they currently are on that spectrum and what they have to change to match the highest-achieving students

- **Revisited**: as a one-off exercise, target-setting will have little to no effect;

  - When classwork and homework is regularly related back to target grades then they might help to sustain high expectations and effort levels

## Informing our teaching relationships

I'm all for giving a pupil a fresh start at the beginning of a year and allowing them the chance to renew their expectations of themselves. But it is (in my not-so-humble opinion) facile to think that ignoring what they've done previously is giving them the best chance of developing. It would be like a doctor advising a patient on healthy living without first looking at their medical record – less, not more personal.

While FFT estimates should obviously not completely dictate our teaching styles, they do give us a chance to see at a glance:

- who may struggle in our subject
- who perhaps has a lot of potential but hasn't really fulfilled it yet
- who has worked really hard and is, if anything, ahead of where we'd expect

This snapshot could surely help us to tailor our pupil-teacher relationship, allowing us to very quickly offer encouragement and challenge, appropriate extra support or more stretching tasks. We are hoping to make this and other information available on your registers from the very beginning of September.

## Evaluating our strengths

Mark Twain popularized the phrase "lies, damn lies and statistics." And he had a point. Statistics can be made to show pretty much whatever you want. But as a tool for honestly evaluating what we, as teachers, have done well and what we could improve, they could be hugely positive.

I will openly admit that each September I quite like smugly patting myself on the back by counting the number of A*-A grades my students achieved. If that number doesn't look so good, then I might check out the A*-B or A*-C percentages instead and quietly mutter to myself about lazy students. But this doesn't change anything for the better.

The next time we go through the annual fun-fest of performance management, one suggestion might be this: I might make a list of the students who did not achieve their FFT estimate, or who missed out on FFT+1, and try to explain to my performance manager how this happened for each in turn and, crucially, what I might have done to improve the situation. If we are aiming to help our boys achieve their potential, then perhaps our own performance management targets should be explicitly focussed on how we've done that well, and what we could do better.

## Who cares? OFSTED, for a start

It is a cold, hard fact that OFSTED use a measure closely related to FFT to assess the effectiveness of departments and schools. So we need to be bothered. But perhaps more importantly, if we care about motivating our pupils, informing our teaching relationships and evaluating our own strengths, FFT is one tool which we would be silly to ignore completely.