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Guidance for Schools Opting In

Policy Directions from MTB-MLE Implementation and Learners' International Assessment Performance

Romylyn A. Metila and Cecilia A. Suarez[1]

Key Messages

1. Given the passage of RA No. 12027 (2024), which makes MTB-MLE optional for certified schools, the study offers guidance to schools that commit to implementing MTB-MLE, particularly the subset of schools that participate in international large-scale assessments (ILSAs).

2. Across five school years, most of the 52 participating schools achieved only an overall Partial level of MTB-MLE implementation, indicating that key preconditions for Strong implementation (e.g., adequate materials, sustained training, organizational support) were not met.

3. The four dimensions of MTB-MLE (i.e., Language, Materials, Instruction, and Program) are strongly interlinked, implying that policy should therefore treat MTB-MLE as a coherent system and avoid componential, single-dimension reforms.

4. MTB-MLE should not be dismissed as lacking educational value, nor assumed to be the main driver of low international assessment results. Teachers consistently reported gains in pupil participation and lesson comprehension; with implementation only Partial, stronger delivery is likely a necessary condition for these benefits to show in measurable learning outcomes.

5. While KWF and DepEd certify schools that opt-in via implementation requirements, they should ensure quality MTB-MLE implementation through consistent program evaluation based on indicators of strong, coherent implementation across Language, Materials, Instruction, and Program dimensions.

1 Romylyn A. Metila is Deputy Director and Senior Research Fellow, Assessment, Curriculum, and Technology Research Program, UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, and Professor, College of Education, University of the Philippines Diliman (r.metila@actrc.org; ORCID: 0000-0003-3633-1840). Cecilia A. Suarez is Executive Director, Ateneo Center for English Language Teaching, Ateneo de Manila University (csuarez@ateneo.edu; ORCID: c).

Policy Landscape

In 2013, the Philippines rolled out Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) as the banner program of the K–12 curriculum, using the learner's mother tongue (MT) as the medium of instruction in the early grades and developing literacy in three or more languages (Philippines, Department of Education [DepEd] 2012). Implementation was uneven from the start (Metila, Pradilla, and Williams 2016; Monje et al. 2019), which likely helps explain the program's variable impact on learning outcomes (Gempeso and Mendez 2021; Orbeta et al. 2025). When Filipino learners performed poorly in PISA 2018, TIMSS 2019, and SEA-PLM 2019, MTB-MLE was widely blamed, even though the PISA 2018 cohort had not undergone the program. House and Senate hearings from 2022 to 2023 surfaced persistent gaps in teacher training and materials provision, and Republic Act (RA) No. 12027 (2024) subsequently discontinued mandatory nationwide implementation. Under its Implementing Rules and Regulations (DepEd 2025), schools may opt in to MTB-MLE only if they are certified to have trained teachers and an MT approved by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF).

While the requirements for certifying opt-in schools are clear, how the quality of their implementation should be evaluated is not, even though RA No. 12027 requires a review of optional MTB-MLE implementation three years after its enactment and every three years thereafter. Evaluating quality requires a framework of implementation standards. Earlier ACTRC studies operationalized good practice in four interrelated dimensions, namely Language, Materials, Instruction, and Program,[2] all underpinned by localization as an overarching principle (Metila, Pradilla, and Williams 2017). Few studies, however, have empirically examined how MTB-MLE was implemented and whether implementation relates to learning outcomes (Monje et al. 2019; Orbeta et al. 2025).

This gap matters for the schools that will opt in and for the country's renewed participation in international large-scale assessments (ILSAs), in which Filipino students posted higher scores in reading, mathematics, and science in PISA 2025 compared to PISA 2022, while retaining their low scores compared to the OECD averages (OECD 2026).[3] This brief therefore examines MTB-MLE implementation in high- and low-performing schools (HPS and LPS) in SEA-PLM 2019 and TIMSS 2019. It argues that MTB-MLE was implemented only partially in these schools, so it can neither be blamed for nor credited with their results, and that schools opting in under RA No. 12027 need clear standards for strong implementation. The study asked:

1. How was MTB-MLE implemented in the schools of performing and non-performing learners in SEA-PLM 2019 and TIMSS 2019?

2. Are the learners' test performance in the SEA-PLM 2019 and TIMSS 2019 associated with their schools' MTB-MLE implementation?

Methods

A retrospective process evaluation compared actual implementation with the MTB-MLE best-practice framework from earlier ACTRC studies, using quantitative and qualitative survey data from teachers as primary program implementers. The SEA-PLM and TIMSS cohorts experienced MTB-MLE for four school years (SY 2013–2014 to 2016–2017 for SEA-PLM; SY 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 for TIMSS); data were collected for all five years from SY 2013–2014 to 2017–2018 to better establish implementation patterns.

The sample was purposively restricted to schools in the top and bottom 15 percent of SEA-PLM 2019 and TIMSS 2019 results. Of 105 invited schools, 52 from all regions participated (26 per assessment; 14 HPS and 12 LPS in each), and 1,043 K–3 teachers who had implemented MTB-MLE during the period completed the survey (621 in TIMSS schools; 422 in SEA-PLM schools).

Twenty-four schools completed the survey face-to-face and 28 online,[4] with teachers completing one form per school year they taught under MTB-MLE.

2 The Language dimension involves selecting the child's strongest language as the mother tongue, ensuring a working orthography, and cultivating positive attitudes toward the mother tongue among learners, teachers, and the community. The Materials dimension emphasizes the presence of age- and developmentally appropriate resources that are locally developed in collaboration with the community. The Instruction dimension centers on lesson comprehensibility through the MT as medium of instruction, alongside complementary teaching of the MT through immersion, language-focused activities, and experiential learning. The Program dimension concerns program design, community engagement, teacher training, funding, documentation, and evaluation.

3 Filipino test-takers achieved a 16-20-point increase in reading (367), mathematics (371), and science (373) in PISA 2025.

4 The survey tool, available in Filipino and English, was adapted from the Phase 2 and Phase 3 ACTRC teacher tools used in Understanding Best Practices in MTB-MLE (Metila, Pradilla, and Williams 2016, 2017) and updated using recent literature and researchers' feedback on its previous administration. The tool was expert-validated, revised, and piloted in both hard copy and online formats. Survey and consent forms were encoded in Qualtrics for online administration, with printed versions used for face-to-face data collection.

The number of participating schools per school year ranged from 17 to 25, with a mean of 5.4 (SEA-PLM) and 6.6 (TIMSS) teachers per school per school year.

For RQ1, responses were scored against the framework, aggregated by dimension and overall, and classified as Limited (below 50 percent of the total score), Partial (about 50–74 percent), or Strong (75 percent and above). Teacher-level scores were aggregated by school, and independent-samples *t*-tests compared HPS and LPS per school year. Open-ended responses on challenges, strategies, innovations, and pupil behaviors were coded for themes using Spark AI; the researchers checked the suggested themes against tallied responses and retained only validated themes.

For RQ2, school mean implementation ratings were correlated with SEA-PLM and TIMSS school ranks using Spearman's rho, and with binarized performance (high = 1, low = 0) using point-biserial correlations.

Results and Discussion

MTB-MLE Implementation of Performing and Nonperforming Schools in SEA-PLM 2019 and TIMSS 2019 Across School Years

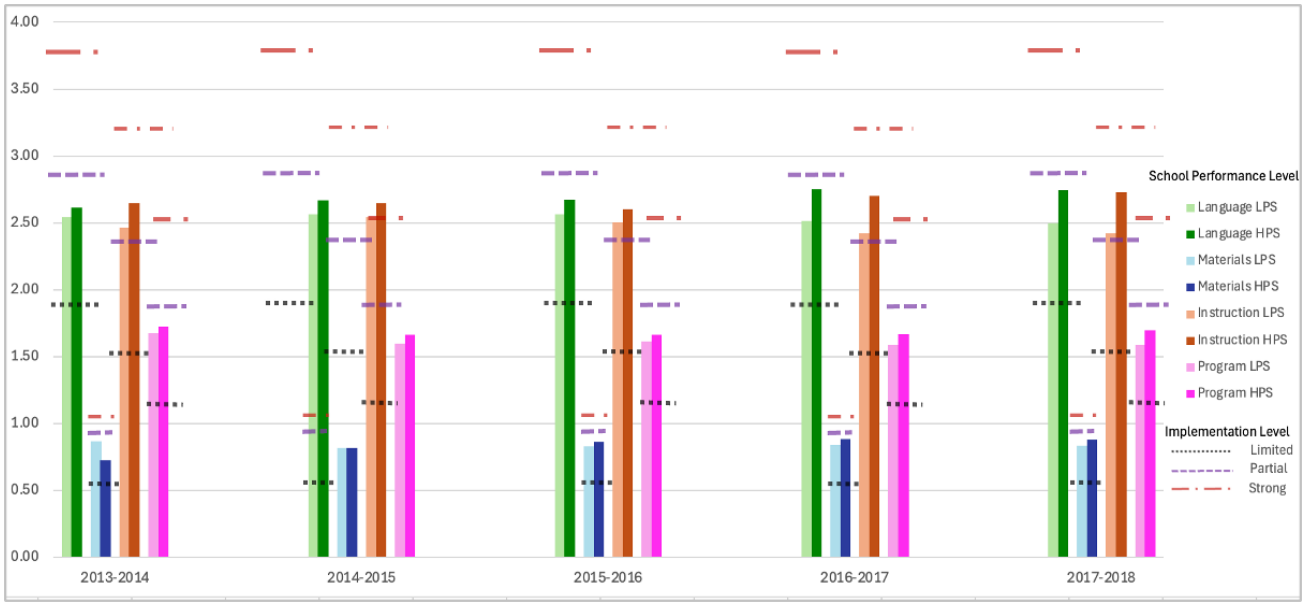
Across school years, implementation in both HPS and LPS remained at the Partial level. Descriptively, HPS implemented the program more consistently and improved gradually, though without reaching Strong implementation; as only one HPS–LPS difference was statistically significant (see notes to figures 1 and 2), these patterns should be read as trends. Both groups faced similar challenges, especially in Materials, but HPS adopted more strategic and immediate problem-solving. Persistent gaps led most schools to focus on gap-filling, so innovations were largely compensatory rather than transformative.

By dimension, schools generally showed Partial implementation in Language, Materials, and Program, but Strong implementation in Instruction across most school years; in SEA-PLM, HPS also reached Strong levels in Materials in the final two years.

Over time, HPS scores rose, particularly in Materials, Instruction, and Language, while LPS scores were flat or declining. In TIMSS, HPS scored higher than LPS in Language, Instruction, and Program throughout and later overtook LPS in Materials; in SEA-PLM, HPS started below LPS in all four dimensions but overtook them in every dimension by SY 2017–2018 (see figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1

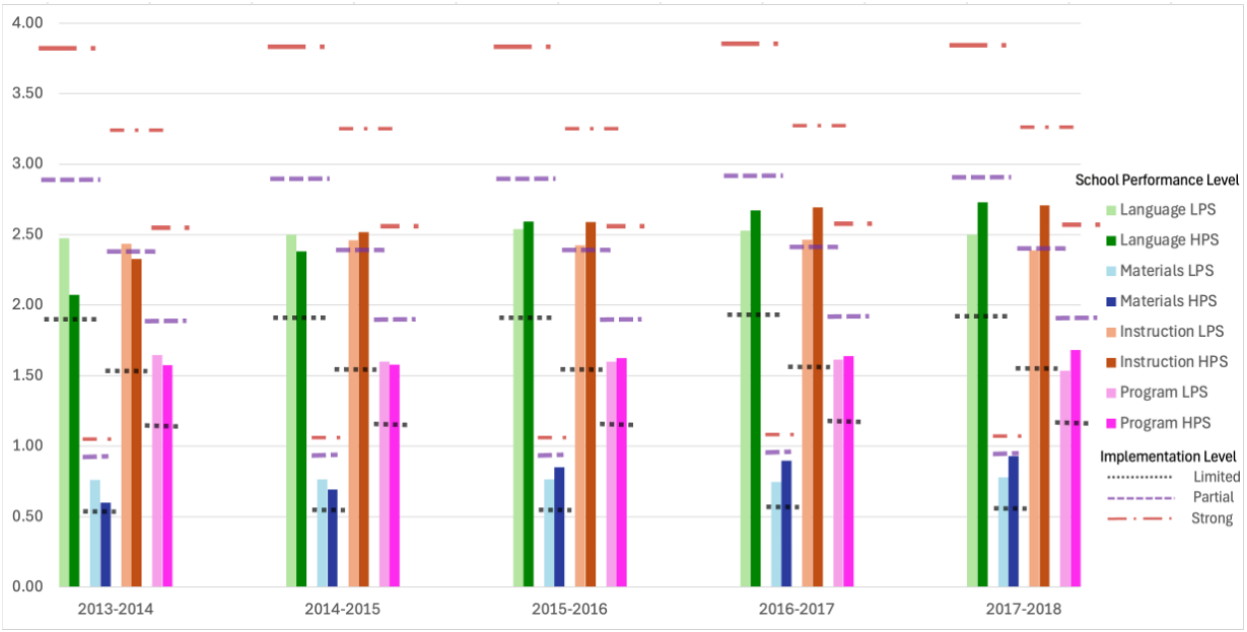
Trends in Language, Materials, Instruction, and Program Dimensions of High- and Low-Performing Schools in TIMSS 2019



Note. Independent-samples *t*-tests comparing HPS and LPS. SY 2013–2014: Language, $t(23) = -0.28$, $p = .782$; Materials, $t(23) = 1.20$, $p = .242$; Instruction, $t(23) = -1.37$, $p = .183$; Program, $t(23) = -0.94$, $p = .358$. SY 2014–2015: Language, $t(22) = -0.57$, $p = .578$; Materials, $t(22) = -0.45$, $p = .660$; Instruction, $t(22) = -0.76$, $p = .456$; Program, $t(22) = -0.96$, $p = .348$. SY 2015–2016: Language, $t(20) = -0.48$, $p = .633$; Materials, $t(20) = -1.28$, $p = .215$; Instruction, $t(20) = -0.38$, $p = .710$; Program, $t(20) = -0.64$, $p = .530$. SY 2016–2017: Language, $t(22) = -0.84$, $p = .412$; Materials, $t(22) = -0.89$, $p = .383$; Instruction, $t(22) = -2.15$, $p = .043$; Program, $t(22) = -1.37$, $p = .184$. SY 2017–2018: Language, $t(22) = -0.89$, $p = .381$; Materials, $t(22) = -0.16$, $p = .873$; Instruction, $t(22) = -1.77$, $p = .091$; Program, $t(22) = -0.69$, $p = .498$.

Figure 2

Trends in Language, Materials, Instruction, and Program Dimensions of High- and Low- Performing Schools in SEA-PLM 2019



Note. Independent-samples *t*-tests comparing HPS and LPS. SY 2013–2014: Language, $t(21) = 0.49$, $p = .630$; Materials, $t(21) = 0.39$, $p = .698$; Instruction, $t(21) = 0.12$, $p = .902$; Program, $t(21) = -0.06$, $p = .949$. SY 2014–2015: Language, $t(18) = 0.14$, $p = .893$; Materials, $t(18) = 0.21$, $p = .837$; Instruction, $t(18) = -1.04$, $p = .313$; Program, $t(18) = -0.21$, $p = .837$. SY 2015–2016: Language, $t(15) = -0.31$, $p = .764$; Materials, $t(15) = 0.03$, $p = .980$; Instruction, $t(15) = -1.27$, $p = .223$; Program, $t(15) = -0.19$, $p = .853$. SY 2016–2017: Language, $t(16) = -0.92$, $p = .370$; Materials, $t(16) = -0.24$, $p = .813$; Instruction, $t(16) = -1.89$, $p = .077$; Program, $t(16) = -0.30$, $p = .769$. SY 2017–2018: Language, $t(18) = -0.88$, $p = .390$; Materials, $t(18) = -0.04$, $p = .968$; Instruction, $t(18) = -1.69$, $p = .108$; Program, $t(18) = -0.52$, $p = .612$.

Reported Challenges and Strategies

Across HPS and LPS, and across Mathematics, Science, and Literacy, teachers reported the following key challenges: lack of instructional materials (*"Learning materials were not provided. Teachers printed the materials."*) and Teacher's Guides in English (*"TGs were in English, so we had to translate them to MT."*) ; gaps in technical vocabulary and standard orthographies (*"Pupils have difficulty understanding the terminologies used in mathematics."*); limited teacher training and weak institutional support (*"There was insufficient training in MTB-MLE pedagogy."*); and difficulties managing linguistic diversity (*"Learners have different mother tongues."* . . . . *"Not all teachers are used to using the MT Palaw'an, so the Tagalog MT was used in the school."*) and aligning instruction with assessment (*"It's difficult for learners to have the lesson in Tagalog and the exam in English. What happens is that the district uses an English test."*).

HPS responded with stronger teacher agency and more strategic, school-wide problem-solving: localizing and creating materials, using translanguaging and bridging, differentiating support for diverse learners, and engaging parents and communities. LPS generally showed weaker agency and more reactive, ad hoc strategies, alongside persistent resource shortages, lower learner engagement, and poorer and less improving performance over time.

Pupil Behavioral and Skill Strengths and Challenges Attributed to the Program

Teachers in both groups reported that pupils under MTB-MLE showed higher participation and confidence, improved reading and comprehension, more active engagement, and greater pride in the local language. However, some reported difficulties in reading, spelling, and other subjects as pupils adjusted to the MT. In HPS, teachers more consistently linked these behaviors to better academic performance; in LPS, they were not consistently associated with improved test scores.

Implemented Innovation

Innovations in both groups centered on materials development and localization, teacher professional development, MT use in school events, and MT-based

reading. HPS implemented these on a wider, more collaborative scale involving grade-level teams, DepEd offices, and parents, while LPS efforts were more individual and fragmented.

Association of Learners' Test Performance in the SEA-PLM 2019 and TIMSS 2019 with Their Schools' MTB-MLE Implementation

Spearman's rho showed no significant association between school performance in SEA-PLM or TIMSS and implementation in any dimension or school year (Annex, Tables A1–A3). Point-biserial correlations with binarized performance yielded similar results (Tables A4–A5), with one exception: a moderate positive correlation between TIMSS performance and the Instruction dimension in SY 2016–2017 ($r = .417$, $p = .043$). As this was one of 40 such tests, it should be interpreted with caution.

The four dimensions were strongly correlated with one another, suggesting that schools struggling in one dimension tend to struggle in others, although this may partly reflect rater effects, as the same teachers rated all dimensions. The lack of a detectable association does not imply that MTB-MLE has no educational value: given how implementation and outcomes were measured and the small sample, effects may have been too small, indirect, or delayed to detect, or overshadowed by factors outside the study's scope, such as socio-economic context and school quality.

Conclusions

This study is the first to examine MTB-MLE implementation in Philippine schools that took part in international large-scale assessments, providing evidence for debates that have attributed test results to MTB-MLE, often without data. Its findings should be read in light of its limitations: a small sample; reliance on teacher self-reports and school-level rather than learner-level data; retrospective reporting; a roughly 50 percent school participation rate; and limited coverage of contextual factors such as leadership and resources.

Throughout the reckoning period, both HPS and LPS attained only an overall Partial level of implementation, with Instruction the only dimension rated Strong in most years. Schools appear to have operated in an extended state of survival, which likely constrained the quality of teaching and learning.

The findings are consistent with MTB-MLE functioning as an integrated system in which the four dimensions must be aligned, so that weakness in one undermines the others.

No statistically significant association was found between implementation ratings and SEA-PLM or TIMSS performance, apart from one isolated correlation in the Instruction dimension. This does not mean that MTB-MLE lacks educational value: teachers in both groups reported that the program increased pupils' confidence, participation, and comprehension and strengthened their cultural and linguistic identity, although these benefits were constrained by persistent materials shortages and limited MTB-MLE-specific training.

Overall, the prevailing Partial level of implementation was likely insufficient to influence outcomes measurably. High-quality implementation appears to be a critical precondition for realizing the program's intended benefits, which is why schools that opt in under RA No. 12027 need clear standards and support.

Policy Gaps and Recommendations for Opt-in MTB-MLE Implementation

In light of RA No. 12027 and its IRR, the following short- and long-term recommendations aim to guide and support schools that opt in to MTB-MLE. Short-term recommendations address standards for implementation and evaluation and the Materials dimension; long-term recommendations address professional development, the sharing of HPS practices, and targeted support for LPS.

Short-Term Recommendations

Responsible Agency	Policy Gap	Policy Recommendation
DepEd Central Office, DepEd Regional and Division Offices, KWF	No mechanisms or standardized tools to evaluate the quality of MTB-MLE implementation	To support the required evaluation of opt-in schools, develop clear standards and descriptors for levels of MTB-MLE implementation quality, including what Strong implementation looks like in each dimension, and integrate them into DepEd's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework. Most schools in the study did not reach Strong level of implementation in any dimension except Instruction. Building on DO No. 21, s. 2019, provide simple self-evaluation tools organized by dimension, and require that monitoring culminate in improvement plans that target the weakest areas.
DepEd Central Office, DepEd Regional and Division Offices	No clear, well-communicated quality targets for MTB-MLE implementation	Require opt-in schools to implement MTB-MLE toward agreed indicators of high-quality practice, communicated as four interrelated dimensions (Language, Materials, Instruction, and Program) to promote coherence. Teachers reported insufficient orientation on the program's dimensions and quality targets, and without clear targets, implementation is unlikely to be focused and intentional.
DepEd Central Office, DepEd Regional and Division Offices	Inadequate and delayed supply of appropriate instructional materials	For opt-in schools, adopt policies that guarantee the timely development, production, and distribution of MTB-MLE materials, with clear timelines and accountabilities at national, regional, division, and school levels, and protocols with deadlines for reporting and resolving materials issues, which teachers reported consistently. Institutionalize the participation of families and communities in developing and reviewing materials, especially in Indigenous Peoples' contexts, where local language and cultural knowledge often rests with community members.

Long-Term Recommendations

Responsible Agency	Policy Gap	Policy Recommendation
DepEd Central Office, DepEd Regional and Division Offices	No system-wide professional development framework for teachers of multilingual learners in Key Stage 1	Develop a system-wide MTB-MLE professional development framework of regular, sequenced training in MT instruction, local language proficiency, subject-specific terminology, materials development, and assessment, aligned with the quality assurance guidance in DO No. 21, s. 2019. Most teachers reported receiving no MTB-MLE-specific training, with participation concentrated in the early years and little follow-up. Include school heads and program coordinators, given their roles in instructional leadership and M&E.
DepEd Central Office, DepEd Regional and Division Offices	Limited documentation of HPS practices and limited systematic support for LPS	Document and share the practices of HPS, which responded to challenges in a timely, targeted way and improved across dimensions, through mechanisms such as school-to-school support. Provide differentiated support to LPS, which faced similar challenges but responded more slowly, based on a diagnostic analysis of school leadership, human and material resources, and context.

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Annex: Correlation Results

Table A1

Spearman's Rho Correlation Results of SEA-PLM School Ranks with MTB-MLE Implementation

School Year	N	Language		Materials		Instruction		Program	
		r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
2013-2014	23	0.151	0.491	−0.01	0.962	0.191	0.382	0.069	0.755
2014-2015	20	0.166	0.484	0.005	0.985	−0.124	0.602	0.054	0.82
2015-2016	17	0.193	0.459	0.064	0.808	−0.174	0.503	0.039	0.881
2016-2017	18	−0.024	0.925	−0.013	0.958	−0.287	0.248	0.016	0.951
2017-2018	20	−0.094	0.695	0.084	0.724	−0.135	0.571	−0.08	0.736

Table A2

Spearman's Rho Correlation Results of TIMSS Science School Ranks with MTB-MLE Implementation

School Year	N	Language		Materials		Instruction		Program	
		r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
2013-2014	25	0.095	0.651	−0.039	0.855	0.368	0.07	0.238	0.251
2014-2015	24	0.025	0.907	0.219	0.304	0.274	0.196	0.351	0.093
2015-2016	22	0.09	0.691	0.213	0.342	0.146	0.516	0.186	0.406
2016-2017	24	0.094	0.662	0.082	0.705	0.345	0.099	0.366	0.079
2017-2018	24	0.123	0.568	−0.109	0.613	0.328	0.118	0.133	0.537

Table A3

Spearman's Rho Correlation Results of TIMSS Math School Ranks with MTB-MLE Implementation

School Year	N	Language		Materials		Instruction		Program	
		r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
2013-2014	25	0.125	0.552	−0.054	0.799	0.38	0.061	0.222	0.287
2014-2015	24	0.045	0.834	0.205	0.336	0.287	0.173	0.287	0.174
2015-2016	22	0.102	0.651	0.199	0.376	0.144	0.522	0.159	0.48
2016-2017	24	0.136	0.526	0.07	0.744	0.336	0.108	0.302	0.151
2017-2018	24	0.177	0.407	−0.1	0.64	0.333	0.112	0.114	0.596

Table A4

Point-Biserial Correlation Results of SEA-PLM School Ranks (binarized) with MTB-MLE Implementation

School Year	N	Language		Materials		Instruction		Program	
		r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
2013-2014	23	−0.106	0.63	−0.085	0.698	−0.027	0.902	0.014	0.949
2014-2015	20	−0.032	0.893	−0.049	0.837	0.238	0.313	0.049	0.837
2015-2016	17	0.079	0.764	−0.006	0.98	0.312	0.223	0.049	0.853
2016-2017	18	0.225	0.37	0.06	0.813	0.427	0.077	0.074	0.769
2017-2018	20	0.203	0.39	0.009	0.969	0.371	0.108	0.121	0.612

Table A5

Point-Biserial Correlation Results of TIMSS School Ranks (binarized) with MTB-MLE Implementation

School Year	N	Language		Materials		Instruction		Program	
		r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
2013-2014	25	0.058	0.782	−0.243	0.242	0.275	0.183	0.192	0.358
2014-2015	24	0.12	0.578	0.095	0.66	0.16	0.456	0.2	0.348
2015-2016	22	0.108	0.633	0.275	0.215	0.084	0.709	0.141	0.53
2016-2017	24	0.176	0.412	0.186	0.383	0.417*	0.043	0.281	0.184
2017-2018	24	0.187	0.381	0.035	0.873	0.352	0.091	0.145	0.498

Note. * $p < 0.05$

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CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni, Magsaysay Avenue
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cids.up.edu.ph

Telephone (02) 8981-8500 loc. 4266 to 4268
(02) 8426-0955

Email cids@up.edu.ph
cidspublications@up.edu.ph

Website cids.up.edu.ph