



Evaluating the impact of teaching assistants

ACER assessments support research into evidence-based teaching and learning in England, as **Mirkka Jokelainen** explains.



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Reliable evaluation of the impact of interventions and approaches is crucial if educators are to select and apply the most appropriate and effective strategies in the classroom when working with individual students.

ACER's schools assessments are playing a part in supporting improvements in teaching and learning by providing accurate baseline and outcome information to inform decision-making by school and system leaders.

In England, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is committed to raising the attainment of 3–18 year olds, particularly those facing disadvantage. According to an analysis of results from the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment, students who are in the top 10 per cent of achievement nationally, but in the lowest quarter socio-economically, are around two-and-a-half years behind in learning than their more socio-economically advantaged peers.

To address this, EEF provides schools with free and evidence-based resources to improve teaching practice and student learning. Part of this work is to generate evidence on what works in education, and the EEF funds studies that evaluate teaching and learning programs and approaches.

The Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants (MITA) program has shown high-impact potential and is now being evaluated in an objective research study. The MITA approach has been developed at the Institute of Education at University College London and aims to ensure teaching assistants' resources are appropriately targeted in

the classroom and school. The program has been developed for school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants. With the right use of resources and clear roles, learning in the classroom is expected to improve.

To evaluate the impact of MITA, EEF has commissioned RAND Europe to conduct a two-year study. While the program is a whole-school approach to training, deploying and preparing teaching assistants, the study focuses on outcomes in two year groups. For children who are in Year 5 at the start of the trial, the impact of MITA will be evaluated based on their Key Stage 2 test results. Children who are in Year 2 at the start of the intervention program were assessed before the program was implemented, and will be assessed again at the end of the two-year intervention, at the end of Year 3. The assessments RAND Europe and EEF will use to measure the impact in this age group are ACER's Essential Learning Metrics (ELMs).

ELMs has been developed for schools in England to measure learning in reading comprehension, mathematics, vocabulary and writing. For this study, a paper version of the digital tests was created.

The baseline assessment was completed in June 2017. ACER invigilators visited 120 schools participating in the study and administered the ELMs Reading Comprehension assessment to more than 6000 students in the intervention and control groups. The research seeks to confirm that, in comparison to the control group, MITA intervention:

- has a positive effect on student attainment
- results in improved deployment of teaching assistants
- results in change of practices
- has a positive effect on student engagement.

The outcome testing will be conducted in 2019 with the report on findings to be released in 2020.

Schools invest substantial resources when implementing new learning and teaching strategies, particularly in terms of the time and commitment of their teachers. For this reason it is important that they ensure their investment pays off. Valid and accurate assessment plays a key role in objectively evaluating the impact of new, and indeed, existing, teaching and learning strategies. ACER's collaboration with RAND Europe demonstrates how high-quality assessments are supporting effective teaching and learning practice in schools. ■

LINKS

For more about EEF and the MITA study, visit <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/maximising-the-impact-of-teaching-assistants>

For more about the MITA program, visit <http://maximisingtas.co.uk>

For more about ELMs, visit <https://elms.acer.org>