Teachers Make the Difference Study Brief

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Research suggests Neuhaus Education Center’s Teachers Make the Difference professional development program for early childhood educators may improve teacher knowledge and classroom practices and, ultimately, student outcomes.

In 2013, the Neuhaus Education Center (Neuhaus) contracted with Education Northwest to determine if the evidence-based professional development program for early childhood educators, Teachers Make the Difference (TMTD), improves teacher knowledge, classroom practices, and student outcomes.

Education Northwest conducted a quasi-experimental study that included a comparison group of teachers who did not participate in TMTD. This type of study could provide evidence of impact, but could not definitively attribute differences in impact to teacher participation in TMTD.

Neuhaus offered TMTD to pre-kindergarten teachers working with disadvantaged students in traditionally lower performing schools in the Houston Independent School District. Teachers attended six TMTD workshops and received coaching delivered throughout the school year. Content focused on improving skills in teaching early literacy in:

- Oral language
- Phonological awareness
- Letter recognition
- Concepts of print

All TMTD teachers participated in the workshops and received coaching, although they received less coaching than anticipated. Overall, the study found teachers were pleased with the workshops and felt the time spent on a variety of early childhood literacy topics was “just right.” They reported that receiving coaching positively impacted their instruction.

Researchers analyzed survey responses on early literacy knowledge and teaching practices. TMTD teachers correctly answered more knowledge items in spring than in the proceeding fall (70% and 60%, respectively). Furthermore, teachers reported using the TMTD materials weekly, usually with their most struggling students, and during small- and whole-group instruction.

To determine growth in early literacy student outcomes, Neuhaus coaches administered the Early Literacy Quick Assessment (ELQA), in fall and spring, to students in the classrooms of teachers who participated in TMTD and those who did not (i.e., the comparison group). The ELQA assesses early literacy in seven areas: print concepts, picture naming, rhyming, upper- and lower case letters, letter sounds, and receptive vocabulary.
Based on fall data, comparison teachers’ students performed better than those in the classrooms of TMTD teachers in all areas except picture naming (see Figure 1).

By spring, the fall trends were reversed—TMTD teachers’ students performed better than those of comparison teachers (see Figure 2). In all areas except picture naming, this fall to spring growth was significantly greater than would be expected if the students’ teachers had not participated in TMTD. Had the teachers not participated in TMTD, their students would be expected to show growth equal to that of the students of comparison teachers; instead, they experienced additional growth that ranged from a low of 5 percent in receptive vocabulary to a high of 26 percent in print concepts.