Parents' Perceptions of the Benefits of Full-Day and Half-Day Kindergarten

Diana Brannon
Elmhurst College

- Parents' perceptions about kindergarten were studied. Segmentation scores were analyzed to determine if there was a difference in achievement between full-day and half-day kindergarteners. Parents' decision regarding kindergarten seems to relate to factors beyond achievement.

There is a great demand for full-day kindergarten programs today in America. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 61% of all schools in our country that have a kindergarten program offer at least one full-day class (Walston & West, 2004). This coincides with the dramatic rise in the number of children enrolled in kindergarten since the 1970s. The number has more than tripled (Miller, 2002). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2001), 60% of kindergarten children attend full-day programs lasting between 5 to 6 hours (Brewster & Railsback, 2002). To meet this demand, public schools are spending millions of additional dollars each year to fund longer kindergarten classes.

Changes in the American family structure have dramatically increased the need for full-day kindergarten and other childcare opportunities for young children. There has been a dramatic rise in the number of single-parent and dual-wage earner homes in the last decade (Miller, 2002). As early as 1993 almost 60% of married mothers of young children were in the workforce (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1996). Because of this, there have been increasing numbers of children attending some sort of daycare or preschool before entering kindergarten (Gullo, 1990). Full-day kindergarten is often chosen by working parents because of child care and transportation issues associated with half-day programs (Elicker & Mathur, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into parents' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of full-day and half-day kindergarten programs in preparing students for success in first grade. Parents' perceptions of the academic benefits of full-day and half-day kindergarten and whether these perceptions reflect students' actual achievement in kindergarten and first grade were studied.

This study addressed the following questions: What are full-day and half-day kindergarten parents' perceptions of kindergarten and its importance to students' achievement in first grade? What are parents' perceptions regarding the benefits of full-day and half-day kindergarten programs? What is the effect of attending full-day kindergarten upon students' phoneme segmentation fluency in kindergarten and first grade? And, do parents' perceptions regarding the academic benefits of full-day and half-day kindergarten programs reflect students' actual achievement in kindergarten and first grade?

Methods
Data were collected at a small, suburban elementary school in the Midwest. Students' achievement at the end of kindergarten and first grade were evaluated by analyzing students' kindergarten and first grade phonemic segmentation abilities. Parents' perceptions regarding full-day and half-day kindergarten were studied by analyzing parents' responses to a questionnaire and their participation in focus groups.

The study contained three different parts. The first part of the study investigated parents' thoughts and perceptions regarding full-day and half-day kindergarten through qualitative analysis of full-day and half-day kindergarten parents' responses to questions asked at focus group meetings. The focus group participants, consisting of parents of children in either full-day or half-day kindergarten, were asked (a) why they chose the kindergarten program type they did, (b) what they think the purpose of kindergarten is, (c) what they see as the advantages of the kindergarten program type that they chose, (d) why they think some parents choose the opposing kindergarten program type, and (e) if they think there are advantages to the opposing kindergarten type.
Parents’ responses were analyzed to identify themes regarding their perceptions of full-day and half-day kindergarten.

Part two included an analysis of kindergarten and first grade parents’ responses to a questionnaire given to all parents of kindergarten and first grade students in the district being studied. The questionnaire was designed to elicit parents’ feelings regarding the importance of full-day and half-day kindergarten in developing the intellectual, personal, social, and health/physical skills necessary for success in first grade.

Questionnaires were given to 153 parents of kindergarten and first grade students. A total of 141 questionnaires were returned. Questions regarding parents’ perceptions of the personal, social, and health/physical outcomes of kindergarten were included to determine if parents’ preferences for full-day or half-day kindergarten were related to things other than academic outcomes. In other words, there was an effort to determine if parents perceive full-day of half-day kindergarten as having purposes or benefits beyond academic instruction. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions including multiple choice and Likert-scale questions. It was based on modifications to the work of Downey (1960), Cabler (1974), and Van Cleaf (1979).

The study also included repeated measures analysis of students’ Spring kindergarten and Spring first grade scores on the phonemic segmentation portion of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment. This analysis was conducted to determine if there is a difference in phonemic segmentation abilities between students who attend full-day and half-day kindergarten. Students’ phonemic segmentation scores were compared at the end of kindergarten and at the end of first grade. Therefore, a mixed design including between (full-day / half-day) and within (kindergarten / first grade) subjects measures was used.

Developed by Roland Good and Ruth Kaminski at the University of Oregon, the DIBELS assessment was designed to assess primary students' mastery and knowledge of skills identified as early indicators of reading success. The phonemic segmentation fluency portion of the DIBELS assessment has been shown to be a good indicator of students' current and future reading success (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001; Mann, 1993). Phonemic segmentation scores for 72 first grade students from four different classrooms were included in this study.

Results

Parents expressed many commonalities regarding their perceptions of kindergarten and full-day and half-day kindergarten programs. Full-day and half-day kindergarten parents both expressed a desire for their children to receive exposure to "the basics". They also felt that socialization was important and that kindergarten is very important at influencing children's attitudes about school. Parents' decision regarding program type was influenced by who was home during the day, parents' confidence in their ability to teach their child, and parents' comfort level with being separated from their child. Parents' perceptions of their child's maturity level played a major part in their decision regarding enrolling their child in full-day or half-day kindergarten.

Students who attended full-day kindergarten performed significantly better on phonemic segmentation skills than half-day students at the end of kindergarten. However, there was not a significant difference in phonemic segmentation ability between students who attended full-day and half-day kindergarten by the end of students' first grade year.

As indicated by their responses on the parent questionnaires and during the focus groups, full-day and half-day kindergarten parents both expressed a strong belief that the kindergarten program type that they chose for their child was the most beneficial. Parents of half-day kindergarten students in this study expressed a concern that full-day kindergarten children are exposed to too much academic pressure. These parents also expressed a concern that full-day kindergarten could have a negative impact on students' feelings about school. Full-day kindergarten parents expressed a belief that their children were more socially, academically, and personally prepared for first grade than students who attended half-day kindergarten.

On the questionnaires, parents were asked to rank from most to least important skills related to kindergarten including academic, social, self-esteem, and physical development. Half-day and full-day kindergarten parents both rated developing students' self-esteem as the most important skill students need to develop in kindergarten to succeed in first grade. Half-day and full-day kindergarten parents agreed that developing students' academic skills such as reading and writing was second in importance. Developing students' social skills was ranked as third in importance by half-day and full-day kindergarten parents. Physical development was ranked as least important by both groups of parents.
The questionnaire also revealed that full-day parents believe that full-day kindergarten does a better job of preparing children for first grade academically, socially, and physically, and of building children’s self-esteem. Half-day parents believe that both programs do an equal job of preparing children for first grade. Therefore, one can conclude that both groups of parents believe their children to be well prepared for first grade.

Full-day kindergarten teachers interviewed by Towers (1991) believed that full-day kindergarten was more developmentally appropriate for children. The teachers maintained that the extended day provided children with more time for language development, dramatic and social play, and enrichment activities. They also asserted that full-day kindergarten prepared students more socially, emotionally, and academically for attending school full days in first grade. The full-day kindergarten parents in this study agreed that these were benefits of full-day kindergarten.

Another advantage of the full-day program, according to full-day parents in this study, is that it provides their children additional time to work and form relationships. Ellicker and Mathur (1997) found similar results. They found parents and teachers preferred full-day kindergarten because it seemed more relaxed, provided more time for creativity, and more opportunity for children to develop their interests.

**Implications**

Parents’ perceptions regarding the benefits of full-day and half-day kindergarten go beyond the issue of students' academic achievement. Both full-day and half-day kindergarten parents rated developing their child's self-esteem and love of learning as more important than developing his or her academic skills for first grade. Therefore, the fact that full-day kindergarten students outperform half-day kindergarten students at the end of kindergarten, or the fact that this benefit seems to level off during first grade does not seem as important as parents’ perceptions of their child's individual needs and preparedness for full-day or half-day kindergarten.

The length of the school day is only one dimension of the kindergarten experience. Other important issues include the nature of the kindergarten curriculum and the quality of teaching. In general, research suggests that both full-day and half-day kindergarten programs can be effective at preparing students for learning provided that the curriculum is developmentally appropriate and stimulating (Rothenberg, 1984). This study has shown that not all children may be ready for full-day kindergarten. Therefore, this study supports Elkind’s (1987) recommendation that schools provide a choice for parents regarding full-day or half-day kindergarten. Elkind is correct in his statement that “With respect to the full-day kindergarten issue, there are no good guys and bad guys, just parents with different, but equally legitimate, needs and values trying to do what is best for their children” (p. 2).

**References**


principals concerning kindergarten objectives and preferences relating to behaviorist and cognitive-transactionist methods. *Dissertation Abstracts International.*