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# Choosing an effective kindergarten program : comparing full-day and half-day schedules

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# Choosing an effective kindergarten program : comparing full-day and half-day schedules

#### Abstract

Due to changes in American society and education during the last twenty years the popularity of all-day, everyday kindergarten programs has grown. Among the many issues cited as reasons for implementing all-day kindergarten programs are "... a growing need for child care, the need for more opportunity for socialization among young children, and a demand for more academically challenging programs" (Rust, 1993, p. 8).

The "whole child" approach is what we strive for today. However, that focus has been compromised in some instances by placing financial, parental, or school needs ahead of what is best for kindergarten students.

The literature is surveyed for strengths and weaknesses of the full-day schedule in comparison to the half-day kindergarten schedule in an attempt to conclude which schedule is best for parents, teachers, and most importantly, kindergarten students.

In summary, the research clearly states that advantages of the all-day kindergarten schedule outweigh the disadvantages in comparison to the half-day schedule.

Choosing an Effective Kindergarten Program: Comparing Full-Day and Half-Day Schedules

A Research Review submitted to the Division of Talented and Gifted Education Department of Curriculum and Instruction in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

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Titled: Choosing an Effective Kindergarten Program: Comparing Full-Day and Half-Day Schedules

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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#### ABSTRACT

Due to changes in American society and education during the last twenty years the popularity of all-day, everyday kindergarten programs has grown. Among the many issues cited as reasons for implementing all-day kindergarten programs are "... a growing need for child care, the need for more opportunity for socialization among young children, and a demand for more academically challenging programs" (Rust, 1993, p. 8).

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#### CHAPTER I

Due to changes in American society and education during the last twenty years the popularity of all-day, everyday kindergarten programs has grown. Among the many issues cited as reasons for implementing all-day kindergarten programs are "... a growing need for child care, the need for more opportunity for socialization among young children, and a demand for more academically challenging programs" (Rust, 1993, p. 8).

There is concern among early childhood educators that "Many all-day kindergartens have adopted the academic orientation of the elementary school and that the kindergarten has become a 'pushed down' first grade" (Rust, 1993, p. 10). Skeptics say that today's kindergarten has taken the form of a "more-is-better approach" which leads to an increased and inappropriate emphasis on academics (Olsen, 1989, p. 170). However, observers of trends in kindergarten scheduling argue that the issue underlying the value of kindergarten programs is that of providing developmentally appropriate learning programs for all kindergarten children, regardless of the length of the school day.

In my own experience, as a kindergarten teacher of nine years, I have learned that there is a need for a balance of both academic and basic care in my all-day, everyday program. Dr. Bettye Caldwell (1989) coined a phrase that I think speaks to a kindergarten student's needs well. She says that "The reality of any early childhood program is that it must provide a proper blend of education and care - *educare*" (p. 266). It has been my experience that kindergarten children have a tendency to "shut down" during the afternoon hours; they are not interested in more academic instruction. The afternoon lends itself nicely to developing social learning activities.

Based on the philosophy of Kindergarten founder Freidrich Froebel, introduced more than 130 years ago, early kindergarten education experiences were designed to support the developmental process of young children. As a result, kindergartens emphasized self-directed activities that fostered the child's innate curiosity and sense of social responsibility. This spirit and philosophy remained very much intact until the 1970's (Olsen and Zigler, 1989).

#### The Problem

This "whole child" approach is what we strive for today. However, that focus has been compromised in some instances by placing financial, parental, or school needs ahead of what is best for kindergarten students. Educators today may be forgetting that Froebel's philosophy considered children's personal and social well-being first not academics.

#### The Question

The primary question explored in this paper is: Does the length of the school day affect kindergarten students' personal, social, and academic well-being? The secondary question is: What impact does the length of the school day have on faculty and parental considerations?

#### The Purpose

The literature is surveyed for strengths and weaknesses of the full-day schedule in comparison to the half-day kindergarten schedule to conclude which schedule is best for parents, teachers, and most importantly, kindergarten students.

#### **Limitations**

The published research comparing the overall effectiveness of the two kindergarten schedules was quite difficult to conduct for a variety of reasons. It is important that parents, teachers and administrators understand that when reviewing this issue. Professor of education Mary Renck Jalongo (1986) points out that an experiment comparing full-day and half-day must control everything except the length of the school day in order to be valid. For true results, a researcher would have to have the same teacher and students experience a half-day and a full-day experience at the same time (Jalongo, 1986). Of course this is impossible. It is also difficult to assess some student characteristics associated with the personal or social well-being of students such as maturation, motivation, and self-esteem. In addition, teachers' preferences for half-day or full-day scheduling could affect their performance and that of their students (Jalongo, 1986). For these reasons, it has been very difficult to provide conclusive evidence that one schedule is superior to the other.

#### **Definitions**

For the purposes of this review, the following definitions will be used:

All-day kindergarten - will refer to those programs in which students who meet acceptable age requirements attend a full-day kindergarten program (approximately five and one-half hours) each regularly scheduled school day.

Half-day kindergarten - will refer to a program in which students who meet acceptable age requirements attend a half-day program (approximately three hours) each regularly scheduled school day.

#### CHAPTER II

The following review is organized in terms of the way individual variables are affected by all-day versus half-day kindergarten schedules. These variables include differences in basic academic skills; instructional time; social, emotional, and developmental considerations (e.g. fatigue); faculty considerations; and parent considerations.

#### **Basic Academic Skills**

The area of basic academic skills drew the most research attention. Author Vincent T. Puleo (1988) stated that more recent studies are showing better attention to methodology. Researchers are using increasingly sophisticated statistical techniques and there is greater detail and clarity in reporting findings. Puleo found that class size was an important consideration when reviewing academic skills. "By systematically varying class size, a direct correlation was found between teacher-pupil ratios and achievement differences on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills" (p. 430). The comparison sample included half-day kindergarten groups with class sizes of 16 and 28, and full-day classes of 23, 26, and 28. All-day kindergarten classes outperformed half-day class with the same class size but the highest scores were achieved by the half-day class with the 16:1 ratio. In this report, "Class size reduction of seven had a greater effect on student achievement than extending the time schedule to full-day" (p. 430).

Author Carol Sue Fromboluti (1988) reported that the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools (CREMS) at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore reviewed the effects of full-day kindergarten programs and concluded that full-day, as opposed to half-day programs, improved the degree to which at-risk students are prepared for first grade. "Whether the cause is simply more time in school or the fact that full-day programs generally boast more academic curricula remains unclear. Still, disadvantaged youngsters do clearly benefit from full-day programs" (Fromboluti, p.1). According to the CREMS report, a common element found in effective kindergarten programs was structure. Good programs for disadvantaged children were found to be specific, clear cut, but flexible.

Mary Renck Jalongo (1986) stated that incidence of grade retention is reduced by full-day programs and disadvantaged children may benefit greatly from full-day schedules because of the possibility for an expanded curriculum. Frances O'Connell Rust (1993) pointed out that researchers found "A longer day without an enriched curriculum had little carryover to school performance in later years" (p. 10).

Dr. Dominic F. Gullo (1990), professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, reminded readers that "If implemented *appropriately*, the all-day kindergarten allows the teacher to accommodate individual differences by expanding the curriculum horizontally" (p. 37). Gullo said that the wide variety of individual differences can be accommodated in the all-day kindergarten program because of the logical format to individualize the curriculum for children with diverse backgrounds. He stated that "In the all-day kindergarten, the teacher has between 22 and 25 children daily. With half as many children as a teacher with two half-day programs, she is able to know the children and their families better" (p. 37). In the traditional morning and afternoon half-day kindergarten program, teachers usually have 20 -25 students in each session. Gullo felt "A teacher trying to meet the developmental needs of 40 to 50 children a day faces an overwhelming task" (p. 37).

#### Instructional Time

Puleo (1988) suggested that the interaction of a full-day schedule with the curriculum allows for effective instruction of low socioeconomic status (SES) children and allows for variation in instruction for middle- and high-SES students. "Very clearly it underscores the fundamental point that in order to maximize academic gains educators must systematically vary instruction on the basis of recognized differences among groups of students" (p. 431).

Puleo (1988) further stated that the perceived goal of many all-day kindergarten teachers is to attend to individual students' needs. "It might be hypothesized that 'instructional' time is essential in basic skill acquisition while 'unstructured' time is important for social or emotional objectives" (432). In the all-day program schedule it is suggested that there is more time for both.

Dianne Rothenberg (1995) said that in full-day programs instruction is "less hectic" and it is geared to student needs. "Full-day kindergarten allows children and teachers time to explore topics in depth; reduces the ratio of transition time to class time, and provides for greater continuity of day-to-day activities" (p. 2). She also reminded her readers that 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" (p. 2).

Susan B. Cruikshank (1986) agreed, and in her article discussing implementation of all-day kindergarten instruction she stated, "Kindergarten teachers in half-day programs often spend more time on routine matters such as helping children get their boots off and on than they do teaching. Full-day programs enable teachers to meet children's needs better, since they have more hours of teaching time" (p. 12). Jalongo (1986) felt that the full-day schedule provides time for participation and individualization. She added that there is also increased opportunity to participate in the "total school experience" because of more contact with peers and teachers.

However, Olsen and Zigler (1989) argued that the all-day program has the advantage of a greater amount of time for individual instruction is false. "Contrary to expectation, it has been found that teachers in all-day programs, even experienced kindergarten teachers with teacher aides, overwhelmingly tend to teach children as a group rather than working with them on an individual basis" (p. 174). Olsen and Zigler suggested that in-service and training programs are needed for a successful full-day kindergarten program.

Nancy Karweit (1992) agreed that lengthening the school day provided more opportunity for learning, but the critical issue is the actual use of time. According to Karweit "More profound effects could result from a curriculum change that recognizes that five-year-olds do not learn in the same manner as older children" (p. 84). She believed that instructional activities should be designed for children this age and focus on experimental learning, meaning, and higher order thinking. Instruction should "... seek a balance between child- and teacher-initiated activities, recognize the importance of play, and view the teacher as a facilitator of learning" (p. 84).

Gullo (1990) cautioned readers of the trend to bring the first and sometimes second grade curriculum elements down to kindergarten which he warns only put pressure on children. Gullo expressed concern that the all-day kindergarten program is even more vulnerable to this trend than the half-day program. "Kindergartens change their hours as families change their needs, but kindergartens shouldn't change their time proven curriculum by bending to adverse social pressures" (p. 37).

#### Social, Emotional, and Developmental Considerations

Social, emotional, and developmental effects cover a broad range of student behaviors. Within this area, Puleo (1988) said that the fatigue issue has received the most attention. According to Puleo, most investigators reported that fatigue was not a problem and that there were ". . . no studies that showed negative effects on social-emotional development as a consequence of full-day participation" (p. 432). However, Dr. James M. Towers (1991) found in his case study of an all-day kindergarten program in Minnesota that a few parents were opposed to the all-day approach for various other reasons that may have been indirectly related to the fatigue factor. They found the all-day program to be hard on those students who ride the bus, no greater learning experience than half-day, and they found the all-day schedule forced their children to grow up too fast.

Researchers have found a broad range of effects. Rothenberg (1995) reported a study comparing similar half-day and full-day programs in a longitudinal study which found that students in full-day kindergarten exhibited more independent learning, classroom involvement, productivity in work with peers, and reflectiveness than students in half-day programs. Kindergartners participating in the all-day programs were also more likely to approach the teacher and were less dependent on adults for permission and approval. Along with this sense of independence, full-day kindergarten students expressed less withdrawal, anger, shyness, and blaming behavior than half-day kindergarten students.

In their summary of the research, Theresa Housden & Rose Kam (1992) suggested that all-day kindergarten may reduce long-term costs for special and remedial education. They explained that children come to kindergarten with mental ages ranging from three to eight and developmental lags in language, motor, or perceptual skills are common even among children of average or above-average intelligence. "Full-day kindergarten teachers have more time to diagnose and help solve such problems before children go on to the first grade" (p. 2).

In discussing the developmental needs of young children, Holmes and McConnell (1990) said that proponents of full-day programs offered findings of a number of researchers and experts in child development claiming that five-year-olds need a six hour day. The experts said that this is the time in a child's life when the brain is most receptive to learning. It is imperative that the child be exposed to a broader curriculum than can be offered in the half-day program.

In terms of developmental appropriateness, Gullo (1990) said "A consistent experience in one classroom of good quality with one teacher has to be viewed as better than multiple daily care arrangements, each with its different cast of characters, behavior standards, and policies" (p. 36). Gullo also felt that the research suggests an all-day experience is not detrimental to five-year-olds, instead, they probably benefit from the experience. The benefits are not only academic but social and emotional as well.

#### Faculty Considerations

Research from the later 1980's to the early 1990's indicated overall that the reaction of first-grade teachers, special education teachers, and administrators to the idea of full-day kindergarten is overwhelmingly positive. However, some all-day kindergarten teachers have indicated some reservations about the full-day schedule.

Caldwell (1989) stated, "Cutting the day in half might have been sold to the public on developmental grounds (the children need more contact with their mothers, need naps at home, and so forth), but half-days were instituted because of pragmatic factors such as overcrowding in existing school buildings due to fluctuations in the population of five year olds" (p. 263). She suggested that administrators can easily develop a rationale for what is fiscally practical. Jalongo (1986) added that educators (teachers and administrators) share concern for the individual child, like parents, but they are also responsible for making and implementing the needs of the majority. "If administrators believe that their district can be more responsive to the community and increase its cost effectiveness with full-day kindergarten, then the change is probably inevitable" (p. 156).

Many teachers did prefer full-day to half-day scheduling. "It allows them to individualize instruction and devote more time to development of childrens' academic readiness" (Housden & Kam, 1992, p. 2). Studies showed full-day teachers felt they had more time to enrich the curriculum in areas like language development, social play, dramatics, cooking, science, social studies, art, computers, and music. "In the half-day program, reading and math readiness activities consume most of the time" (Towers, 1991, p. 27). Towers also pointed out that children feel less pressure in full-day programs and time can be given to work on socialization skills.

On the other hand, kindergarten teachers reported pressures to make their programs more academic. First grade teachers were demanding that kindergarten teachers teach skills in their programs that used to be taught in first grade. Pressure also came from parents who want kindergarten to be more academic than the preschools their children had attended (Walsh, 1989). Teachers were also finding that they spend a lot of extra time preparing lesson plans for the full-day schedule.

#### Parent Considerations

"The increase in single parent and dual employment households, and the fact that most children spend a significant part of the day away from home, signal significant changes in American family life compared to a generation ago" (Rothenberg, 1995, p. 2). Studies showed that parents favor the full-day kindergarten program which reduces the number of transitions their children experience in a typical day. Three to four transitions a day is stressful for all involved, especially for the youngster. It is not surprising that working parents would want to shift some of the economic burden of daytime care to the schools. "Perhaps more important, in leaving the child in kindergarten for the better part of the day, parents feel they are placing their child in a better environment than they might find in a daycare, an environment rich in opportunities to learn" (Olsen & Zigler, 1989, p. 171). In her summary of the research, Housden (1992) said that parents who are home during the day often resent the long, daily separations from their child but they also appreciate their child's more complete preparation for first grade.

Many parents wanted accelerated learning opportunities for their children but "Experts caution against turning the all-day kindergarten into a 'mini-first grade'" (Cruikshank, 1986, p. 12). Some parents tended to focus only on academic skills and fail to consider how other aspects of the curriculum contribute to the overall learning experience (Gullo, 1990). Caldwell (1989) stated that many parents are simply looking for a program that recognizes their children have spent three to four years in a child care center or a preschool. Children with three to four years of group experiences are likely to need more challenging instruction.

To summarize, kindergarten teachers today face groups of children with wider developmental spans than ever before. Children enter kindergarten with a wide range of home backgrounds as well as a wide range of group experiences, from participation in a structured academic setting to no preschool experience at all (Gullo, 1990). The need for the all-day kindergarten is a reality according to Gullo (1990) "What becomes important is that the children who experience this reality are not compromised. An allday kindergarten is just one way in which these children's needs can be met" ( p. 36).

#### Chapter III

#### <u>Summary</u>

The research clearly states that advantages of the all-day kindergarten schedule outweigh the disadvantages in comparison to the half-day schedule. Parents, teachers, and administrators are cautioned, however, to remember that the emphasis should be to provide developmentally appropriate learning programs for kindergarten children rather than emphasizing academics. When considering the effects of the length of the kindergarten school day the critical issue is not how much time but how that time is used. More time in school makes possible the relaxed atmosphere of the developmentally appropriate programs that research indicates are critical to young children's well-being in school. Without an enriched curriculum, however, the longer day has no significant advantages. The quantity of time spent in school is not nearly as important as the quality of the kindergarten experience.

The social and emotional well-being of students participating in the full-day schedule is found to be characterized more by independence, productivity, and reflectiveness. Students also benefit because of the likelihood that full-day teachers would have time to diagnose and solve any problems students may have before entering first grade. Social and emotional issues are the critical difference in comparing the full-day schedule to the half-day schedule.

Parents who found the all-day schedule to have negative social, emotional, and developmental effects may have experienced a kindergarten program which did not address individual social and emotional needs. A program that is said to be forcing children to grow up too fast is probably a program which emphasizes academics only.

In considering the effects of scheduling in relation to academic skills, the research once again clearly favors the all-day program. The all-day program improves the performance of students at-risk. Although it is not clear as to whether at-risk students' success is due to the longer school day or more curriculum, it is clear that all students benefit because of the possibility for an expanded curriculum. The expanded curriculum leaves room for varied instruction and allows more opportunity to meet individual needs.

Instructional time in the all-day kindergarten program is ideally the same length as in the half-day schedule. The difference is that the all-day schedule provides time for the essential social and emotional needs if it truly is a developmentally appropriate program. Again, the all-day schedule is not meant to expand the quantity of instruction but rather its quality of instruction.

The overall reaction of most kindergarten and first grade teachers to full-day schedules is positive. They agree that the longer day is beneficial because it allows more time to enrich the curriculum and spend more time on children's academic readiness, better preparing them for first grade. However, kindergarten teachers have reported pressure from parents and first grade teachers who want kindergarten to be more academic.

Full-day teachers also find it challenging to meet the needs of groups with such a wide span of developmental readiness. The all-day schedule allows time to meet those individual needs.

The reality is that American family life is changing and because more and more parents are working outside of the home they favor the full-day schedule. Fewer transitions in their child's daily routine is less stressful. Parents feel they are leaving their children in a better environment with all-day kindergarten than they might find in a daycare.

It is also a reality that some kindergarten children have spent three to four years prior to their kindergarten experience in a day care or a preschool. Parents are looking for accelerated learning experiences because of this but a developmentally appropriate program will allow the extra time for children to develop socially and emotionally without an overemphasis on academics.

#### **Conclusions**

It was over 100 years ago that the foundation for early childhood education was laid. Pioneer Freidrich Froebel envisioned an environment for young children that was nurturing, active, relevant to their needs, and supportive of their development. The goal early childhood educators strive for today is to teach to the "whole child." We are called on to implement Froebel's vision and we must realize that some values of the past still apply. There is work to do in educating parents, faculty, and the general public as to what constitutes a developmentally appropriate kindergarten program.

An excellent kindergarten program allows opportunities for individualized instruction and tends to children's social, emotional, and developmental needs. The full-day kindergarten schedule can do that if implemented correctly.

Careful planning and preparation are needed which offer in-service education for teachers and parents. The ideal program would promote home-school-community cooperation and opportunities for varied parent involvement.

When developing curriculum, recognition of the developmental needs of young children must be considered, as the needs of young children are very different from those of older students. Program components such as rest time and free play must be considered as they are a way of meeting a young child's needs.

Finally, successful kindergarten programs exist where decisions are not made solely on a set of test scores. Intellectual growth is only one component of the ideal program. Self-concept, psychomotor skills and social, emotional growth should be equally valued.

#### Implications For Classroom Practice

As full-day kindergarten programs are becoming more and more popular, people are asking questions about their effectiveness. I have the experience of teaching in a full-day kindergarten for nine years and this review has affirmed my beliefs about the necessity of a developmentally appropriate program. The knowledge I have from this research review will be of real value to me when communicating with parents and peers as I am asked frequently about the effectiveness of my full-day schedule. For myself, as well as any kindergarten teacher, this review affirms the "why?" in what we do. In a successful kindergarten program we choose to teach to the "whole child" because we believe that social and emotional issues are as important as academic skills.

I have enjoyed the benefits of time to get to know my students and understand their very individual needs. I also understand the reservations teachers express when planning for a full day and the pressure felt to force the students to perform academically because of pre-kindergarten experiences or unrealistic parent expectations.

This review could be a valuable tool for schools that are considering the full-day option or have made a decision to switch from half-day schedules to full-day. The information available could help when planning for a child-centered program.

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Kindergarten is changing and proactive educators are responsible for making it change for the better.

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