Half-day to full-day kindergarten: an analysis of educational change scores and demonstration of an educational research collaboration

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The benefits of all-day kindergarten are increasingly supported by educational policy groups. Rigorous, prospective empirical research is impractical for schools of limited fiscal means where education must take priority over institutional research. However, post-hoc analyses of archival and informal measures can provide invaluable information concerning educational issues of national concern. A method of university and elementary school collaboration was employed in evaluating the educational effects of a transition from half-day to full-day kindergarten in an economically challenged suburban–rural school district in Maine. A child developmental scale and educational measures were used to evaluate differences in improvement scores between children enrolled in half-day kindergarten one year and children enrolled in full-day kindergarten the following year. Additional measures addressed parent and teacher attitudes toward full-day kindergarten. Overall, children enrolled in full-day kindergarten showed greater improvement than children in half-day kindergarten. Results of teacher and parent questionnaires indicated a high degree of satisfaction with full-day kindergarten. The research effort, based on a service learning model, provided a cost-effective strategy for recovering and analyzing archival data.

Keywords: Kindergarten; Full-day; Achievement; Service learning

Introduction

An increasing proportion of children in the United States are attending full-day kindergarten programming. Whereas 16.8% of children attended full-day kindergarten in 2004, this percentage has continued to increase. The benefits of all-day kindergarten are increasingly supported by educational policy groups. Rigorous, prospective empirical research is impractical for schools of limited fiscal means where education must take priority over institutional research. However, post-hoc analyses of archival and informal measures can provide invaluable information concerning educational issues of national concern. A method of university and elementary school collaboration was employed in evaluating the educational effects of a transition from half-day to full-day kindergarten in an economically challenged suburban–rural school district in Maine. A child developmental scale and educational measures were used to evaluate differences in improvement scores between children enrolled in half-day kindergarten one year and children enrolled in full-day kindergarten the following year. Additional measures addressed parent and teacher attitudes toward full-day kindergarten. Overall, children enrolled in full-day kindergarten showed greater improvement than children in half-day kindergarten. Results of teacher and parent questionnaires indicated a high degree of satisfaction with full-day kindergarten. The research effort, based on a service learning model, provided a cost-effective strategy for recovering and analyzing archival data.

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kindergarten in 1970, 63% were attending full-day kindergarten in 2002 (US Census Bureau, 1970, 2002). Three social and educational factors drive this trend. First, parents have difficulties in managing half-day kindergarten schedules because of increased employment. Second, kindergarten teachers face difficulties in meeting curricular expectations during the time constraints of half-day programming. Third, movement toward a more developmentally appropriate curriculum necessitates a longer day to better integrate experiential and student-centered learning with these increasing academic demands (Elicker & Mathur, 1997).

Educational advocacy groups and professional organizations encourage thorough consideration of length of day in educational programming (Bainbridge et al., 2003). In addition, leading professional organizations such as the National Education Association and the National Association of Elementary School Principals have advanced recommendations promoting full-day kindergarten (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1999).

Empirical research outcomes describing the benefits of full-day kindergarten have been inconsistent over the past 25 years. However, recent research reviews are consistent in showing that full-day kindergarten is associated with greater academic achievement than half-day kindergarten. In a meta-analysis attempting to reconcile the often unequivocal findings, Fusaro (1997) examined 23 research reports comparing full-day with half-day kindergarten. Most of the reports examined were not prospective studies, but were analyses of previously existing data, and the studies were published between 1970 and 1991. Fusaro found that children attending full-day kindergarten showed greater academic achievement on a variety of measures when compared with their half-day peers ($r = 0.79$, indicating a large effect size).

A more recent review of full-day and half-day comparisons in kindergarten (Clark & Kirk, 2000) concluded that research has been supportive of full-day programming in terms of academic achievement, socialization and behavioral control, and parent and teacher attitudes. Among trends in outcome research, Clark and Kirk noted that earlier research demonstrated consistent positive effects of full-day kindergarten in children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, whereas later research demonstrated positive effects more generally across a broader range of different populations.

Four recent studies not included in Fusaro (1997) or Clark and Kirk (2000) also demonstrate the comparative effectiveness of full-day kindergarten. Fusaro and Royce (1995) analyzed data from a previous investigation of full-day kindergarten (Sergesketter & Gilman, 1988) that had found no significant differences between children enrolled in full-day versus half-day kindergarten. After correcting errors in the statistical analysis, Fusaro and Royce found significant differences in the reading achievement scores of comprehension, vocabulary and total score measured by the original authors. Children in full-day kindergarten evidenced greater progress than children in half-day kindergarten.

Wang and Johnstone (1999) evaluated full-day kindergarten using measures of language development, reading skills, mathematics concepts and behavioral control. The authors employed a stratified random sampling technique to evaluate students
from a variety of classrooms and geographical locations within an urban and suburban school district of 25,000 children. The number of ‘regular’ students (students not identified with special needs or with a primary language other than English) measured with a pre-test and a post-test in each domain varied from 198 to 415. The number of bilingual (English and Spanish) students measured in the same domains varied from 14 to 101. Statistically greater gains in language development were made by both regular students and bilingual students. Greater gains in mathematics reasoning scores were made by regular students but not by bilingual students, although these changes were not reported as statistically significant. Gains in literacy skills were significantly greater for regular students but not in bilingual students, and there was a trend toward improved behavioral functioning in both regular and bilingual students. In summary, the longer school day modestly favored regular students’ achievement, whereas results for bilingual students were mixed across the four domains.

In an article partly intended to promote the use of standardized measurement in early education, Tatum (1999) described the results of a pilot program comparing 440 kindergarten children in Title 1 full-day classrooms \( (n = 188) \), full-day general education classrooms \( (n = 158) \) and half-day general education classes \( (n = 94) \). All children were measured in the fall and in the spring of their kindergarten year using a standardized picture vocabulary test. While outcomes of statistical tests were not reported, Tatum stated that children made higher gains in the full-day classrooms (an average of 19 points in the Title 1 classrooms and 14 points in the general education classrooms) compared with gains made by children in the half-day general education classrooms (eight points).

Investigating more enduring effects of full-day kindergarten, Gullo (2000) examined educational achievement, retention, attendance and special education referrals in 974 second graders. The 730 children who were previously enrolled in full-day kindergarten and the 244 children who were enrolled in half-day kindergarten represented intact groups. All children were randomly assigned to classrooms for their first-grade and second-grade years, although initial placement in kindergarten classes was not random. The author determined that children who had been enrolled in full-day kindergarten scored higher in the mathematics and reading portions of a standardized achievement measure, were less likely to have been retained for a second year in a grade and were less likely to be absent from school. No significant differences in special education referrals were found between children in full-day or half-day kindergarten.

Despite the general positive effects of full-day kindergarten, considerable variation in the outcomes of studies comparing full-day with half-day classrooms is demonstrated in a number of studies. The robust effect size detected by the Fusaro (1997) meta-analysis was obtained even though nine of the 23 studies spanning a publication period of 16 years failed to demonstrate positive effects of full-day kindergarten. And while more recent investigations tend to be more consistently positive, exceptions occur. For example, a later study (Nunnelley, 1996), not included in Fusaro (1997) but described in Clark and Kirk (2000), failed to detect significant differences in a
group of at-risk children divided between full-day and half-day kindergarten. While insufficient statistical power may explain the failure of Nunnelley to find meaningful differences in kindergarten achievement (19 children were included in the analysis), power alone is an insufficient explanation. In a much larger investigation, Holmes and McConnell (1990) investigated the effects of full-day and half-day kindergarten in a large sample of metropolitan children ($n = 437$). Schools were randomly selected to participate in full-day or half-day programming, and thus this investigation employed methodology nearest to random selection and assignment, and a true experimental design in the kindergarten length-of-day comparisons. Measuring both affluent and low socioeconomic groups of children and making six comparisons between the groups on achievement measures, the authors found a significant positive difference attributable to full-day programming only in boy’s mathematical concepts.

It may be suggested that two primary methodological conditions prevent consistency in study outcomes concerning comparisons of length of day in kindergarten. First, the literature as a whole has limitations in experimental validity. The most striking of these limitations is the failure of the investigations included in previous reviews and the empirical studies cited earlier to incorporate a true random assignment of children into classrooms. This empirical ideal is impractical, if not impossible, for most educators to incorporate into study designs because of the competing-needs public elementary schools facing increased expectations and decreasing resources. The absence of random assignment limits interpretation of the investigations as individual experiments or reduces internal validity; the absence of random assignment also limits the applicability of the investigations’ contribution to broader knowledge, or reduces external validity (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Second, the experimental designs are not well enough articulated to account for the myriad variables in addition to length of day that may contribute to the comparison of full-day and half-day kindergarten comparisons. Educational settings may vary widely according to curricula, teacher experience, and both internal and community cultures. Student characteristics may vary in educational aptitude, ethnicity, economic advantage, and parental or community investment in education. While individual studies have addressed some of these variables, there has been insufficient attention to these variables to firmly guide educators in decisions surrounding length of day in early education.

These methodological inconsistencies limit the ability of educators in local school districts to make adequate predictions concerning the benefits of all-day kindergarten. The literature concerning length of day is also unlikely to improve significantly, as prospective, thorough and methodologically rigorous studies are beyond the research capacity of many educators. Elementary educators are caught between the educational needs of their local communities, increasing demands for accountability and measurement, and administrative priorities that generally preclude comprehensive institutional research.

These practical considerations provide a strong rationale for individual educational units to evaluate local length-of-day changes in kindergarten by aspiring to accurate and descriptive research rather than to the expense and rigor of inferential research. The study described in the following suggests an efficient and economical
partnership for institutional research, drawing on collaboration between a small suburban – rural school district and a community-based university. The study was completed with the aim of comparing the academic effects of full-day and half-day kindergarten, parent attitudes toward full-day kindergarten and teacher attitudes toward full-day kindergarten.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The investigation was conducted in the Auburn School District, which is situated in a rural – suburban region of south-central Maine. The school district is comprised of six elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools. Auburn is an ‘Entitlement Community’, qualifying it for Federal Block grants, and the average rate of free or reduced fare lunch in the elementary schools is 43%. The kindergarten average enrollment over the two academic years of this study was 264. The participants consisted of 228 kindergarten children in two consecutive years (one year of half-day kindergarten and the following year of full-day kindergarten), the 13 teachers of the full-day kindergarten classes and 119 parents corresponding to an equivalent number of children from the full-day kindergarten classes.

The 119 children from full-day kindergarten were a randomly selected sample from the year’s total enrollment of 276 children from the all-day class, and the 109 children from the half-day kindergarten class were comprised of a convenience sample determined by records availability.

**Procedure**

This investigation compared children in two consecutive academic years (2000/2001 and 2001/2002). The first group of children were enrolled in the last year of half-day kindergarten and the second group of children were enrolled in the first year of full-day kindergarten. Day length was consistent district-wide. The length of the half-day classes was 3 hours per day, and the average length of the full-day classes was 5 hours and 50 minutes.

The child measures employed in this investigation were archival measures routinely collected as part of the student’s educational evaluation. Records were collected and prepared for analysis by an undergraduate college student supported by a service-learning grant. The student was supervised both by the school district coordinator of full-day kindergarten and by a faculty member from the university. Parents were mailed surveys toward the end of the full-day school year, and kindergarten teachers were provided surveys in the schools.

**Measures**

*Child measures.* Developmental, educational and behavioral measures were included in the investigation only when those measures were used consistently across both years
of the investigation. The Brigance screening total score was used in the fall of each year to quantify developmental level. The educational measures consisted of both standardized measures employed in curriculum evaluation and items created by the school for the children’s report cards. Educational measures created from the kindergarten curriculum consisted of: reading level measured by the Informal Reading Inventory (McCarrier et al., 2000), based upon graduated texts not part of regular classroom experience and administered in November and June; and the Observational Survey, which measures the literacy skills of primary grade students and is administered in October and June. Report cards from both classes of kindergarten were issued in fall, winter and spring, but for the purposes of this investigation the fall and spring scores alone were utilized in the analysis. Items from the children’s report cards consisted of ‘alphabet recognition’, ‘letter sounds’, ‘works from left to right’, ‘tells a story sequence’ and ‘creates patterns’ (the single measure of arithmetic concepts). The single behavioral measure of ‘follows directions’ was also obtained from the children’s report cards.

**Parent measures.** Parents were sent a survey at the end of the first year of all-day kindergarten asking them to evaluate the first year of full-day programming as well as their own child’s progress. The parent survey consisted of nine questions rated on a scale of 1–5, with higher ratings indicating favorable views toward all-day kindergarten. A space was provided for parents to make additional comments. The questions related to parent views of the child’s academic performance, social or maturational development, and benefits to the family of the kindergarten child. Parents of the previous year’s half-day kindergarten were not assessed.

**Teacher measures.** The 13 kindergarten teachers were provided surveys at the end of the first year of all-day kindergarten asking them generally to comment on the impact of all-day kindergarten in their classroom. Teachers were not provided surveys in the previous year’s half-day kindergarten classes.

**Analysis**

The analysis proceeded in three parts. First, improvement scores were computed for all educational and behavioral measures by subtracting the individual children’s fall scores on each measure from spring scores on that same measure. Letter designations were converted to numerical data and treated as interval measurement for statistical analysis. Second, Brigance scores were used as a covariate to assess the impact of developmental level on change scores. Third, parent and teacher surveys were examined qualitatively for themes concerning their impressions of all-day kindergarten.

**Results**

**Child measures**

Table 1 reports the t-test for change scores between full-day and half-day kindergarten educational measures. Significant differences are found in favor of all-day kindergarten
in ‘reading level’, ‘literacy skills’, ‘letter sounds’ and ‘story sequence’; ‘follows directions’ is of marginal significance ($p < 0.10$). Change scores favor all-day kindergarten, but do not attain statistical significance, in ‘works left to right’ and ‘creates patterns’. ‘Alphabet recognition’ change scores favor half-day kindergarten, but the difference is not statistically significant.

Because the developmental level indicated by Brigance total scores of the all-day kindergarten class appeared to be higher than the half-day class ($t = 2.47, p = 0.02$), developmental level was used as a covariate to clarify the relationship between day length and educational outcome. Partial correlations computed between length of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean (standard deviation)</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>Degrees of freedom</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Reading level</td>
<td></td>
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<td>All-day</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>2.39 (2.47)</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>193</td>
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<td>118</td>
<td>1.57 (1.98)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literacy skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>All-day</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>62.80 (16.32)</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
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<td>132</td>
<td>52.83 (16.59)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alphabet recognition</td>
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<td>All-day</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>0.29 (0.48)</td>
<td>−0.45</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>0.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letter sounds</td>
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<tr>
<td>All-day</td>
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<td>0.60 (0.52)</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>0.01***</td>
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<td>Works left to right</td>
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<td>0.43</td>
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<td>0.23 (0.44)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story sequence</td>
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<tr>
<td>All-day</td>
<td>84</td>
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<td>2.46</td>
<td>210</td>
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<td>128</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Creates patterns</td>
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<tr>
<td>All-day</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>0.28 (0.48)</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>0.21</td>
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<td>147</td>
<td>0.19 (0.52)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Follows directions</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full day</td>
<td>93</td>
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<td>1.86</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>0.06*</td>
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<td>147</td>
<td>0.03 (0.39)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

* $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$. 
day and each of the educational measures established that full-day kindergarten children continued to show significantly higher change scores in ‘literacy skills’, ‘letter sound identification’, ‘story sequence’ and ‘follows directions’.

**Parent measures**

Of the 119 surveys sent to parents, 55 were returned. The mean rating for parent survey questions relating to academic performance was 4.6 out of 5 ($n = 55$). The mean rating for survey questions relating to social and maturational level was 4.8 ($n = 54$), and the mean rating for the family benefits was 4.7 ($n = 54$). All ratings indicate a highly favorable rating of full-day kindergarten.

Parent comments were positive. Representative comments included ‘all-day kindergarten proved to be very successful for us’ and ‘she blossomed and truly loves school’. Some parents noted the convenience of full-day kindergarten: ‘... the full day allowed for more services for him. It also allowed me to work more hours during the day.’ Some comments reflected initial reservations toward all-day kindergarten followed by changes in opinion: ‘It was a great experience. I have to admit I wasn’t totally for the idea of full-day kindergarten. The children are so young ...’ and ‘a full day was a concern at first. However, [my child] flourished, as you can see.’

Criticism of all-day kindergarten concerned child fatigue and irritability: ‘Very irritable due to lack of rest time (nap) during the day’ and ‘the only caveat to the full-time kindergarten was that by the end of the week his learning capacity was greatly diminished because of fatigue’.

The Auburn School District continues to offer half-day programming to parents who elect not to send their children to the all-day class, and several parents commented on this choice as a positive feature: ‘[My child] attended half-day most of the year. I don’t feel that academic and social skills have suffered as a consequence’ and ‘I highly value the option of when to start my son going all day. Since it was such a big adjustment for him, having him start going all day at half [way through the] year was a good thing.’ One parent chose to keep her son home until he was six, and commented that had she sent him full day at age five the challenge would have been excessive.

**Teacher measures**

Comments from the teachers of all-day kindergarten described themes of child behavior, academic performance and social relationships. Reflections of child behavior were both positive and negative, with some teachers indicating an increase in difficult behaviors and some indicating an increase in positive behaviors and emotional maturity. Some teachers found a rest or nap-time essential to keep children focused, whereas others found it possible to reduce or eliminate a rest period. Most teachers reflected an increase in children’s academic performance and attributed this to a more relaxing classroom, more time available to process lessons and increased time to support children’s play. Teachers felt able to build a stronger classroom community and enjoyed increased communication with their student’s families.
Discussion

Summary of results

Results of child, parent and teacher measures supported the district’s transition to full-day kindergarten. Of the eight child measures common to both the half-day classes and the full-day classes, five measures favored full-day kindergarten. Brigance developmental score differences between the two years complicated the interpretation of change scores between the two groups. However, even when developmental scores were taken into account, only ‘reading level’ dropped in significance, leaving four of eight child measure change scores favoring the full-day program and none of the measures favoring half-day programming. Brigance screenings are completed on children in the fall of their kindergarten year (late October). While the difference in observed developmental scores between the two groups may have reflected actual group differences, it is equally plausible to assume that length of day affected the developmental assessment by providing greater opportunities for the children to become comfortable with the testers and the testing situation. Children are generally more responsive to test situation variables than adults (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997), and increased familiarity between the tester and the student would tend elevate observed scores, especially in children with developmental lags (Fuchs et al., 1985).

The child measures employed in this investigation showed a pattern demonstrating modest academic advantage for the children attending full-day kindergarten similar to findings of previous research. The overall correlation of effect size, or ‘contrast correlation’ (Rosnow et al., 2000), obtained for this investigation was $r = 0.15$. This small effect represents the median correlation between kindergarten class (half-day or full-day) and the eight child measures. This correlation describes a small effect size as defined by Cohen (1988) and is considerably less than that ($r = 0.79$) reported by Fusaro (1997). Thus, the outcome of the child measures describes a small but statistically significant association between length of day and academic achievement.

Both parent and teacher evaluations were strongly favorable of the district change from half-day to full-day programming. While not directly reflective of student’s success, these measures indicate the broad support necessary for any successful program implementation. These positive findings mirror the investigations described in Clark and Kirk (2000), all of which underscore the increased opportunity for social and academic progress afforded by the increased day length. The district decision to maintain the option of half-day programming, supported by several parents in the sample addresses concerns that full-day programming may not be appropriate for all students.

Limitations

This investigation employed post-hoc analyses of pre-existing data contrasting groups evaluated consecutively rather than simultaneously. Thus, generalization from this investigation to other kindergarten locales and populations is limited. Furthermore, while language and emergent literacy skills were broadly addressed, the child
measures contained only a single measure of mathematics concepts (creates patterns) and a single measure of social functioning (follows directions). A more comprehensive measurement of mathematical concepts and social functioning would probably yield a more comprehensive picture of children’s functioning in half-day and full-day programs.

Reflections on methods and service learning research

Despite the investigative limitations just described, the investigative method employed in this research evidences several strengths. These strengths include the efficient use of readily available data leading to a robust picture of full-day kindergarten performance, and cost-effective means of research employing a service-learning model of research.

Children and teachers alike face the increasing burden of educational testing and assessment. While recent state and federal mandates encouraging greater expectations in student achievement and school accountability can be said to have both advantages and disadvantages, researchers must be mindful of both the benefits and risks of increasing that burden. Recent investigations into the attitudes of teachers toward testing demonstrate the profound impact of increased testing. Abrams et al. (2003) describe the results of a national teacher survey on attitudes toward mandated testing. The total number of teachers surveyed was not reported, but multiple states were included with hundreds of teachers in each state. Teachers in states with ‘high-stakes’ testing (testing with significant teacher and school rewards or sanctions) were concerns about the testing negatively affecting their ability to educate. Perreault (2000) employed focus groups with approximately 60 teachers in schools performing well in state-mandated tests and with teachers in schools performing poorly on state-mandated tests. Teachers in both groups described considerable difficulties in maintaining their self-image as independent and effective educators. This investigation’s reliance on archival information, unobtrusively collected, along with minimally invasive teacher and parent questionnaires allows for meaningful research to be conducted with minimal intrusion.

Finally, this investigation was undertaken with the support of a small service-learning grant and completed on a budget just under $1100 (a Community Higher Education School Partnership grant was administered by a local public university). Service-learning involves the merging of both community service, or volunteerism, and educational principles of scholarship and reflection. Service learning can be defined formally as ‘what it is’ or practically by ‘how it works’ (Prentice & Garcia, 2000, pp. 19–20). Formally, this service-learning research project supported an undergraduate student in the public schools in an applied project of educational data collection, analysis, presentation and reflection. Practically, a student engaged in community service formed working relationships with school secretaries, teachers and principals in order to obtain cleverly filed archival data; wrestled with words, spreadsheets, and statistics; figured best how to present ideas to a school board and superintendent; and reflected broadly on the interaction between classroom ideas of
learning and applied scholarship. Thus, this partnership improved the local educational community’s appreciation of the modest academic advantages of full-day kindergarten, the broad support of parents and the learning of an undergraduate student engaged in the scholarship of application.

References


