Kindergarten: Determining Character Development
A Research Proposal

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Problem Statement

The benefits of full-day kindergarten are an extremely important issue for today’s parents, educators, and most importantly the children. There have been numerous studies done comparing full day versus half-day kindergarten, however these studies all tend to focus solely on the academic benefits on the next few grades.

There has been substantial research and clinical studies to document improved social and academic achievement in children who attend full versus half-day kindergarten. This is especially true for lower income urban school students. Students from lower income families may not have access to books, crayons, scissors, or paper that their middle class peers do. We will compare two kindergarten classes from the same sending district in a middle class suburb in New Jersey.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the character development of children who attend full-day kindergarten versus the character development of children who attend half-day kindergarten. Our study will look at students who have gone through full-day kindergarten and half-day kindergarten. We will compare their progress, including grades, temperament, activities and group involvement as well as any trouble they may have been in. We will compare students from two schools from one suburban school district. One school will offer half-day kindergarten and the other one will offer full day kindergarten. We will look at their progress from kindergarten up to third grade.
Research Question

Is there a difference in the character development of children due to the type of kindergarten they attended: full day versus half-day? The purpose of this study will be to determine if a child's development is affected by spending a full day in school at such a young age. We will seek to determine how full-day kindergarten compared to half-day kindergarten will affect a child's overall development up to third grade.
Literature Review

There is a considerable amount of research done comparing half-day and full-day kindergarten. The majority of it points to full-day kindergarten having positive academic and social effects on children in the years immediately following kindergarten. As the focus of our research proposal will be to look at the effects of both programs up to the 3rd grade, we’ll examine current research to determine if any long-term advantages are being sought after, and indeed if they even exist. In order to more fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of the previous research, literature regarding this subject has been examined and synthesized to further enhance our study.

A brief history of kindergarten in the United States

The person credited with “inventing” the concept of kindergarten is Fredrich Froebel (1782 – 1852). (Brosterman, 1997) Rather than label him the inventor of this now commonplace educational phenomenon, it may be more accurate to say that the evolution of kindergarten was influenced by Froebel’s philosophy, which had a strong Christian component as well as an understanding of the importance of learning through play and early social peer development of children. (The kindergarten concept was introduced to the United States around the 1840’s, but the ideals behind it took some time to take root in this country. St. Louis was the first city to offer kindergarten at all of its schools by 1883). (Brosterman, 1997) Of the ideas that may have delayed the wider acceptance of kindergarten, one was that the middle-class considered it (accurately so) to be a teacher-training of young children rather than that of their mothers. The initial acceptance to this
younger education was in the immigrant populations and poorer areas. Thus the early kindergarten advocates hoped that it could be a phenomenon to help young children escape the slums and poverty that their parents lived in by providing early education and implementation of a formalized instruction process. This is somewhat ironic as we find that part of the increasing number of full-day programs is attributed to more working/single parent households and the decreasing number of stay-at-home parents who are available to provide much of the social interaction and intellectual stimulation that children are receiving in modern kindergarten.

**Cause and effect of the growing popularity of full-kindergarten programs**

The growing emphasis on standardized tests and the advent of technology has made numerical analysis of the education process front-page news and readily accessible to the public. Yet aside from the concept of the three R’s (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) schools have also become more important to the socialization of children with the growing number of one and two-parent working households over the past several decades as more children are spending a significant part of the day away from home (Rothenberg, 1995). Kindergarten has to be viewed as a “strategic opportunity to socialize the young child in an educational environment and to enable the child to secure basic preparation for academic skills” (Gardner, 1986, p.46)

Of the 4 million children enrolled in kindergarten in the fall of 1998, 55% were in full-day programs, and the remaining 45% were in half-day programs. (USDOE, 2001) In addition to the academic and social aspects of full-day kindergarten, some of the research
points out that economics also play a roll in its growing popularity in the United States. Some schools claim that a decrease in need for midday crossing guards and transportation services to bring youngster to and from day-care programs are also benefits of all-day kindergarten (Rothenberg, 1995). Others claim that the additional costs for full-time teachers make full-time kindergarten not as cost-effective as using early childhood funding on pre-school programs in conjunction with half-day kindergarten (Martinez 2001).

An interesting phenomenon that permeates the research is that whether a child spends half a day in kindergarten and the other in a day-care program, most kindergarteners are spending a whole day in some sort of educational atmosphere outside of their homes (Martinez, 2001). But are we offering our children a better education by increasing the amount of time they spend in school, particularly at the earliest ages? Full-day kindergarten & extended-day programs are a reality in many communities throughout the United States, even though this differs from what is offered in private education and the schools of other nations (Fromberg, 1987). Education Week captured one of our research proposal’s concerns succinctly when it stated that “the popularity of full-kindergarten programs has been growing nationwide – with or without evidence of their economic and educational effectiveness.” (EW, 2002, p.14)

**Review of current half-day versus full-day kindergarten research**

Most research studies show that full-day kindergarten attendance indicates improvements in academic and social skills as measured in the primary grades (Fromberg 1987,
Gardner 1986, Rothenberg, 1995, USDOE 2001). The methods for gathering and analyzing the data are as interesting and important as the results themselves, as the groups in question are experiencing the phenomenon (attending full or half a day of kindergarten) when they are approximately 5 years old. Some studies used attendance rates, attitudes towards school, conduct marks on report cards and rates of promotion to compile data that is not of a pure academic performance nature (Evansville, 1988). The results of these studies showed the greatest increase in the first two years after kindergarten, with the perceived positive effectiveness declining as the students continued along in their elementary school years. Some showed no difference using second-grade Terra Nova test results of full and half-day kindergartners (FACES, 2001).

Elementary school teachers were also surveyed on a variety of topics focusing on their classroom observations, and again the trend is similar. The greatest amount of difference between full and half-day kindergarten students is seen in first grade, with the later grade teachers seeing a smaller amount of difference in their observations in each subsequent year thereafter (Rothenberg, 1995). In a study of effectiveness of all-day kindergarten in nearby Newark New Jersey, one study looked at two cohorts of students: one in the third grade and the other in second. There was no significant differences in reading comprehension and math scores on the California Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) for the first cohort; however both reading comprehension and math scores were higher for students of the second cohort who had attended full-day kindergarten. (Koopmans, 1991).
Consistent amongst these findings is that disadvantaged children experienced the greatest amount of short-term benefits from attending full-day kindergarten programs (Martinez, 2001, daCosa 2001, Robinson 1965). Thus a question surfaces as to whether or not full-day kindergarten programs are equally beneficial to all 5 year olds, and if not, whether those less affected would in fact experience equal or better results long-term in half-day programs. Some argue that a “developmentally appropriate” full-day kindergarten program benefits all children both academically and socially, but even these conclude it’s especially beneficial to children from low socio-economic or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (daCosta, 2001). Some studies further theorize that this phenomenon may be the result of the teacher providing necessary experiences to socialize and educate students who may not readily have these available at home due to their lower socio-economic and/or family’s educationally disadvantaged background (daCosta, 2001). This correlates to several New Mexico school districts that stated that while their first-grade teachers reported full-day kindergartners were “clearly further along” than their half-day counterparts, some of these students were achieving higher results due to efforts exerted by their parents outside of school as well (News-Bulletin, 2003).

Observers of trends in kindergarten scheduling argue that changing the length of the kindergarten day is not as important as making sure that all kindergarteners are provided with developmentally and individually appropriate learning environments, regardless of whether those programs are full day or half day (Karweit, 1992). Some non-public schools also found that there is no definitive research on their own programs that show a difference in academic progress between children enrolled in half-day versus full-day
kindergarten (FACES, 2001). While lengthening the school day provides more opportunities for learning, the actual use of time is still the critical issue. (Karweit, 1992)

With the exception of the US Department of Education’s 1998-1999 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of 20,000 kindergarten students and over 3,000 of their teachers, most of the studies reviewed here were of significantly smaller samples. This study however will only follow this same cohort of youngsters through grade 5. Still there is little research available that covers the entire primary education timeline and such research would yield interesting long-term results. The longest evaluation period was that of the Evansville-Vanderburgh longitudinal study, which did include data from kindergarten through grade 8. In many ways this study embraces more of the non-academic parameters that our proposal is seeking to conduct research on; unfortunately some of the methodology is questionable.

While studies such as the Evansville-Vanderburgh longitudinal study did use numerous methods to gather data, some of them, particularly the questions found on the student questionnaires, demonstrate a significant reason why their results need to be re-examined. "Half-day students were only able to spend a short time each day using the blocks, paints, and playhouse. Were you glad you went to a full-day school so you could spend more time with these activities?" (Evansville, 1988, p.48)

Not surprisingly, 89% of these students responded YES to this leading question. In another questionnaire to teachers, the results again are suspect:
“The children who attended full-day kindergarten have a better knowledge of phonics and reading skills than half-day kindergarten students.” (Evansville 1988, p.51)

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<td>3rd Grade Teachers</td>
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**Summary**

Research of the 1970’s and 1980’s yielded mixed results on whether or not full-day kindergarten was preparing children for the elementary school years better than half-day kindergarten; more recent research seems to indicate that this has indeed become the case (Phelps, 2003). It is possible that the full-day kindergarten curriculum has developed and is making better use of the extra time (Rothenberg 1995), or perhaps that pre-school is now covering what kindergarten did 20-30 years ago (Phelps, 2003). The percentage of full-day programs offered by districts continues to rise, and the socio-economic realities for many families in this country have made it more of a necessity than an extra-curricular idea to send their children to a full-day kindergarten program.

Most of the research done thus far has used fairly small cohorts and/or questionable methodology of studying public school children that does not seem to explain (or perhaps explore deep enough) why we are not educating our children as well other institutions and countries whose students spend less time in school and specifically, in kindergarten.

The focus of previous studies tend to look only at academics, with a few researching broad social concerns. There has been no long-term study strictly focusing on the
character development of children sent to full day kindergarten versus half-day in a suburban setting. Our focus is to look at two suburban school districts with one offering full-day kindergarten and the other only a half-day program, and survey these students’ parents and teachers on items not limited to educational performance.

Method

a) Research Design

This study will use both qualitative and quantitative research methods to compare two groups of suburban kindergarten students until the end of third grade from two different schools. One group will be those who attend full-day kindergarten, the other will be those who attended half-day kindergarten. The two schools that will be observed will be from the same district to ensure that the schools will have similar socio-economic backgrounds and yield the most effective comparison.

The method of data collection will be through surveys containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions administered at the end of the school year. We will also be examining the students’ school records at the end of each year. The quantitative analysis will be from the closed-ended questions as well as the student records. The qualitative analysis will be from the open-ended questions on the surveys. The use of open-ended questions will be more time consuming but necessary as they will provide further insight as to the feelings of the participants.

Due to the large-scale nature of this study and the age of the participants, we will be unable to conduct interviews. Therefore the combination of using the survey and the student records will give us the best insight and information for our research.
b) Participants

We will be comparing two suburban elementary schools that are in the same sending district. It is important to have the schools in the same district to ensure that the socio-economic background of the students will be similar. Thus in addition to utilizing the same district for our study, we will analyze socio-economic data (e.g.: free/reduced lunch programs) to ensure that both schools are of equal level. One of the schools will offer a half-day kindergarten program while the other one will offer a full day kindergarten program. All the students in both kindergarten classrooms will be asked to join in the research. All students will be asked since we are anticipating families that refuse to give their consent and families that move away during the years we are conducting the research; we also do not want to skew the results of the participants by excluding any children in either group.

After selecting two suburban schools matching our requirements, we will seek permission to conduct the research. Upon receipt of the consent of the school, we will send out informational letters and consent forms to the parents of the following year’s kindergarten class. We will also send out consent forms to all the teachers in the school from kindergarten through third grade stressing the anonymity of the study, stating that the findings will be used for research only.

After we have the consent of the schools, teachers, and parents of the students we will have all the participants of our study.
c) Instruments

We will use surveys to collect the data needed for our research. The surveys will be used for teachers and parents for four years, from kindergarten to third grade. Surveys are the most effective way because they allow for the collection of data from a larger group of people than is possible in other research methods (Mertens, 1998).

The survey will contain closed-ended questions that will be analyzed using the Lickert Scale. The Lickert Scale is a five point rating scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” with gradients in between. The open-ended questions on the survey will be coded and scored and their results tabulated and represented in numerical and graphical format (graphs, charts, etc.).

The teachers’ survey will focus on student behavior and academic performance. The parents’ survey will also focus on behavior and academic performance; however, the first survey sent out will also contain questions regarding background information. Subsequent surveys will only contain questions regarding behavior and academic performance. We will first send out informational letters as well as consent forms to all the parents and teachers that will be involved in the research.

We will also be looking at each student’s record at the end of each year. The student’s end of the year record will contain basic information such as grades and any disciplinary issues, as well as school activities the child is involved in.
d) Data Collection Procedure

This research can only be done with the full cooperation of all the participants. Once we have the full support of the school, we will send out an information letter as well as a consent form to each teacher that will be involved. We will also ask the school to mail out the letters and consent forms to parents on our behalf, as some parents may become extremely upset if the school gives us their address directly. The letters to the teachers and parents will contain self-addressed stamped envelopes to make the return of the consent form as simple as possible.

The principal, teachers and parents will receive a letter each September reminding them that we will be again sending out surveys at the end of the school year. One month before school ends we will be sending out post cards to remind parents and teachers that it is time again to fill out the research surveys. We will be sending out mailings to remind participants of the surveys rather than telephone calls because some people today feel very strongly about receiving any type of phone call that resembles telemarketing, particularly in light of the over 55 million Americans who signed up to be on the DO NOT CALL list that the FCC proposed earlier this year.

The participants will be given three weeks to complete and return the surveys in the self-addressed stamped envelope that will be provided. After five weeks we will again send out a reminder postcard stating the importance of their completed survey to our research. All teacher surveys will be sent to their respective schools rather than their home address.
Mailed surveys are effective at collecting detailed information at a low cost, but you do encounter lower response rates nor can you probe as deeply as interviews (Martens 1998).

One month prior to the end of school we will call the principals of each school and schedule time to review the records of each student. At the end of each year all information received will be analyzed immediately.

e) Validity
Our research results will rely on information received from survey responses. Surveys rely on individual’s self-reports based on their attitudes on the topic; therefore the validity of the survey will be contingent on the honesty of the respondent (Mertens, 1998). We will stress to parents and teachers that all results will be strictly confidential and anonymous. This should provide enough comfort to answer the questions truthfully.

We will take several measures to ensure the validity of all our research results. For example: the survey will contain a broad variety of questions. We will have the surveys used reviewed by a panel of elementary school teachers. All suggestions and comments made by this panel will be taken into account and those deemed beneficial and appropriate will be incorporated into the actual format used.

We will use the same survey for all four years of the study, which will further increase its credibility. Using the same survey for all four years will make certain we will receive dependable results. We will use repeated questions in the survey to ensure the validity
of the answers. If the answers are conflicting the respondents may not be answering the questions truthfully each year.

The survey will contain open-ended questions to give the respondents an opportunity to express their own views. The survey will contain no questions that can be outdated and therefore the study can be easily replicated in the future with different schools. We will also compare the teacher’s, parents and school records for each student to see if there is anything that is out of the ordinary.

It is imperative that both groups that are being compared are using the same curriculum to teach; this is to confirm the content validity of the research. Mertens states, “Content validity is especially important in studies that purport to compare two (or more) different curricula, teaching strategies, or school placements. If all the students are taking the same test but all the students were not exposed to the same information, the test is not equally content valid for all the groups” (p. 294, 1998).

f) Ethical Consideration

Given that this research involves young children, we will need to make certain that parental consent is given each year of the research study. We will also assure parents that all information will be kept anonymous and will be destroyed at the end of the study.

We will also assure teachers that all information obtained from them will be kept anonymous and used for research only. Again, we will reassure them that at the end of the study all information will be destroyed.
g) Limitations and Constraints

The most prevailing constraint will be obtaining the consent of parents to use their child in the study. Parents tend to be very protective of their children in general, and even more so at such a young age. We will also be limited by finding two schools in the same district where one offers full-day kindergarten and another offers half-day kindergarten. Once we have found these schools we will then need to obtain the consent and full cooperation of the administration and the teachers of each one.

We will also need to take into consideration that the qualitative research will rely on the interpretation of the researchers. We also need to realize that parents may have preconceived notions of half-day or full-day kindergarten and this may affect their answers.

There is also a possibility of the experiencing the Hawthorne Effect with this study. ‘The idea of receiving special attention, of being singled out to participate in the study is enough to cause change” (Mertens, p. 68,1998). Teachers involved in the study may pay more attention to the students involved in the study. Parents may spend more time than normal working with their children on homework. Principals may not record as many behavioral incidents on student records in order to make their school look “better” in the scheme of our research. Therefore, a wide variety and varied format of survey questions will be used to counter that possibility.
Considerable care and effort must be taken to address participant’s fears and speculation that the results of this research will not alter or affect the course of their education in the district (this may be more important to convey to the parents than the children themselves).

h) Data Analysis

Information will be collected using surveys. The surveys will provide us with both qualitative and quantitative information from the responses we received from the closed-ended and open-ended questions on the surveys. We will use the same procedures each time a survey is analyzed in order to ensure validity.

The closed-ended questions of the survey will generate our quantitative research results. The questions will all be based on the Lickert Scale, which gives numerical significance to each answer. The answers and points will be as follows: Strongly Agree 5, Agree 4, Indifferent 3, Disagree 2, Strongly Disagree 1, No Answer 0. By assigning a numeric value to each answer we will be able to determine the mean and standard deviation of the surveys.

The open-ended questions will generate our qualitative data; however we will still put a numeric value on the answer. After reading through the answers of the open-ended questions we will look for common themes among the answers. The themes will then be counted to see the number of times each theme occurs. We will re-read all the answers to make sure that we did not overlook any pertinent information. Student records will also
be counted for occurrences. We will assign positive and negative scores according to the type of information in the student record.

The results of parent surveys, teacher surveys, and student records will be cross-referenced to determine if the answers are consistent with each other. We will let the results determine how we will interpret our findings. If there is a large deviation we obviously have a flawed study. If there is little deviation in the results we can be confident that we have conducted a valid study and report our results.
References


Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation (1988) *A Longitudinal Study of the Consequences of Full-Day Kindergarten* Evansville, IN


Towers, J.M. (1991, January/February) Attitudes Towards the All-day, Everyday Kindergarten. *Children Today*


APPENDIX A

Teacher and Parent Surveys
Kindergarten Assessment Questions for Teachers

Directions: Please read each question and circle the most appropriate response. Please remember that all data collected will be anonymous and kept confidential.

1. Students sometimes quickly seek out their teachers when they encounter a difficult problem or an intense cognitive-based learning activity. Do your students usually make several attempts to solve problems before seeking your help?


2. Students sometimes find it difficult to remain focused as the length of time on a specific task grows. Do your students usually continue an activity without constant attention and/or encouragement?


3. Most classroom environments have some set of rules that students are expected to abide by. Do your students follow your classroom rules?


4. It’s inevitable that difficult social situations may arise between school children. Do your students come to you when they are having a misunderstanding with other students?


5. Taking into account all of your years of teaching experience, would you say your current class demonstrates appropriate self-control for children their age?


6. There are numerous subjects, activities and exercises that students participate in everyday. How easily do your student transition from task to task?

7. Many children will be faced with situations where an argument with a classmate is almost unavoidable. How often do your students get into arguments with other children?


8. Most teachers do their best to teach the required material and educate their students in the most professional way possible. How well prepared academically were your students when they first came into your classroom?


9. There is probably no one other than their parents who know your students and their capabilities as well as you do. In your opinion, do your students perform to their potential in school?


Please respond to the following questions in your own words.

10. Please describe how you perceive your student’s treatment towards one another?

11. Please describe how you perceive your student’s treatment towards you.

12. Does your class work cohesively as a group, or do you feel they work more as individuals who are seated in a common setting?

Thank you for your time taking this survey.
Kindergarten Assessment Questions for Parents

Directions: Please read each question and circle the most appropriate response. Please remember that all data collected will be anonymous and kept confidential.

1. Children sometimes quickly seek out their parents/guardians when they encounter a difficult problem or an intense cognitive-based learning activity assigned for homework. Does your child usually make an effort to solve problems before seeking your help?


2. Children sometimes find it difficult to remain focused as the length of time on a specific task grows. Do your child usually continue an activity without constant attention and/or encouragement?


3. Children are usually inquisitive by nature, and some also prefer to leave their parent’s interests separate from their own. Does your child take an interest in your activities and seek to learn more about them?


4. Many home environments have some set of rules that students are expected to abide by. Does your child follow your household rules?


5. The school day sometimes takes up the majority of a young child’s waking hours. Does your child talk about their school day with you when they are home?


6. Most children will encounter some sort of potential confrontation with their peers in a given day. Does your child come to you when they are having a misunderstanding with other children, whether it is friends or siblings?

7. Usually children have their own agendas when they are home and parents/guardians have a separate yet sometimes overlapping one for them. How easily do your child transition from activities of their choosing to those of yours?


8. All kids at some point or another have an argument with other children. How often would you say your child gets into arguments with other children?


9. Based on your overall knowledge of your child, does your child perform to their potential in school?


Please respond to the following questions in your own words.

10. Does your child prefer to play by him/herself or to be part of a group of children?

11. How would you describe your child’s overall attitude towards his/her school/education?

12. Overall, are you satisfied with the education your child is receiving?
APPENDIX B

Consent Letters
December 5, 2003

Principal
Sample School
Address
Address

Dear Principal,

We are writing to ask for participation and support to conduct a research study we are conducting. We would like to have your school participate in a study, which will generate a summary of the advantages/disadvantages of full-day and half-day kindergarten. We will make our finding available to other school districts concerned with the differences of half or full day kindergarten.

As you must know, there is much debate over the benefits of full-day kindergarten versus half-day kindergarten. There has been much research done to document the improved academic achievements in students who attend full day kindergarten. One aspect of that has been neglected in previous research is the long-term effect on a child’s character. Our research will focus not only on academic achievement but also on a child’s overall character development.
We are asking your permission to follow a kindergarten class to third grade. We will conduct a survey at the end of each year and will also examine the students record at the end of each year. The surveys will be completed by parents and teachers and will involve a minimum amount of time to complete.

We will send the school our completed finding to review. We will use the results of our research to determine the advantages and disadvantages of full-day and half-day kindergarten. We want to assure you that all student information collected will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding our research, please feel free to call.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,
December 5, 2003

Teacher
Sample School
Address
Address

Dear Teacher,

We are writing to ask for participation and support to conduct a research study we are conducting. We would like to have your participation in a study, which will generate a summary of the advantages/disadvantages of full-day and half-day kindergarten. We will make our finding available to other school districts concerned with the differences of half or full day kindergarten.

As you must know, there is much debate over the benefits of full-day kindergarten versus half-day kindergarten. There has been much research done to document the improved academic achievements in students who attend full day kindergarten. One aspect of that has been neglected in previous research is the long-term effect on a child’s character. Our research will focus not only on academic achievement but also on a child’s overall character development.
Your experience teaching children that have completed (full-day/half-day) kindergarten will be invaluable to our research. The survey should take a minimum amount of your time.

We will send the school our completed finding to review. We will use the results of our research to determine the advantages and disadvantages of full-day and half-day kindergarten. We want to assure you that all student information collected will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding our research, please feel free to call.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,
Dear Parents,

We are writing to ask your support and participation in a research study. (Name of School) offer full-day/half-day kindergarten. We would like your opinion on your child’s kindergarten and how it has contributed to their progress in future years. Your personal insight on your child’s development since they started kindergarten will be very valuable to our research.

We will send you a survey to complete at the end of each school year – up to third grade. The survey should take you a minimal amount of time to complete. We will also be looking at your child’s student record at the end of each school year. Please be assured that all results will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Attached is a permission form to have your child participate in the study. Please return in the envelope provided.
Thank you in advance for your support and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Permission Form

I have read the attached letter and I agree to allow my son/daughter_________________ to participate in the kindergarten research study.

I have read the attached letter and I do not agree to allow my son/daughter_________________ to participate in the kindergarten research study.

__________________________________
Signature

__________________
date