

Meaningful Mornings: Getting a Jump-Start on the Day

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Abstract

How can the twenty minutes between bus arrivals and the official start of school become a meaningful part of the day for students and teachers? This inquiry explores one classroom's attempt to make morning time more productive by trying different routines and activities.

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Background Information

My Teaching Context

My self-contained classroom consists of twenty-one enthusiastic fifth graders. There are eleven girls and ten boys. The mix of personalities, learning styles, and interests creates a healthy social dynamic. While this has led to the development of a wonderful classroom community in which all students freely express their ideas, it has also caused social activity to be at the forefront of most students' agendas.

Our morning routine is clearly written on the board each morning. Students are expected to come in, sign up for lunch, and then begin their geography work. Students also need to get ready for the day in this time, which includes hanging up their belongings and putting down their chairs. Bookbags and coats are hung on hooks located in the room.

As a teacher I hope that every moment in school is valuable for each student. I want to provide everyone with a warm and caring environment in which they can feel calm and successful. I want to make the classroom a less stressful place for students, right from the beginning.

Reasoning and Importance

The unstructured time between bus arrivals and the official start of the day created a perfect opportunity for social greetings in the morning. Even though students did have work to complete, their priorities lay elsewhere. This created a time of visible chaos. While students were supposed to be hanging up their belongings, signing in for lunch, and then working in their geography books, they were instead conversing with

classmates. It was a frustrating time for me as well, since I was constantly asking students to put their chairs down, sign up for lunch, and begin their work.

Another area of morning stress was the coat area. Students had picked favorite hooks on which to hang their coats and bags, but none were assigned. If someone else happened to be there first, things would be moved and eventually fall to the floor. By the middle of the day the belongings in the alcove of the hook area had oozed out to the desks. This made it necessary to make time in the afternoon on some days to clean up.

With only six hours to teach, eat lunch, and have specials, every minute of the school day becomes valuable. It seemed like too much time was being taken away from the day to deal with organizational issues in the classroom. Even if half an hour a week was dedicated to the effort that was still half an hour of lost instructional time. I became interested in utilizing that transitional time when students were just arriving to get some curriculum based activities done. The importance of this was not only to fit in more subject based work, but to hopefully give the students a calmer start to their day. If I felt rushed, I was sure that some of them shared the same type of feelings. I wanted to know if other classrooms looked similar to ours in the morning or if more students could be on task.

Research

It was difficult to find published research on this topic. Many books exist on how to use morning time, but most of these address the time during the official day. For example, the *Morning Meeting Book* is a resource geared toward morning activities, but it provides advice for the structured time after all of the students have arrived and the day

has begun. I was interested in those fifteen to twenty minutes before the actual start; before students can be gathered as a whole.

While most resources did not address this topic specifically, I felt I could use general teaching ideas, especially those involved in establishing routines, to re-work the morning. One suggestion in *Rules in School* is to be concise and clear with instructions. It states, “Too many words...simply confuse and overwhelm children. The most effective teacher language is simple and clear” (Brady et al. 72). When I read this, I did not just see it as addressing verbal language. I felt that it could be applied to written language as well. Perhaps the morning instructions were just not clear enough.

In their collaboration *Principles of Classroom Management* James Levin and James Nolan explain, “The single most important factor in determining the learning environment is teacher behavior...teachers’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors influence student behaviors” (1). My behavior in the morning was rushed and unorganized because I was constantly circling the room in an attempt to keep students on track. I realized that I needed to first change what I was doing in the room to make the students successful with any new routine.

Harry and Rosemary Wong, authors of *The First Days of School*, offer advice on the importance of beginning the school day in the *Teachers.net Gazette*. They say it is critical to have a routine set up that outlines behavior for the second the students walk in the room. Their suggestion for this system includes a series of logical first steps including putting away belongings, getting materials prepped for the day, and then turning in any work before beginning the assigned “bell work.” They also recommend putting this routine in the same place every day and making sure that it is clearly stated.

In terms of what kind of work to present, the Wongs suggest that it not be graded or threatening work and that it is done alone. (“How to Start a Class Effectively”)

Parts of this routine were already established in my classroom. The morning assignment was always posted in the same place. Its content was always the same as well, so students knew what to expect and what was expected of them. Unlike the Wongs’ suggestion, it was never enforced that students should be working alone. In fact, collaboration was encouraged.

Wonderings

I developed the following wondering: How can I increase the on-task behavior in the twenty minutes before the official start of the day? Several sub-questions followed this main idea including:

- How can I motivate students to begin working rather than socializing when they enter the room?
- How can I help students sign up for lunch and turn in homework without providing individual reminders?
- What is the best method for keeping students on task during this time of transition?
- Can a routine be successfully implemented mid-way through the year?
- Should students be given morning time to socialize?

Inquiry Plan

Start to Finish

Before deciding how to change the morning routine to make it more effective I surveyed teachers on their morning routines (Appendix A). I wanted to get more opinions on how to structure this time besides those gained from formal research. This was especially important since not many articles and books addressed the issue. I took the surveys a step further by interviewing a current teacher and former intern, Amy Ruth, who completed a similar inquiry several years ago.

My pre-implementation work continued to a class meeting with my students during which we talked about what happens in the morning and how we could make it better. We talked as a group and then I opened the floor for suggestions. Afterwards, students were given the opportunity to give me additional ideas by writing them on a piece of paper and turning them in.

The week prior to conducting the class meeting I paid careful attention to what students did when they entered the room in the morning. I knew it felt like things were not getting completed and students were unorganized, but I wanted to make sure that diligence was not being masked by my rushed feelings. As we all know, there are times in the room when it looks crazy, but students are actually being successful and getting their work done.

The following week, after the pre-data collection and class meeting, I decided to change small parts of the morning. Based on a suggestion from a student and a need to get the storage area more organized, I first labeled the coat hooks. This was done to prevent students from moving others' belongings to make room for theirs. It also gave

students guaranteed room on the coat hooks. Since our classroom has two levels of hooks, I tried to put those who arrive in the room first on the bottom and those who come in later on the top. This would make it easier for students to just come in and get settled because they would not have to push things out of the way to hang up theirs.

I continued writing the morning routine on the board in the place it had been since the beginning of the year. This followed the research which stated that it is important to be consistent in that area. I added one additional task to the usual write-up. Instead of students simply doing their geography, they were now required to show me when it was complete. The new morning message looked like this:

“Good morning! Please sign up for lunch and complete your geography.

When you are finished, **show** it to Ms. Ewing.”

The students were expecting a slight change in their schedule since we had talked about the morning issues the previous week. This addition was simple and clear, yet it gave them a reason for their actions. I continued this message through the week while collecting data on who was completing the work.

If there was homework or permission slips to turn in, I added that to the description of things to do. I continued with similar messages throughout three weeks of data collection. For the first two weeks I checked in the work and then I simply posted the checklist on the board and allowed students to check off their names when the geography was complete.

Based on research, I next changed the format of the message. In order to make it more clear and succinct for students, I put the message in outline form. The message in that format looked more like:

Good morning!

Please...

1. Sign up for lunch
2. Turn in homework to the homework basket
3. Complete geography and check-in with Ms. Ewing

At this point I even had students vote for which message was easier to follow (Appendix B). The outline version was picked by everyone who voted as the easiest to read and understand.

After these three weeks I had students complete “The Good Morning! Survey” as part of their morning routine (Appendix C). In the following weeks I continued the morning message in the outline format and began to add more assignments, which were meaningful yet still simple, to be completed. These included mostly work that needed to be finished from previous days. Along with this addition, I chose a student volunteer to be our lunch check-in monitor. His job was to make sure that everyone had signed up for lunch.

Data Collection

Because the morning routine is not limited by grade level, I distributed surveys to kindergarten through sixth grade teachers. These surveys asked recipients to select what kinds of things students were expected to do in the mornings such as signing in for lunch and turning in assignments. It left the option to describe an “other” activity as well. The evaluation next asked if there are any additional responsibilities for students. The final

two parts asked teachers to rate the on task behavior of their students and include any other details about the morning routine (Appendix A).

During my class meeting I collected data by taking notes on what students said. I also had students write suggestions which gave me additional data. The discussion was focused around getting things done in the mornings. I began by explaining what I had noticed about the mornings. Basically not many people were motivated to complete their work and it seemed rushed and organized. I asked if the students agreed and what their feelings were in terms of if it even needed to be fixed and what they thought the morning should include. They were then asked to write any ideas they had to make the morning more productive and more organized if they did not get a chance to speak or if they did not want to make the suggestion verbally.

I followed this procedure based on the idea that students should have a voice in the room. In the same sense that it is important to involve students in the process of creating classroom rules, I felt it was important to get their opinion on the morning. I hoped that if they had a say in the new routine that they would be more willing to follow it. Continuing with this logic, I had students complete “The Good Morning! Survey” during the third week of the inquiry. This asked if they felt they worked on their geography more compared to before they were required to check it in. It also asked if the students felt checking it in reminded them to do it more often and if it helped them feel settled quicker. I also left room for student opinions and suggestions (Appendix C).

I developed a check list so that I could keep track of how many students were completing their work (Appendix D). This was used by me in the early stages of implementation and then by the students after a couple weeks. Prior to starting any part

of the inquiry, I did a similar checklist to see how many students were on task during the morning. In addition to the checklist I made observational notes.

Data Analysis

I first separated the teacher surveys by grade level. I then created a chart to organize the answers and made notes of any similarities in the written responses (Appendix E). I was careful when creating the survey to have multiple choice responses so that the data would be more concrete. This gave me three distinct questions to chart and answers that I could average to get an overall feel for what the teachers thought. As a balance, I gave additional lines for written details. It was helpful to see that the elementary average for on-task behavior was about 3.34 on a five point scale. This told me that morning time across the board is more unstructured than academic time during the school day. The results also showed that most teachers just expect the basic morning things to be completed in the twenty minutes before the day begins. These basics include signing up for lunch, putting away supplies, and completing a non-essential activity.

I chose to make a distinction between middle school and elementary when I did the final summary of the teacher surveys because the middle school structure was different. Since sixth graders are not required to sign up for lunch in the morning and they also have lockers, they could not be compared to the elementary results because so much of the elementary time line was composed of those responsibilities.

The most helpful part of the surveys was the detailed responses from teachers. Many described their entire morning routine and things they have had to re-work. I found commonalities among the twenty three surveys received. Many teachers have their

students finish or fix past work or do journal writing. These two answers seemed particularly popular in grades kindergarten through third. I found it helpful to separate the surveys by grade because of such similarities. It was interesting to find that the importance of social time, one of my wonderings, was mentioned, but only by sixth grade teachers.

I combined my notes from the interview with Amy Ruth with the data from the surveys. Since she is not a teacher in my school, the information was not redundant. One of the highlights of her advice was to gradually introduce any changes. I found this to be very helpful. If given too many instructions at once, especially unexpected ones, nothing gets completed. She explained a series of jobs for the students that had been introduced at the beginning of the year. She described the weeks of modeling and practice that the students worked through before they could independently carry out the duties.

My next data collection was focused on the class meeting and the responses that followed. Before deciding what to do for the plan, I reviewed my notes and the students' writing. I found that many of their ideas were harsher than I wanted to implement. For example, one student suggested detention if the geography was not completed in the morning. Several other proposals related to our social studies unit, which was only continuing for one more week. I therefore analyzed these notes by looking for general types of ideas.

Reviewing my completion checklist prior to enacting the new inquiry plan was a simple step. After writing down for a week how many students worked on their geography, I found that zero out of twenty-one students were doing any of it on most days. The three weeks worth of data after that point show a huge jump in this

participation. About three-fourths of the class began working when they had to have it checked. The fourth week I began making observational notes.

I analyzed the student surveys by creating another chart (Appendix F). I also made the three simple questions on this multiple choice so that I could summarize the data. I found it helpful to take students' names into consideration when doing the analysis because the individual's academic pattern often influenced the answers. For example, more motivated students probably would not have circled that checking in their geography made them work harder or feel more settled, because they were already doing these things prior to any intervention.

Findings

Claims and Evidence

Claim One: Giving students a purpose for their work will increase their effort and on-task behavior.

Evidence: The main change I made to the morning was the addition of a geography check-in. Instead of just doing their work, students had to show me that it was done. Prior to this, students were still asked to do one geography question a day. In my week of observation before beginning the new plan, zero out of twenty-one students worked on it in the morning – they were not motivated to do it or they did not see a purpose in getting it done. I knew the morning felt chaotic, but this was my proof.

After providing students with a reason to work, the average number of students completing the geography each morning over three weeks jumped to thirteen. This number is a huge leap considering the ones who did not show me their work were usually

those who arrived on the later buses, ate breakfast, or had other morning commitments. Ten students out of eighteen who answered the survey said that having to show their work when it was complete caused them to do it more often. Eleven out of the eighteen said it helped them get settled more quickly in the morning. This evidence shows that giving the students a purpose for doing their work will increase their effort.

This new routine even increased students' effort throughout the day. About a week after I had started having students check-in their work we had some time to finish incomplete work about ten minutes before buses were called at the end of the day. Someone in the class came up to me and asked, "Ms. Ewing if I'm done, can I work on my geography." His effort to work was increased not only in the morning, but at the completion of the day. He was not just trying to get that one question done for the day; instead he was motivated to keep working. The importance of having a purpose was reinforced when he showed me the work he had done.

It is important to make the distinction between *purpose* and *consequence* as well. There was no consequence if students did not do their work. I simply gave them a reason to do it. This was enough to give them that boost.

Claim Two: The morning routine should be simple, clearly stated, and easy to follow.

Evidence: When I wrote two versions of the morning message on the board and asked students which they could understand better, they unanimously voted for the outline style (Appendix B). Why? It was simpler and easier to follow. Since that day, I have continued writing the morning chores in a bulleted or numbered list. This also gives the students the opportunity to mentally "check-off" what they have completed. I have

students in the morning that stand in front of the board, read the list, and say, “Did that, did that, need to do that.”

Making the morning instructions clear helps not only the students, but the teacher. A fifth grade teacher stated in her survey, “Putting expectations on [the] board as well as a daily schedule is helpful and saves the teacher a great deal of repetition.” If the routine is understood, the teacher will not have to answer questions related to what the students should be doing. Another teacher wrote, “On my daily morning message to the class, I include directions for what to do.”

The research I completed stressed the importance of clear and to-the-point instructions. *Rules in School* states, “The most effective teacher language is simple and clear. Say what you mean and say it concisely,” (Brady et al. 72). As explained in the research section, these statements are directed toward classroom rules, but they can definitely be applied to directions since directions are really just “rules” for an activity.

I also had several requests from students to make another part of the morning clearer – the coat hooks. One student wrote, “We should have assigned coat hooks because people hang their things over yours and when you have to get something out of your backpack you either hang their stuff over someone else’s or throw it on the floor!” Another said the same, “I think we need assigned coat hooks.” I took their advice and assigned the hooks. We have since had a huge reduction in the amount of coats and bags that crowd the room. This created an organization routine which was clear, simple, and easy to follow.

Claim Three: When developing the morning routine, as with all routines in the room, the class personalities should be taken into consideration.

Evidence: My main wondering for my inquiry came from my classes' innate nature to socialize at all times, especially in the morning. While my goal was to see if there could be a way to keep them more on task in terms of an academic activity, I did not expect to, nor did I want to, eliminate all talking. Without the chance to "catch-up" in the morning, I felt as though students would take time later to do so. The fifth grade schedule has students going to math right after announcements. This does not leave time for a morning meeting, so the socializing seemed not only important to the students, but to me as well. It was our way to continue building a classroom community.

I was not sure before beginning the project if this was a good idea. I found my answer with the surveys completed by the sixth grade teachers. Four out of the eight sixth grade teachers that responded said they included socialization as part of their morning time. One wrote, "Socializing is very important in sixth grade!" Another replied, "I believe sixth graders need time in the morning to be independent and to interact with their peers."

Since the fifth graders in my room will be sixth graders in just two short months, I thought this need could extend to them as well. Socializing, just like community building, is important especially if the class needs it. In essence, I felt the need for some free time in the morning because of the personality of my room. For this reason, I did not make the morning tasks too overwhelming – after answering one, two part geography question students were given the chance to relax and prepare for the day.

Claim Four: It is necessary to find a balance between too much work and not enough work.

Evidence: The weeks progressed and students consistently were completing their geography work. Many students began to get ahead and as the days went on, they had nothing to do in the morning. They went from having the right amount of work to no work at all which can lead to more off task behavior. One student asked a classmate, “Should we do anything else in the morning?” When I noticed this was happening, I began to add other assignments to our morning list. Following suit of several of the primary teachers that I surveyed, I suggested students finish work from the day before or do very simple activities. All of the options were non-essential so that anyone who came in on a later bus would not be behind.

Before adding these new activities, my balance between too much work and not enough was slanted. The opportunity was lost to have productive things get done in those twenty minutes before the official start of the day. Now, since the students know there could be more to do, they have continued checking the board when they walk into the room. As the Wongs stated, “Prime time in school is the first few moments in class. If you blow these moments you blow the success of your class for that day... An assignment must be available, and the students must know the procedure for getting to work immediately.” This assignment must not be something that the students have already done and it must not be too overwhelming that they feel it would not be worth it to start.

When this balance was effectively achieved I felt more relaxed and available for the students. When the students had a clearly defined task that seemed manageable to

accomplish, they got settled and began working. This meant I did not have to chase everyone around the room trying to enforce on-task work. Instead, I could focus on greeting students as they came in or spend time with someone who needed assistance. It helped me get more prepared for the day of teaching. I could check in with students and get a feel for those who maybe did not have a great morning. Basically, it set me up for success for the following lessons and interactions.

Claim 5: Students are capable of on-task morning behavior in addition to socializing.

Evidence: What was good about the geography was that it lent itself to cooperative work. I had several students approach me in the morning and then during the day asking if they could work with a partner to complete it. I observed each of these work sessions to be very productive and the students to be on-task. Therefore, their need for socializing was fulfilled, yet work was still being done. The students who were talking were still checking in their work.

Conclusions

Future Implications

This project has influenced my future teaching practices in several ways. First of all, I think it is imperative to decide upon a morning routine before the students even arrive on the first day of school. This helps students get accustomed to having expectations for the morning. If a baseline is established, then it will be easier to make adjustments based on the personality of the class. My project suggests that this will allow

students to have a calmer and smoother start to the day. I look forward to being able to utilize that time to learn more about my students. When I was able to greet my class early in the day, I felt better about interactions later.

In order to prevent hectic mornings I may create a job system in which students become responsible for the morning chores. Based on the findings in my room and research, I know it will be important for students to practice anything that will be expected from them long-term. For example, if I want to establish a system in which students come in each morning and begin seat work, I need to practice this procedure with them for the first few weeks until it becomes habitual. A similar step was created in my project. The students practiced checking in their geography by coming to see me. Later, they were able to mark themselves off on the checklist.

I think it is important for students to have something to do when they arrive, otherwise they begin the day off-task and academically unfocused. I found that even adding the simple check in the morning was enough for students to get some work done, yet still be able to have time to get settled and catch up with friends. The amount of structure and free time will depend upon the grade level. Younger students may need more specific socialization guidelines.

New Wonderings

I wonder if a new routine can ever be as effectively implemented mid-year compared to if it was started at the beginning of the year. I would like to explore the social aspect of the morning more as well. I wonder if it is truly beneficial or just a distraction for some students to allow time for morning conversation. For my particular

class I felt as though it was a necessity to give that time. The students' needs should always take priority over simply making a classroom look more orderly. My students would not have been happy, and probably more distracted during the day without it.

It would be interesting to measure the effects of a teacher greeting in the morning. How much does a handshake or even a good morning from a teacher affect a student's day? One thing I was not sure how to measure in this particular inquiry was the extent students' days were affected by a more organized morning. This is an interesting wondering as well. Does a calmer morning affect the remainder of the students' day? I felt it was important to give my students time to settle. It seems that the morning, or the beginning of the day, can set the mood for the rest of the time. I wonder if the students feel the same.

I did attempt to assign someone to help me make sure everyone was signed up for lunch. This responsibility did not last long. I wonder how to set students up to be responsible for this type of job. Is practice the key? As a result, I had to continue to double check the lunch count, but at least more students were signed up compared to before the inquiry began. Perhaps a job system has to be organized in order to get one particular responsibility to work, or maybe individual students do reminders during the first few days of their position. This is one area that may benefit from beginning the routine at the start of the year.

Resources

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- Wong, Harry and Rosemary Wong. "How to Start a Class Effectively." Teachers.net 1.8 (2000): 9 Feb. 2005 <<http://teachers.net/gazette/OCT00/wong.html>>
- Wood, Chip. *Yardsticks*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, 1994.

Teacher:

Grade Level:

As an intern in fifth grade with Brenda Khayat, I have decided to focus my inquiry project on finding an efficient way to get students motivated in those twenty minutes between arriving at school and the official start of the day.

I would really appreciate it if you could fill out this survey about your own morning routines. I hope to gather not only suggestions for our classroom, but an overall idea in regards to how teachers begin their days. Please return the survey to the labeled folder near the mailboxes by **3:30 PM Tuesday, February 8th**. Thank you so much for your time! - Leslie Ewing

1) What is expected of students when they first arrive in the morning? (Check all that apply)

- Lunch sign in
- Coats/book bags put away
- Completion of an activity/assignment
- Other (Please describe below)

2) After the basics are completed, do the students have any other responsibilities?

- Yes No

If yes, what are they? This can include any activities or assignments.

3) Do the students appear to be "on task?" In other words, do they do the tasks assigned with little to no distractions? Circle based on the scale 1 = no students on task to 5 = all students on task.

1 2 3 4 5

4) Please include any other details about your morning routine that you feel work well for your class.

(A)

Good morning!

Please sign up for lunch. Place your signed report card folders in the homework basket. Next, complete your geography and check off your name.

(B)

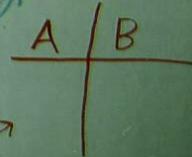
Good morning!

Please do the following

- ① Sign up for lunch
- ② Place signed report card folders in the homework basket
- ③ Complete geography
- ④ Check off your name

★ Both of these morning letters say the same thing. Which one do you like better/ is easier to read? VOTE

★ by placing a mark under the letter you like.



Tooth Fairy

T A N A

Name _____



The Good Morning! Survey

Circle your answer to each question

1) Since you started checking in your geography, how often have you worked on it in the morning compared to before?

More often The Same Less often

2) Do you feel like having it checked has helped you remember to do it?

Yes I Don't Know No

3) Do you feel like you get settled more quickly?

Yes I Don't Know No

4) Is there anything that would make your morning in the classroom better? Explain.

5) Do you have any other suggestions for the morning? For example, is there anything that would help you get even more things done? Is there something you could do that would help make your whole day better? (Answer on the back)

Geography Checklist



Name1				
Name2				
Name3				
Name4				
Name5				
Name6				
Name7				
Name8				
Name9				
Name10				
Name11				
Name12				
Name13				
Name14				
Name15				
Name16				
Name17				
Name18				
Name19				
Name20				
Name21				

Teacher Surveys

	K		First		½ Split			Second	Third			Fourth		Fifth		Sixth								
Expectations	4	1	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	2	3	2	3	3	1	3	2	
Responsibilities	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	
On Task	3	4	3	3	4	2	2/3	3	4	4	4	4	4	3	3		3/4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4

Summary:

Elementary:

Expectations Average: 3.6 / 4
 Responsibilities Calculation: 4 = No; 11 = Yes
 On Task Average: 3.34

Middle:

Expectations Average: 2.7 / 4
 Responsibilities Calculation: 2 = No; 5 = Yes
 On Task Average: 4.4

Common Comments:

- Fix work
- Finish work
- Journal writing
- Daily schedule/expectations on board
- Turn in assignments

Interesting:

- Change of activities needed because boredom = lack of progress
- One-on-one work
- Careful of work requiring questions
- *Only in sixth grade mention of importance of socializing – 4 / 7

The Good Morning! Survey

Question 1 - How often do you work on geography?

More Often	Same	Less Often
xxxxxxxxxxx = 10	xxxxxxx = 8	

Question 2 - Checking helps you remember to do it?

Yes	I Don't Know	No
xxxxxxxxxxx = 9	xxxxx = 5	xxxx = 4

Question 3 - Do you get settled more quickly?

Yes	I Don't Know	No
xxxxxxxxxxx = 11	xx = 2	xxxxx = 5

Ideas:
prize to quietest - 2
less talking
more talking - 2
sit next to anyone to talk

Total: 18/21