

Wake Up!  
Creative Ways to Make the Morning  
Routine More  
Exciting, Effective, and Productive

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April 29, 2005  
Inquiry Conference

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## ***Background Information***

### ***My teaching context***

A partnership with the State College Area School District and the Pennsylvania State University has given me the incredible opportunity to intern in a self-contained fifth grade classroom for one full year. I am currently in a placement at Gray's Woods Elementary School. I would classify the setting of this school as rural because there is a lot of land acreage and no businesses nearby. There is a low level of ethnic diversity, with not many children with an African American or Asian background.

My classroom of 26 fifth graders is like a puzzle; if one piece is missing, then the full effect of the puzzle is not obtainable. Like a puzzle, my class is comprised of many "different" pieces that all contribute something in their own way to the unique diversity of learners in our classroom. Of my 26 fifth graders, there are ten girls and sixteen boys. Both genders combined, four children receive learning support for reading and math, six students are enrolled in Title I, two receive speech and language therapy, two are English as a Second Language Learners, and two receive services for emotional support.

If you break down the boys on an academic level of 1 through 3, 3 being the most needy, I would classify seven of my students as a 3, six on grade level, or a 2, and three as a 1. Many of the students in the middle category have a lot of potential, but either rush through work or do not give a 100% effort on the work that they complete. Two of those boys are categorized as having ADHD or ADD. Behaviorally speaking, the boys in my class, ranked on the same scale, are basically at the normal level as any other 11-year old boy. I would categorize eight of my boys as a 3, three as a 2, and the remaining six as a 1. Many of the boys in my class this year have been caught teasing or harassing other

students on several occasions. This does not go for all of the boys, but a solid handful have been talked to several times concerning this problem.

Ranking the girls on the same scale academically, I would place five of the girls at a 2, two of the girls at a 1, and three of the girls at a level below grade level, or a 3. Of these girls, one has an anxiety disorder, and a learning disability in writing and reading. As far as a behavioral level, I would place three of them in a category 1, six of them at a middle level, and only one at the lowest level. The girls in my class seem to interact well with one another, and do not seem to show many acceptance problems.

Over the course of the year, we have had two students join our classroom. One is from Connecticut and the other one has joined us from another fifth grade classroom in our building. It seems as if our new student from the other classroom has changed the dynamics of our classroom. Many of the boys follow in his antics now. Our class did not have any leaders beforehand, but it seems that he has taken on that role and is not capable of using it in a positive way. As for the girls, there are no stand out leaders or followers. They seem to all get along well and are considerate of others.

The majority of my students come from an upper middleclass home where both parents still live with them. Three students in my class have experienced a divorce, though. Two of those students who are part of divorced families are part of the five students in my class that one might consider lower income families. Parent involvement fluctuates in the classroom. There are several parents who are involved in a helpful way, supporting their children and involving themselves in their lives and education, and there are others that take their children's defense, ignoring teacher advice.

## *How My Inquiry Developed*

As my year as an intern progressed, I began to take notice of the morning routine that my mentor and I had worked to establish from day one. The routine goes as follows: the students come in, then unpack their bags and take a look at the blackboard, which has the daily schedule and Individual Work on it. The Individual Work includes different assignments or things students should work on until the bell rings at 8:45. Usually the students have at least three different things they could be working on or doing. During these fifteen minutes, students also chose a lunch and hand in any work or important papers. Typically, at 8:45, we all meet at the rug to review the day's schedule and any important reminders. At this point students also have an opportunity to share any important or exciting news going on in their lives. A few weeks into the school year, the students knew this routine and seemed comfortable with it. As time went on and I took over more of the morning responsibilities, I noticed that many of the students became increasingly lethargic with what they were getting accomplished in the first thirty minutes of the day. This is where my initial wondering came in. I stepped into the shoes of my fifth graders and wondered if the reason why they were not doing their work was because they wanted time to relax and prepare for the day the way they felt necessary? Did they feel rushed? Did they want or need a more energetic routine? Was it just the fact that they did not want to do work? A thousand questions popped into my head and I wondered what had happened to the productivity of the morning routine.

Another part of my initial wondering is the idea that the first thirty minutes of a student's day are the most important. I believe that this time prepares the students for the day ahead and has the opportunity to get them excited and motivated to learn. Not being

the best “morning person”, I realized how a motivating assignment or short interactive activity could get the students in the correct mind set and prepared for a day of learning. Because I feel this way, and I noticed the lack of enthusiasm in the students and the increasing lethargy as they entered the room, I wondered if I could make an adjustment to the routine I had established to put the life back into the first thirty minutes of the day.

Implementing new character into the morning routine can have a major effect on my teaching, as well as the students learning. If the students are more motivated to learn and ready to go as the day starts, as a teacher I will be 100% more energetic, as well. When a classroom full of students are interested in what you are teaching and are excited about learning, the feeling becomes contagious. I also believe that what I am teaching would be more significant to students who are well prepared to learn. I think a better morning routine could make a difference in the way the day flows and would make a world of difference for my students.

In the future, knowing the affects of establishing a morning routine that could change the way a student’s day unfolds will help me to instill this same motivation into other students of mine. I will be able to establish a community of learners that trust one another and look to each other for guidance. The information that I am learning and modifying now to make a successful morning routine will only better the future of my students to come.

### *Wonderings*

My main wondering was, **How can the morning routine be changed/adjusted to make that time of day more efficient, effective, and meaningful for the students?**

As a result of that main wondering, I came up with several other wonderings or thoughts about this possible change in the routine. All of these thoughts came into my head:

- Why do some students work and others not?
- Would building community be a way to improve their morning habits?
- Are there specific activities that would make this time more productive?
- Would starting the day earlier help?
- Could some of the activities be incorporated into a centers-based routine or could a group activity take place?
- For the students that have finished all the work that is on the board, is there something else for them to do?
- By some students not doing what they are expected to, is this preparing them for the day the way they feel necessary?
- Are there not enough options for morning work?

All of these wonderings created a great drive in me to try and adjust the morning routine so that it is still familiar to the students, but it is more productive and beneficial.

### ***Research***

To really understand the importance of a morning routine, I did some research. Below are reasons that back up my wonderings about the important role I feel the morning routine holds.

According to the authors of *The First Six Weeks of School*, the morning meeting carries many responsibilities. It acts as a transition from home to school, sets the tone for the day, increases student's confidence and investment in learning, and provides a meaningful context for teaching and practicing academic skills amongst other things. To

me, this really emphasizes the importance of having a daily routine that will provide the students with all of these opportunities. The authors of the book, *The Responsive Classroom*, agree that the morning sets the tone for the rest of the day. This is one of the reasons why I feel so strongly about strengthening the morning routine. If it does set the tone for the rest of the day, then those first 30 minutes better be worthwhile.

Also according to *The First Six Weeks of School*, the morning meeting gives students an opportunity to share some news of interest, which my current morning routine incorporates and my adjusted routine will, as well. I have kept this in my morning routine because I feel it is important that students share what is on their minds and make all the students aware of the unique individuals that are amongst them. According to Roxann Kriete, author of the article *Start the Day with Community*, sharing is an important part of the morning. It gives students a chance to talk, as well as listen to their fellow classmates. It also gives students practice expressing their ideas orally.

Although group activities are not currently built into my morning routine, they are a part of my sub-wonderings and I intend to incorporate them into the new routine. Kriete believes that group activities build a class's sense of familiarity and comfort that makes for a feeling of belonging. I feel that this is an important feeling for each child to achieve in order for them to be successful within the classroom parameters.

### ***Inquiry vs. Project***

What makes inquiry, inquiry? It is the wonderings followed by the quest to find something to feed that wondering and thirst for the unknown. Why is my wondering inquiry and not a project? There are many reasons for this. To start off, I came up with several smaller wonderings. I wondered why I noticed a change in the work habits of the

students once I began to take over. I also wondered why the students seemed less motivated than at the beginning of the year. From those smaller wonderings, I concluded my main wondering; **how could I make the morning routine more effective, efficient, and meaningful to the students.** Because of that wondering and my feeling that the morning is one of the most important parts of the day, I developed a desire to figure out a way to make a change in the lethargic path my students were headed down.

### ***Inquiry Plan***

#### ***Observations and field notes***

Once I had established my wonderings, I began carrying out the steps of my inquiry plan that would hopefully lead me to the answer of how to make the morning routine more exciting and effective. My first step was to begin by observing the morning routine. Although I am a part of this everyday, actually observing the routine and students helped me to put data onto paper. By observing my students, I was able to sit back and see the whole picture and catalog students' activities each day. Included in these observations were some from my PDA. I had her come into my room so that I could get another point of view of how things really looked in the morning. These observations were just notes on paper and sometimes a tally of girls doing work versus boys doing work. These were simple notes that stated what time it was, how many students were present, and what those children were doing or not doing. These observations were my first step into what was really going on during the morning routine.

#### ***Classroom Survey***

The next step I took to carry out my inquiry was to have my students complete a survey. I did this in order to receive feedback about their feelings towards the current

morning routine. I designed the survey so that the questions would lead me to parts of the routine that the students liked and disliked. (See Appendix A) I also created this survey in order to become aware of other things that happened during the morning routine that I might not have noticed through just plain observations alone. I was looking for the student's honest opinion in order to move forward with my project.

### ***Teacher Interviews and Observations***

Following the survey, I completed several interviews and classroom observations. By doing the different interviews I hoped to gain insight into other effective routines, as well as gain knowledge from teachers in other grades who may have different ideas. Teachers can offer a wide spectrum of ideas, whether or not they are teaching the same grade. I completed these interviews by asking them several basic questions, such as; Do you have an established morning routine? What does it consist of? Do you believe it is effective? How long do you take in the morning before starting the core curriculum? What I hoped to gain from these questions were ideas they may have that might be working with other students that might also be just as effective in my classroom setting. If they believed they were running an effective and efficient morning, I wanted to know why they thought so and I wanted to know what they were doing. The observations in other classrooms basically served as an idea catcher. I believe you can gain a lot from speaking with someone, but once you actually see the plans put into action and the students response, you will learn so much more. The whole focus here is the students, and the teacher may think his or her routine is successful, but if the students do not accomplish anything in the morning and are not excited to learn by 9:00 a.m., then I may question the actual success of that morning routine. For each observation, I took the

same kind of notes that I took in my class. I recorded who was there, what time it was, and what those students were doing. I observed a fifth grade class, a first grade, and a fourth grade. I found that all of the routines were in fact very different, yet all successful in their own ways.

### ***Reflective Journals***

Once a variety of data had been collected, I wanted a way to put all of these ideas and thoughts onto paper. I decided to write several reflective journals about what all these thoughts meant and to see what direction they were pointing me in. These journals were short and not as frequent as the other tools used, but they helped me to organize my thoughts. These journals are also responsible for the creation of many of my sub-wonderings and helping me to brainstorm ideas of how to adjust the effectiveness of the routine. These journals were sent to my PDA each time that I wrote one. Receiving feedback from her also helped because I was gaining another perspective on what movement I had made with my inquiry. Anytime I put my thoughts onto paper, I was able to regroup and organize my thoughts so that I could start building a direction in which I wanted to head.

### ***Planning the activities***

Once I had taken several steps to collect data, I needed to decide how I would go about implementing these changes. I came to a decision that I would create different activities for the students to do in the morning. My mentor came up with the idea of incorporating the Multiple Intelligences into the new morning activities. I thought this would be a great idea, and it also brought on a new wondering about the effect introducing Multiple Intelligences into the curriculum would have on a student's

education. Amy Brualdi, a writer for ERIC Clearinghouse, says that Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences need to be incorporated into the classroom. Howard Gardner's theory states that there are seven different kinds of intelligences and that all seven intelligences are needed to productively function in society. Brualdi argues that because of this, teachers should emphasize the intelligences in their classrooms. This implies that educators should be teaching to a broader range of talents and skills. Pokey Stanford, the author of *Multiple Intelligences for Every Classroom*, states that, "Indeed unsuccessful, unmotivated students have experienced academic growth when exposed to multifaceted interventions and techniques principled by MI theory." I am hoping that by integrating these special tools into my routine, it will make a difference in those students who seem to be unmotivated by the current morning routine. By incorporating these specific intelligences into my morning routine, I am also tapping into the diverse talents and skills encompassing my classroom. This is important in the all-around growth of a child.

My purpose for these activities was to keep students busy when they finished early, give the students who had nothing to do something to do, as well as make the morning a little more interesting and fun! These activities were not to be "busy work", but different activities that touched all the intelligences. This gave the students something productive and significant to work on. Each week I created a list of 5 to 6 new activities. (See Appendix B) Each activity had a set of instructions, the necessary materials to complete the activity and a folder to go with it. Many of the activities also asked the students to share their finished work at the end. Each week, more activities were added onto the list of original activities. This helps integrate the different intelligences and also gave students more variety in their choices.

Aside from the activities, I created a sign-in sheet for the students stating that if they signed it, then they had read the morning instructions and understood what was expected of them. I also created a laminated check-off list for each student that they were to use each day to record what they had done during the morning time. I gave each student their own dry erase marker so that they had no reason not to sign the chart and use the check off list. I also decided to move the “weasel”, or white board on wheels, closer to the room entrance. The purpose of this was so that students would see it immediately and the morning’s agenda would hopefully grab their attention. These new adjustments would change the procedure slightly, but not enough to make it seem like their morning was going to be totally different from what they had known.

## ***Data Collection***

### *Initial data collection*

Once my wonderings and ideas were intact, I needed to decide the best route for my data collection. I decided upon many different techniques. The first piece of data collection that I decided to use was class observations and field notes. To do this effectively, I began observing my students and taking notes between the time of 8:30 and 8:45 a.m. To aid in the clarity of my observations, I even had my PDA come in and observe a morning for me. We began to look for trends in students and their behaviors from the time they walked in the door, until the time we met at the rug. I was looking for something that would tell me why these students were no longer motivated to do the work that was assigned to them in the morning.

The next tool that I used to collect data was a survey. I created a survey that would allow the students to honestly record how they felt about the morning routine. I

also asked for suggestions of ideas that they thought would make the morning routine more productive and stimulating to them. The feedback that I received from this initial survey led me to many different ideas to use for improvement.

After the initial survey was complete, I set up several times to talk with different teachers, in different grades, to observe and discuss their morning routine. My first target was Amy Swart, a third grade teacher who had previous experience with this problem. Amy was able to offer me several ideas about how she went about making a positive change in her morning routine. After speaking with Amy, I spoke with Priya Poehner, a fourth grade teacher, Jessica Cowan, a kindergarten teacher, and Candy Bryan, a second grade teacher. The idea was to get as much information as I could from a variety of different grades and see if I could find similarities through out all of the grades. Every teacher that I talked to agreed with the fact that the purposes of their morning routines were to get the students engaged and involved, create responsibility, and to set expectations. Each teacher was also able to offer me several ideas of how they were able to create an effective morning routine. One common denominator between several of the teachers was community building. They said that it helps to create a positive start to the day. From these observations, I gained many insights to the immense varieties of morning routines that are available. The last person I interviewed was my mentor teacher. I did this so I could get another view from someone within my classroom. From each one, I was able to take something that I thought would make my routine more stimulating.

I was also able to observe my partner classrooms' morning routine. Jen Lawrence, a first grade teacher, has a structured routine established that she feels is effective in

getting the students motivated, ready for the day. Being able to observe this helped me to see what ingredients make a routine effective and productive.

The last collection tool I used prior to the implementation of my inquiry activities was my reflection journals. Through these, I was able to organize my thoughts and recap the day of observations on paper. These journals allowed me to think of more wonderings and put ideas onto paper.

### ***After implementation of inquiry activities***

Once I began to implement my inquiry activities, I created a few new data collection tools, in addition to my initial ones. I continued with the journals and the field notes, but I also began to use spreadsheets. I had two different spreadsheets. One was used to record what each student had done each morning, and the other one was used to record whether or not the students were using the new check-off lists. A few weeks into the implementation of these activities, I also gave another survey. This survey was used to check in on how the students felt about the new changes, and for me to see if any progress had been made.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Observations and Field Notes***

Once I collected all of my data, I came up with a way to analyze it so I could figure out what it all really meant. To start this process, I first took a look at all of my and my PDA's field notes and observations. I looked for trends and things that would stand out and tell me something. Some of the trends and questions that I looked for are as follows: Were there more girls

than boys doing work or vice versa? Did students seem to be doing more work as the inquiry activities and tools started to kick in? Were there certain days of the week that students seemed to do less or more work? Did it make a difference if there were more or less individual work choices available? Did the time the students began work stay consistent or change? I highlighted anything that stood out involving any of these trends. I looked into these trends because I felt that they would provide great evidence into whether or not the inquiry was slowly gaining ground in making the students morning more meaningful.

### ***Student Surveys***

My purpose in giving the students a survey was to find out how they truly felt about the current morning routine. By asking questions such as: What is the time from 8:30 to 8:45 used for? What do you dislike and like about the current morning routine? What would you change and how would you change it? What would you like to do in the morning to get yourself ready, if not already what we do? I realized that I could get honest responses from the students to get their opinion of the morning. This was important to me because I wanted to adjust something that I felt strongly about, but without getting any feedback from the students, any changes I would make would be pointless. Once I received all of the surveys back, I looked for trends once again. I looked to see if there were a large number of students who did not like one activity or another, or if there was a large group that did like a specific activity or aspect of the morning routine. Once I found different trends, I made a list of positives and negatives of the morning

routine. On the other side of this list, were a bunch of ideas to change the routine that the students had vocalized in their surveys. From the surveys and the ideas that I collected, I was able to create the basis for my inquiry activities.

### ***Other Classroom Observations and Interviews with Teachers***

My goal in speaking with other teachers and observing their classroom routines was to come up with ideas that worked and didn't work. The data that I collected from the observations was compiled into a list of what I thought were positives and negatives about all the different morning routines. I then went through the lists and thought of my class. I took into consideration all of the different student needs, when students arrive, and when we officially start the day. After I had my class in mind, I went through each item on the list and checked off whether or not I thought that technique would work in my class. The ones that I decided would work in my class were then compared to the previous list of what my students wanted and the positives of our routine. Those combined, I was able to think of many things that would work in our classroom and make it a more meaningful morning routine.

The data that I collected from the interviews was used in a similar. The only difference was that since I was talking to teachers who believed their routines were successful, there were no negatives. So, I took those positives and again matched them up with my student needs, my goals, and the other possible ideas I received from the observations. I looked to see if I would want these types of systems added into my routine and whether or not I thought it would make a difference in the productivity of the routine.

## ***Claims and Evidence***

Claim 1:

*Students appear to have a clear understanding of what to do between 8:30 and 8:45 a.m. and take care of the “necessities”, such as lunch count and handing in important papers consistently.*

Evidence 1:

My initial wondering was based on the idea that the students were not getting work accomplished or tended to wander around the room once they had completed the necessary work. One thing that I did notice through my observations and through my presence in the room is that the students got done what was necessary. They realize that it is their responsibility to choose their lunch, and if they do not choose a lunch, then they may not eat that day. Same thing goes for the homework, if they do not hand it in on their own, then they may get a lower mark. The students have been doing this consistently over the past few months and rarely do I need to remind them to choose their lunch or hand in their homework. I believe that since there are consequences that the students can see and understand, this makes them more apt to do these two things.

Claim 2:

*After completing the necessities, students seem to get more involved when hands-on activities or partner or group activities are morning options.*

Evidence 2:

Before I implemented the new activities, the choices the students had for Individual Work were mainly just options that included finishing up classroom work, and no hands-on or

group activities. After the implementation of the activities, there were a greater number of students participating in the Individual Work. Almost all of these activities allowed students to use their hands, creativity, and work in groups of four if they wanted to. Not only did I notice a greater growth in participation through my observations, but also the responses from the student surveys clearly indicate that they do enjoy and respond better to these types of activities. I once asked a couple of the boys who always seemed to be using the play dough why they liked that activity so much. The students replied, “We just like to do something fun where we get to use our hands.” The pre-implementation survey showed that the students wanted more activities or chances to do these types of activities, and the post-implementation survey lead me to believe that they were satisfied with these new activities and may have been one of the reasons why more students were participating in morning activities. The results from the first survey indicated that over half of the 26 students who had completed the survey wanted a chance to do a hands-on activity or something with a group of their friends. Of the 20 students who completed the second survey, 18 said they were happy with these activities, one felt neutral towards the activities, and only one did not like the new activities. (See Appendix C)

Claim III:

*The implementation of the new activities does not make the students feel rushed, and may act as a sort of “reward” for completing work.*

Evidence III:

The responses to the second survey led me to this claim. The students were asked if they felt more rushed and of the 20 students who completed the survey, 10 said they did feel

rushed, 4 were neutral, and 6 said that they did feel rushed. (See Appendix D) Although all of the students did not firmly say yes to this answer, the majority did feel that they still had ample time to do what they needed to and didn't feel bombarded by the new activities.

Claim IV:

*Students feel like they are still able to complete classroom work with the new non-academic activities in place.*

Evidence IV:

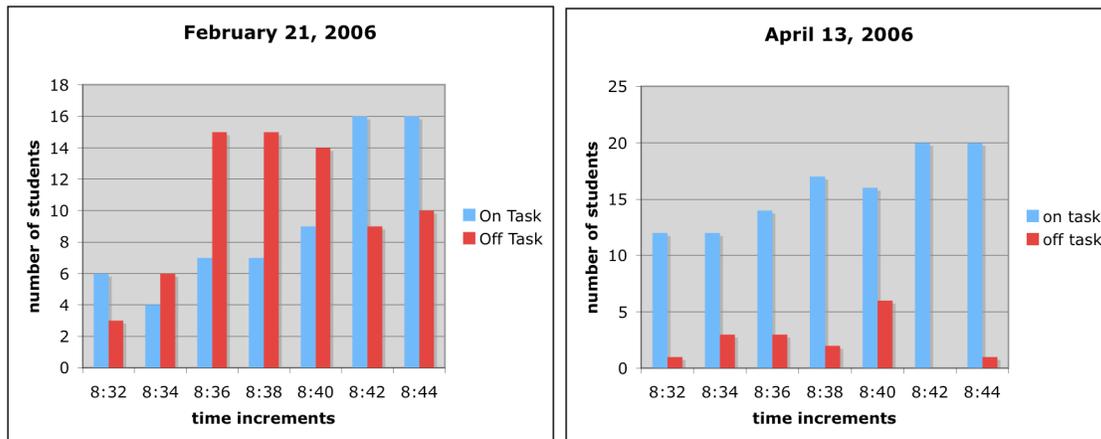
The second survey asked the students if they felt like they were able to get work done with the new activities in place. Of the 20 students who completed the survey, 75% said yes, 15% said no, and 10% were neutral. I have also seen students choose to do their unfinished classroom work before heading over to the new activities bin. Several students have said to me, "Miss Kriftner, I am trying to finish up my work so I can get to one of the other activities." The majority of the students feel that they are still able to get work done, and this shows that the students have priorities to get done what they need to, even though there may be more appetizing choices. (See Appendix E)

Claim V:

*The new activities have made a positive change in the number of students who are consistently on-task during the morning time.*

Evidence V:

I was able to see this from the observations my PDA took. On February 21, 2006 she took initial observations before the activities had been implemented. On April 13, 2006 she took more observations once the activities had been implemented and the students had some time to get adjusted to the new routine. The graphs below show that there is a large difference in the number of students who stay on-task in the morning now than before. I have also noticed this through my own observations. From the time that I implemented the activities until now, I have seen an increase in students working, and a decrease in the number of students wandering around the room. Some of the students who were key offenders of the increasing lethargy of the classroom have become more involved in the activities of the morning routine. I told one of these “offenders” that I noticed that he seemed to be more on task lately. He said, “Having the activities really keeps me on task because they are something fun to look forward to doing. I know I have to get my stuff done in order to do them.”



Claim VI:

*The new routine is not yet fully effective in changing the attitudes of students towards learning, as well as getting them excited for the day.*

Evidence VI:

According to the information I gathered from the second survey, 10 students felt little to no change in their attitude towards learning, and 11 felt little or no change in the excitement they felt for the day as a result of the morning routine. In order for me to feel like this routine has made a positive affect in both of these areas, I would need to see that almost all of the students who participated in the survey felt that they did feel or see a change in themselves because of the activities. This was not the case, and I was not able to visibly see a difference in the students' attitudes or excitement. (See Appendix F)

### ***New Wonderings***

As a result of this project, the conclusions drawn from it, and all of the individual steps involved in this process, I have come up with several more wonderings. Listed below are my new wonderings, which I hope to act upon in a classroom of my own some day soon!

- Would starting this routine at the beginning of the year make it more effective?
- How can I get the students to actually follow the specific directions given for each activity?

- Is there a way to incorporate large group activities that would be successful in helping build community and trust within the classroom?
- If there were more time, would the students be more apt to getting out an activity?
- Does the choice of the work make a difference with who does work and who doesn't?
- How do you get students motivated who are not affected by the implementation of the new activities?

## ***Conclusions***

### ***Implications for the Future as a Teacher***

After realizing the effects that the morning can have on a child's whole day and school year, I intend to create a similar routine like this in my own classroom. I will create a morning routine that incorporates an official morning meeting so that "students will learn to trust one another and become better with communicating", as said by the authors of *The First Six Weeks of School*. The routine will not be exactly the same, because if I have learned anything, it is that all students and every class will be very different from one another and they will all have different needs. I still intend to incorporate the Multiple Intelligences into my classroom because I do agree with Brualdi who believes that Multiple Intelligences offer a wide variety of talent and skill to students, and need to be implemented more into the classroom. Hopefully, as my career

as a teacher grows and flourishes, I will continue to see the importance of establishing a balanced morning routine that prepares students for the day. I plan to observe other classrooms as I enter my new school district to gain some insight into how things are done there and what works and what doesn't. If all goes well, I intend to have my students ready and excited to learn by 9:00 each morning!

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*Website used to assist the creation of my inquiry activities:*

<http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic68b.htm>

