

FUEL FOR THOUGHT: Improving Behaviour and Enhancing Learning In The Classroom



An article by Dave Vizard

- *Why is it that a student's ability to learn is influenced by the food and drink they have during the day?*
- *Why is it that we appear less able to cope with the challenging behaviour presented by students in our classes by the end of the day?*
- *Also why is it that student behaviour always deteriorates later in the day?*

The answer to these questions can be found by analysing the way we refuel our bodies.

DRINK

Most staffrooms are awash with coffee at breaktimes. Staff consume large quantities of coffee throughout the day. Drinking excess coffee not only disrupts our sleep patterns if drunk after midday, it can also reduce our tolerance threshold. As a diuretic, coffee can cause dehydration and resultant fatigue. Our bodies are made up of 75% water and if this drops as little as 2% then we can become dehydrated. Our brain cells are 82% water. Even moderate dehydration causes headaches. So too much coffee in conjunction with us drinking too little water can cause our brains to overheat and lead to higher levels bad temperedness. We need to reduce caffeine intake and increase water intake to at least 2 litres a day, with even more on hot days. Consumption of adequate quantities of water throughout the day is also necessary to lubricate our vocal chords-too little will damage them.

For students schools can be very difficult locations in which to find water. Many do not have drink fountains and where they exist they are often vandalised. In this commercial age there are always plenty of machines selling cans of fizzy drinks, which are heavily laden with sugar and additives. The average can of coke contains 7 teaspoons of sugar. This can exacerbate dehydration and in conjunction with the additives can increase the likelihood of poor behaviour. In most schools students are expected to pay for bottled water.

Allied to this is the level of alcohol consumption amongst students. The Schools Health Education unit stated that from a sample of 42,000 students, 25% of 12/13 year olds and 43% of 14/15 year olds consumed at least one alcoholic drink in the past week. 10% of boys had drunk at least 10 units of alcohol the past week. This level of consumption would lead to increased levels of dehydration with the resultant increase in body temperature, with the likelihood of overheating the brain with associated poor behaviour.

Enlightened schools are providing chilled water dispensers in staffrooms and classrooms. In these schools students are encouraged to fill bottles from them and to keep these on their desks to re-hydrate when necessary throughout the day. In other schools sugar based fizzy drinks are being replaced by bottled water/squash machines.

AquAid and Children's Medical Charity ERIC are now promoting a 'Water Is Cool In School' scheme. They have found that a lack of water can affect student's health and their ability to learn. Illness can result and levels of energy and concentration suffer.

Where water is freely available and students are encouraged to re-hydrate, poor behaviour has become less significant later in the day and staff report that their schools are happier places as a result.

FOOD LEARNING AND BEHAVIOUR

To cope with the stresses of our work as teachers and the challenges presented to us by students we need to think carefully about our food intake. Skipping breakfast is the worst sin as it makes us feel tired later in the day. Blood sugar levels tend to dip 3 to 4 hours after eating so a regular intake of the right types of food is essential. Many of us get it wrong by going for foods high in sugar, which give us a short-term lift. This is usually done by eating biscuits and cakes or drinking fruit juices and canned drinks. This is a very shortsighted action as it can cause energy lows after the short-term lift. At lunch we should avoid too much refined starch as in white bread sandwiches. Try to reduce fat intake as this raises serotonin levels, which can make you very tired and relaxed. Fruit, vegetables, nuts and seeds will give you the right intake.

Try some brisk exercise and create personal space by chilling for 10 minutes at lunchtime away from the staff room and classroom – you will feel much better and be able to face the inevitable challenging behaviour from students during the afternoon.

Students' behaviour is influenced by the food they eat. At the start of the day 25% of British school children have just crisps or sweets for breakfast. Indeed many adolescent children get 40% of their calories from fat. With many working parents having to leave home early in the morning their children are left to prepare their own breakfast. Therefore it is not surprising that many choose to stop at the local shop for their breakfast.

Once at school commercial pressures on Catering Contractors in school leads to the sale of foods high in E numbers, fats and carbohydrates.

With many schools now starting earlier students have longer morning sessions with a resultant long wait for lunchtime. This can have two adverse effects with students snacking on inappropriate foods. This can affect their behaviour and make them sleepy. Too much fat intake can impair memory and concentration as it prevents the brain taking up glucose, possibly by interfering with the action of insulin, which helps regulate blood sugar levels. High fat diets cause a resistance to insulin.

Better dietary education is needed to guide students towards a healthy lifestyle. A move away from the commercial / profit based motives of the Catering Contractors would be helpful. Schools should introduce healthy options to their menus including wholegrain bread and fruit. Setting up breakfast clubs would also be helpful. A more even distribution of break times throughout the day would enable appropriate boosts to take place to the blood sugar levels of staff and students.

These moves would lead to a happier and more effective learning environment with less challenging behaviour and students maximising their learning potential in the classroom.

Article taken from:

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