Breakfast Clubs

A Yorkshire Based Review

FixOurFood

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Summary

The FixOurFood project aims to transform food systems to benefit population and planetary health, with a focus on regenerative farming, hybrid business models, early years and school settings (Doherty et al., 2022). It is made up of a consortium who are committed to learning, through a set of action-orientated interventions, one of which is prioritising dietary health in young people (Doherty et al., 2022). Key to this is a programme of research within school settings including primary schools with nurseries across Yorkshire. This report on school breakfast clubs is based on primary school observations within one of the FixOurFood projects, where researchers visit, observe and engage with staff and students through participatory research, leadership interviews and focus groups. It provides an understanding of how breakfast clubs are delivered, what sorts of foods are provided and the constraints and benefits of delivery.

Findings highlight the potential of breakfast clubs to provide a nutritious breakfast before the start of the school day, particularly for families who do not have the resources or the time to provide breakfast for their children. When delivered appropriately, they also provide opportunities to boost attainment and behaviour (Adolphus et al., 2013). Thus, the nutritional content of the foods provided is important. We learnt about the value of breakfast clubs to allow children to enjoy breakfast with their peers and create an environment with social and educational benefits. Importantly, through this work, our research highlights the importance of breakfast clubs to support working parents through the childcare provision.

What we did

These findings are based on data that have been collected from FixOurFood researchers during primary school observations across Yorkshire (n= 17 schools). Researchers conducted school food observations across the whole school day, including breakfast clubs, break and lunch.

Data were supported from both the interviews conducted with the school leadership (n= 17) and focus group discussions facilitated amongst group of children in each school.

CONNECTS-Food principles were applied as a framework for the data analysis (Bryant et al., 2023).

Data from all sources earlier mentioned were combined for the analysis and this report provides a summary of key findings.

What we found

1.0 School Food Provision

Breakfast clubs were available in most schools visited by the researchers and organised in the mornings before the start of lessons. A variety of foods were provided for children to make their choices; however, most schools had no breakfast menu design. On the whole, breakfast and drinks were offered to children, with the provision of a range of activities where possible. These created a nice atmosphere for the children and provided opportunities for interactions, which were important to allow children to kickstart their day happy and excited. The breakfast club providers were often external (private providers) with a few exceptions where schools handled the breakfast themselves. Some other schools had Magic Breakfast as providers.

1.1 Types/Options of foods

There was little variation observed in the food offered across the schools visited. Offers commonly included bagels, cheese sandwiches, toast, cereals, milk, spreads, jam and juice, with fresh fruits only available occasionally. Interactions with children further confirmed that fruits were not regularly offered. Very few schools offer hot foods (like beans and sausages) and these are only available either on certain days of the week, during colder months or as an occasional treat.

"*We do a cooked breakfast for our Year 6 for SATS Week. We call it SATS Breakfast Week, so they get bacon sandwiches one day, pancakes another, sausage sandwiches another and……. toast and beans or eggs and beans*" (School lead 5-Head Teacher).

What we found

One school however, noted that they have stopped providing hot meals due to certain constraints:

"*We used to provide spaghetti on toast, beans on toast, but due to the mass growth of numbers at breakfast club, we've got about 45 children attending today. We haven't got the facilities to be able to provide that. Breakfast club runs at a loss. It costs me more money than we get in*" (School Lead 1-Head Teacher).

In our interactions with children, we learnt that food options were sometimes not well understood. This may have influenced their choice/decision to eat or not:

"*Like, in breakfast club sometimes the options are on the wall in the kitchen, but most of the time you just don't know what they are*" (Child 6).

Water was not always provided during breakfast clubs and, if available, children were not always able to serve themselves. Children were mostly offered various types of juice, milk and milk shakes. Generally, schools were generous with how much food the children could eat and where necessary, adjustments were made on the availability of foods. This was particularly evident for those with special dietary requirements or allergies, who were always accommodated in breakfast clubs.

Other provisions were made to ensure children had breakfast before the start of schoolwork, independently of the presence of a formal club. For example, one school provided bagels in class to Key Stage 1 children in the morning (whether they attend breakfast club or not).

What we found

1.2 Quality of provision

Across the schools, the quality of food on offer was perceived to relate to availability and price, and was often dictated by providers rather than through school or child preferences:

"*It would be that it'll be the company itself called [Name 2] who run the Breakfast and After School and they'll provide the food themselves and they'll make a decision about*" (School lead 8-Head Teacher).

In cases where the breakfast club was handled by the school, the quality of provision was determined by resources available:

"*but I think that is more to do with availability and price rather than, sort of, choices on quality*" (School lead 2-Head Teacher).

Some school leads felt it was important to consider the nutritional quality of breakfast options:

"*we have a private company who comes in and do that, but they have to follow, as far as I'm aware, they have to follow our like food code of conduct standards*" (School lead 3-Deputy Head Teacher).

"*they're getting a healthy, well, they're getting a breakfast in the morning of a bagel, which is amazing, which is a better start to the day for most of our children*" (School lead 4-Head Teacher).

In situations where breakfast clubs and food provision were handled internally, food was often bought from the supermarkets, where meal planning was usually not factored in:

"*So yeah, I mean, that is much more under our control, but it is more snacky foods than it is, sort of, planning meals as such*" (School lead 2-Head Teacher).

Breakfast clubs that were provided internally (usually financed from the school budget) tended to be restricted to offering choices that were more likely based on cost rather than nutritional quality; often resulting in greater availability of snack style foods.

We perceived that children were commonly provided with what they would love to eat and to 'make them happy'. Notably, there were few cases where children were offered a treat during breakfast club, for instance, one school offered honey nut cereal occasionally as a '*treat*'.

Children are commonly offered the same breakfast options throughout the week: "*It's always the same*" (Child-1) with very few exceptions (e.g. where they might be offered a hot food over the winter season).

Fresh fruit was not regularly offered during breakfast clubs in most schools. This was due to various factors, including the fear it may not be consumed by the children. One of the school leads noted that they could not afford to buy fruits which may go to waste if not consumed. In addition most schools had a small amount of storage space for breakfast foods.

What we found

1.3 Access

In all the schools we visited, attendance at the breakfast club was not restrictive as it was open to all children. However, one school lead noted extending provisions to parents:

"*So breakfast club is available every day, it's available for any child or parent that needs it*" (School lead 5-Head Teacher).

The number of children attending varied across schools and most schools offered places free or subsidized for children on Free School Meals (FSM) or other government schemes and to any other child at a reduced cost. Some schools ran their breakfast club internally and parents were expected to pay, to support the wages of staff working at the club. In a few cases, schools subsidised costs to allow breakfasts to be offered to all children irrespective of FSM status.

2.0 Eating environment

The environment provided in most schools was largely dependent on the number of children, space, facilities available and the extent to which the breakfast club was integrated with other activities. Schools made use of varyious spaces such as the dining hall or school hall, while some had dedicated serving areas just for breakfast and after school club:

"*there is just a lot more space down in the bottom hall really*" (School lead 6-Head Teacher).

The children were either allowed to help themselves or served breakfast by the staff. Across all schools, children were provided with tables, chairs and crockery to eat. The eating environment was generally observed to be clean, though some schools had spaces that were more attractive and neater, and a few still needed improvements (for example, a crowded hall). Opportunities were often given for children to chat and play. The activities and interactions amongst children created avenues for them to socialise irrespective of age, also ensuring the atmosphere was lively. The environment was often focused on ensuring children were provided with a nice place to eat, creating a sense of belonging and allowing varying forms of activities. Some of the activities included games, reading books and drawing, all of which were supervised by the staff. Children always seemed to be happy and enjoyed the breakfast and activities provided for them.

What we found

2.1 Staff support

The staff in the breakfast clubs were very engaged with the children, creating a nice environment and were particularly supportive in encouraging the children to 'finish up their breakfast'. They supported the children by providing opportunities for them to play or chat and engaged them in games or activity sessions. The staff were equally sensitive to the time allocated for breakfast clubs and ensured that children had their meals and were not solely engrossed in play or other activities. This was evident in one school where the staff had a little bell signalling the last opportunity for children to eat up before lessons started.

3.0 Pastoral care

Several schools carefully considered disadvantaged families and provided opportunities for such children to be offered a free breakfast. Families were supported with food regardless of their eligibility for FSM, if they could not afford to pay. Where children had to pay, the cost was kept low in most schools visited to enable as many children as possible to access the breakfast club.

"*And if there are families that even £1 for that family would be too much, we do tell them just to bring their kids. We'd rather have their kids here*" (School lead 7-Head Teacher).

"*We only charge a pound for that for the sole purpose of keeping as many children in the building to eat to start the day as possible, which is really important for our context because a lot of children come without breakfast and food*" (School lead 1-Head Teacher).

There was a positive move to ensure the children have a better start in the morning:

"*Most of our children come to school hungry without having breakfast, or probably haven't eaten since five o'clock, so we want to make sure that they get that breakfast in the morning*" (School lead 4-Head Teacher).

In schools without a formal breakfast club, children were often supported with leftovers from afterschool clubs. This was to ensure children as much as possible had breakfast before the start of school lessons.

What we found

4.0 School policies and culture

Some schools encouraged children to bring in water bottles, which is considered positive and a way through which drinking of water can be fostered. The breakfast club also created an opportunity to instil positive culture in children.

An example of this was observed in a school where children helped to pack away chairs and tables after their breakfast. Another was observed where children were encouraged to wash up their own plates. Furthermore, children were always told to sit while taking breakfast as there were tendencies for them to run around.

Implications / learnings

- Breakfast club creates an opportunity for children to have a nutritious breakfast before school starts, especially those from families struggling financially or living with food insecurity. In addition, it supports parents who do not have the time to provide breakfast for their children.
- Breakfast club allows all children to start the day equally, with equal opportunities for learning (especially in instances where they are free or subsidized to those on FSM).
- Breakfast club provides children with a nutritious start to the day which has the potential to boost attainment and behaviour (Adolphus et al., 2013).
- The breakfast club provides an opportunity for children to have breakfast with their peers and creates an environment with social and educational benefits.
- Healthy lifestyles can be encouraged in schools through the nutritional foods provided at the breakfast club.
- Working parents are supported with childcare through the breakfast club.

Recommendations

- Children need to have visible access to water where they are able to serve themselves or be served by someone. This is an easy way to ensure they start their day hydrated.

- Breakfast clubs are promoted to ensure children get the best start to the day; we therefore recommend excluding the provision of fruit juices due to the high consumption of sugar. Where possible, only water and milk should be provided.

- We recommend that fruits should be offered alongside the foods provided at the breakfast club. Furthermore, children should be encouraged to eat the fruits.

- Schools should consider opting for low sugar based cereal options.

- Clear guidance regarding breakfast club foods should be made available to schools to ensure the provision of a healthy breakfast that adheres to nutritional guidance and school food standards. Where possible, schools should work with breakfast club suppliers to ensure quality is prioritised over quantity of choices.

- The breakfast club menu should be made available online, so children (and their parents) are aware of the provisions and where possible, given the opportunity to make their choices.

References

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