

**The thunderous
whisper that can
help keep control**

LES WALTON runs through the teacher's armoury that can quell the noisiest school dinner hall

A BIG issue over the next academic year will be free meals for school pupils.

From this month all Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 pupils in state-funded schools are automatically entitled to a free school meal.

The politicians are presently arguing about whether there are sufficient funds to provide the meals and the impact the new requirement will have on the attainment and daily educational routine of children.

Leaving aside the financial implications of this new measure it has always been my view that school lunchtimes are a critical part of a child's education.

In my second year of teaching I received a promotion point. One of my responsibilities was to organise the handing out of school milk at break times. Later I described this as the forerunner of 'pasteurised care'.

Each day bottles of milk were delivered to the school. All the 'big lads' in year 4 (year ten today) would meet me, guzzle a couple of bottles and then hand out the milk.

This served two purposes. The 'big lads' were well occupied at break and the health of the nation was safeguarded.

'Dinner time' was an important event. The pupils filed silently into the mobile classroom which served as a dining room. The meals had been previously delivered from the central kitchen.

In my previous school I had the responsibility to march the children from the school to the central kitchen, which served a number of schools in the area, and then march them back again.

The meals consisted of the classic first course of meat and dumplings, followed by either semolina or chocolate cake with pink custard - Roly Poly Pudding or Spotted Dick were reserved for special occasions.

We would then say grace before the meal. The Selkirk Grace by Robert Burns

"Some hae meat and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it;
But we hae meat, and we can eat,
Sae let the Lord be thankit."

In 1966 I took up my first teaching post in a secondary school. My induction was thorough to say the least, including 'dinner duty training'.

It was clear from the first day, that whilst I would have absolute freedom with regard to designing my



➤ Even more children will eat school meals this year

own curriculum within a broad framework, there were clear rules on how I and the children should behave.

The 'senior mistress' - now there's an interesting title - would never direct me on WHAT I should teach; nevertheless each morning she came into my classroom and measured the paragraph indentations of my pupils' stories. If they were more or less than quarter of an inch I was in big trouble. The senior maths teacher, who would follow the natural progression route of becoming a primary headteacher within a couple of years, was my dinner duty trainer.

At the beginning of lunch he simply stood in the middle of the mobile classroom that was the dining hall and glowered, staring at one child in particular. When the children stopped talking he turned to me and said 'that is first stage silence'.

He then continued to glower, staring intensely at all the children at the same time. He then asked me if I could hear the clock ticking and birds singing outside. "That's the achievement of dead silence, the one skill you need to know ... and that's what education is all about".

Later the 'PE Teacher', (umbrella and wellies required when supervising games) gave me another piece of advice. "If you can get them through the showers you can get them through life".

After the Newcastle riots in the 1990s I was asked by Sir John Stevens when he was Chief Constable of Northumbria Police, later Head of the Metropolitan Police Service, to speak to the annual police conference on how to manage discipline. When I walked onto the platform I faced hundreds of policemen who were wondering what on earth a teacher could teach them. A question most teachers are asked throughout their lives.

I believe there is a real skill in holding the attention of a hall full of young people at 9am in the morning.

It takes the combined expertise of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill, the Archbishop of Canterbury and all of the top comedians on British TV to run a really good assembly.

My personal role model was Dave Allen, the famous Irish comedian. I saw Dave in Greys Club, Newcastle in the 1970s. Comedians traditionally had 'attacked' audiences, trying to be louder than the noise coming from the audience. Dave 'whispered loudly' thus the audience had to make an effort to listen and engage. 'Loud whispering' became a core aspect of my assemblies.

I showed the police a slide of a policeman on a white horse controlling crowds at the 1923 Cup Final.

My caption read 'teachers don't need horses to control crowds'. I then spoke about achieving silence in dining halls by glowering and loud whispering.

I am not arguing for the return of silence in dining halls. The point I wish to make is that school meals should be more than simply providing young people with a balanced diet: they should be a positive social and educational experience.

Our children's health and well-being are dependent on our commitment to promoting food access and good eating habits at home, at school and in the community.

I once asked the chief school cook if she would arrange for flowers to be on the dining tables at lunch time, to 'enhance the social experience'. She looked at me as though I was mad, exclaiming: "Don't do it. They'll eat them - stalks and all!"

Jamie Oliver take note.

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