



WARWICKSHIRE

PARENT CARER VOICE

Pen Licences

Introduction

Through our work on the PINS (Partnerships for the Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools) Project we have been speaking with parent carers in some primary schools across Warwickshire. In some schools, parent carers shared their childrens' difficult experiences with 'pen licences'. As this theme was wider than just one school we asked parent carers from across Warwickshire for their experiences too and this report shares that feedback.

We recognise that some children will practice their handwriting more with the promise of a certificate and permission to write in pen, gaining pride when they succeed, however this is often not the case for many children with additional needs.

The use of a 'pen licence' system without any reasonable adjustments discriminates against children with a range of needs (including developmental coordination disorder (DCD) / Dyspraxia, hypermobility, dysgraphia and left-handedness) and children who take longer to achieve the required handwriting proficiency can be working just as hard, or even harder than their peers at their handwriting and presentation but not have this recognised.

Hierarchy

We have heard how 'pen licences' create a hierarchy in the classroom, with those who achieve their licences first being perceived as more skilled than those who have not - their work being displayed because it is the neatest not because it has the best content.

"Our son's work was never displayed on the wall at school. They choose neat or pen work only."

This can lead to feelings of resentment and unnecessary divisions between children encouraging exclusion instead of inclusion within the classroom.

"some kids get bullied because of it. It's great to praise kids but it is more pressure on them."

"My 7yo isn't likely to get a pen license either and his bully boy friend really rubbed it in his face."

Self-Esteem

The struggle to gain a 'pen licence' can significantly impact on their confidence and self-esteem as they see their classmates celebrated and promoted to pen use before them. It can be demoralising, demotivating and affect all areas of development. Whilst these children may be skilled in other areas, focusing on handwriting may not acknowledge this. A 'pen licence' system can create and reinforce feelings of failure and inadequacies.

"My son never got a pen licence. Poor fine motor skills meant he was only trusted with a pencil. He's 16 now and types fluently at college. He spent primary and year 7 believing he was inadequate because his fingers don't work like the other kids do."

"My son is in year 5 and still hasn't officially received his or been acknowledged like all his peers. There are multiple reasons sen kids may find this difficult. We had lots of tears and upset over these."

"it does nothing for self confidence if your writing isn't up to "standard"'"

Writing Tools

With the focus on handwriting the 'pen licence' can overshadow the importance of the writing itself. The tools given to a child when learning to write have an impact on how neat their handwriting can be, unlike pens - which write consistently until the ink runs out, pencils are inconsistent - they are sharp and then blunt, which makes it harder for a child to have consistent handwriting. Writing tools should be chosen to support the child and their individual needs. The correct pen can help to improve presentation.

"Son was advised by STS (report) to use stabilo easy grip pen. Senco and school declined initiating this as Son didn't have a pen license yet!!!"

Struggling to achieve a 'pen licence' can lead to a dislike, fear or even avoidance of writing for some children. If children are given the right tools, then they will improve their fluency, legibility and speed. They will maintain their confidence and feel a sense of achievement in their work. Teachers can work on handwriting skills, fluency, legibility and speed with the whole class by allowing every child to use their preferred writing tool.

"Stop making it a reward/requirement. What's the purpose? Schools should just be happy they're writing."

"My child who has no fine motor issues purposely started not joining her handwriting up so she wouldn't progress to a pen because she preferred her handwriting in pencil and liked that she could rub out her mistakes rather than having to put a line through the penned stuff. It caused some issues because school was insisting she moved to a pen, for me they focused on the wrong issue of

enforcing the pen 'just because ', instead of encouraging letter formation and spelling whether that be written in pencil, pen or highlighter why does it matter?!"

Preparation for the Future

Some children will never achieve their 'pen licence', and others will struggle to do so before they leave primary school. Secondary schools will expect all children to write in pen whether they have achieved a 'pen licence' or not. If a child does not receive a 'pen licence' and leaves primary school still writing in pencil then they have not been prepared or supported for secondary school.

"Every child should have experience of using a pen before starting secondary school."

"Kids go to senior school using a pen without a license."

Not getting a 'pen licence' is remembered long after children leave Primary School with many adults recounting to us the stories of how they "didn't get their pen licence" many decades later.

For many adults the world of work is now computer based so neat handwriting is not as important for your whole life. A focus on keyboard skills should be seen as just as important as handwriting for the current generation of primary school children, especially those who are struggling with getting their ideas down through writing and who will have the use of laptops or a scribe for exams.

Inconsistency / Reasonable Adjustments

Some parents reported that schools were inconsistent with issuing 'pen licences'. It was felt that if a school does use 'pen licences' then they should have a clear policy that is shared and followed consistently with reasonable adjustments in place for children with additional needs.

"If the school are adamant of a policy, draft a copy and share it. So everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet! Add a caveat for SEN pupils."

"Listen to professionals and over rule policy when advised... individualised basis."

Next Steps

We urge all schools to reflect on this feedback about some of the unintended impact 'pen licences' may be having on children in your school. We ask that you consider this feedback in relation to your writing policies and the use of 'pen licences' in your school.