

Does a talented wood worker always get the chance to become a great carpenter?

Esther Whitehead of the Dyslexia Foundation of NZ doesn't think so.

Removing Barriers to Trades

A young boy, whose father is a carpenter, grows up helping out with odd jobs on the weekends and seems to have an innate talent for envisioning the finished piece in 3D in his mind's eye. His hands work quickly and with great enthusiasm – the product seems to come directly from his mind. His friends and family witness his amazing talent and admire him for it. But school – where woodwork classes no longer exist – tells a very different story. For some reason, he just can't seem to learn in the same way as the rest of the children. He knows he's bright, as he has learned so much at home. School experiences label him as a failure and no matter how hard he tries, he seems to make little progress. He can't wait to leave school and become an apprentice in the construction industry.

Apprenticeship training provides access to rewarding and well-paid jobs that demand a high level of skill, judgment and creativity, yet we are seeing changes in the industry that may hinder those qualities in favour of higher literacy skills. The question that the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand (DFNZ) asks is: "Should practical, hands-on jobs – like those in the construction industry – need high levels of theory and literacy as part of the pre-requisite of learning the trade?"

The National Government believes that the apprenticeship changes will make a significant contribution towards meeting the Government's Better Public Services target of 55 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds gaining at least a Level 4 NZQF qualification. But this target potentially narrows the scope and opportunity for learning in the industry. Ironically, this may be to the detriment of acquiring the very skills that apprentices need to learn.

New Zealand schools are beginning to recognise dyslexia as a learning difference (that is, a *different way to learn*). The Dyslexia Foundation believes that schools are now becoming more aware that we do not have to disable these students by only offering one way to learn. By simply supporting students to work in a way that suits them, we can provide opportunities rather than take them away.

How can we empower our trade workforce to gain the skills and experience they need to succeed? In trades like carpentry and building we often see a lack of enthusiasm for literacy

and written material. Traditionally, construction trades have appealed to 'hands-on' people, who were less academically inclined, but could excel by working to their strengths and proving their skill in practical areas.

With the new legislation due to change apprenticeships and skills training, Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) are tightening skill standards. However, we have seen in our schools that standardisation of learning can narrow learning, it can diminish creativity and it offers advantages to those with high literacy skills rather than to students with higher-order thinking skills. We want to ensure that this does not happen in ITOs.

Part of the government initiative is to boost the educational content of apprenticeships. At a minimum they will require a programme of at least 120 credits that results in a level four qualification. Apprentices with the capability to think of original concepts and solutions (who, like the boy in our story, may have poor literacy) need to be offered avenues that can be measured diversely; not limited to standardised written theory.

If Trades are to continue to be a career step, we need to ensure that the industry

offers equitable access to school leavers who may have weaker literacy skills, English as a second language, dyslexia or other learning difficulties. These groups of students are often the casualties of our school system. We are now in danger of our ITOs failing these same students as school leavers. The likelihood of this group entering unemployment or, worse still, prison, is much higher if we only allow people one avenue to succeed – through academic qualifications.

Esther Whitehead is a Managing Trustee of The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand.

You can email your views to info@dfnz.co.nz

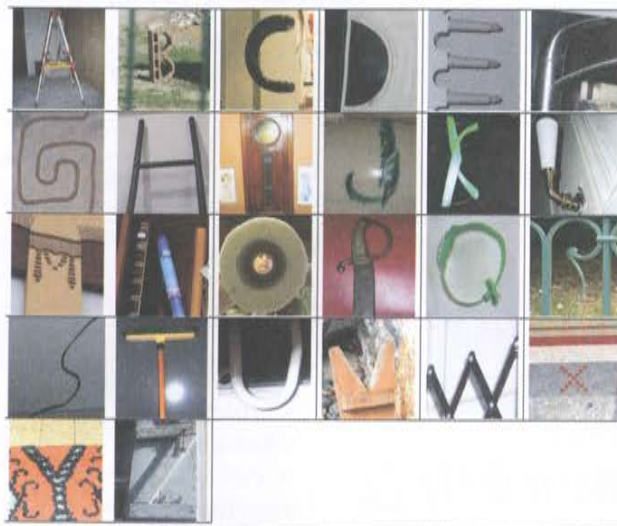


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