**First Year Apprentices’ experiences of workplace learning**

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**Abstract:**

This paper reports on a subset of the findings from an Ako Aotearoa National project conducted with first year apprentices, based in ten trades, from seven Industry Training Organisations (ITOs). The project sought to identify factors influencing apprentices' initial decisions to enter and commit to an indenture, along with factors contributing to continuation of apprenticeship past initial entry. To identify these factors, apprentices' perceptions of entry trajectory and initial workplace learning experiences were collected and analysed. The experiences of potential, continuing, and unsuccessful apprentices were compared.

Apprentices’ perceptions of their initial experiences in their first year of work are crucial to the formation of a sense of belongingness and engagement with workplace and occupational identity. As such, an understanding of apprentices’ initial experiences is important towards ensuring continual participation and completion of apprenticeship. The findings from this project have been used to prepare a brochure for prospective apprentices, to better inform potential apprentices of their career choice, their responsibilities as apprentices and their employers’ commitments to provide training opportunities and support.

**Introduction**

As with many developed countries, New Zealand has found it difficult to attract young people into trades-based occupations. Apprenticeship retention rates, especially prior to the advent of the modern apprenticeship coordinator scheme in 2001, have been challenging (Jeffcoat & Jeffcoat, 2006). Completion rates of modern apprentices and of young people who enrol in pre-trade full time programmes have been lower than the norm in post-school and tertiary education (“Many apprentices failing to finish”, 2007). A recent survey of modern apprenticeship completions indicates an average of 32% of apprentices completing in the fifth year of apprenticeship (Mahoney, 2009). Industry Training Organisations (ITOs – see next section for background on New Zealand ITOs) whose apprentices participated in the study reported in this paper, have completion rates (after five years) ranging from 10% to 71%. To date, there has been very little research into vocational education within New Zealand (Teaching and learning research initiative, 2008). Therefore, the project reported here, involved ITOs covering a range of apprenticeship structures/models (traineeship to traditional craft apprenticeship), apprentice profiles (gender, ethnicity and age ranges) and industries (traditional trades, land based, service sectors and technology-focused).

The main objective of the study was to understand why and how apprentices make decisions to embark on an apprenticeship; the support factors that assist these apprentices at the beginning of indenture; and the on-going support factors these apprentices perceived would be helpful towards completion of trade qualifications.

This paper firstly provides a brief overview of the New Zealand apprenticeship context. Relevant literature sources regarding vocational choice and workplace learning is introduced. The research method, findings relating to first year apprentices’ entry into and experiences of workplace learning and discussion/implications are then presented.

**Apprenticeships and the role of ITOs in New Zealand**

In New Zealand, records indicate the presence of formalised apprenticeship arrangements since the 1890s (Murray, 2001). In 1992, the Industry Training Act rationalised the apprenticeship system. In part, this Act replaced previous legislation governing vocational training and apprenticeships. Industry Training Organisations, (ITOs) were set up by various industries, with representatives of employers, employees and firms with stakeholder interests, and from education and training providers, industry associations, trade unions and government departments. Currently, there are 34 ITOs. These cover a range of industry ‘sectors’ and can be categorised as primary, manufacturing, infrastructure services, and government and community services. The three core roles of ITOs are to:

1. provide information about industry skill demand thereby increasing the real power of students, employers and industry, and to inform providers
2. define national skill standards and qualifications required by industry to ensure the value and relevance of investment in education and training
3. broker training to meet the needs of employees in industry by linking individual workplace learning to national industry skill needs (Industry Training Federation, 2011).

The project reported here undertook a study of the first year apprentice experience within various industries engaged with apprenticeship training. Therefore, the ITOs participating in this project include industries from four sectors that have a history of apprentice training. These sectors are:

* Infrastructure: Building and Construction ITO (BCITO)
* Manufacturing: NZ Marine ITO (formerly the Boating ITO) supporting the boatbuilding industry; Competenz covering engineering and food and beverage manufacturing; and Joinery ITO (JITO)
* Primary: Agriculture ITO
* Services: Hairdressing ITO (HITO); Hospitality Standards Institute (HSI) supporting catering and food and beverage services.

Participating apprentices were from ten trades, including dairy farm trainees, building and construction, boat building, engineering (fabrication and fitting/turning), joinery, glazing, hairdressing, cookery and front of house services.

**Literature foundation**

*Vocational choice*

Vocational imagination is defined as “imagining oneself in a career pathway, with some specificity about what that might involve in terms of education qualifications and occupational possibilities” (Higgins, Nairn & Sligo, 2010, p. 14). Occupational choice may be based on individuals’ self-perceived affinities to aspects of each trade, perhaps derived from prior leisure (Hong, Milgram & Whiston, 1993) and/or school or part-time work engagement with the occupation (Smith & Green, 2001; Taylor and Watt-Malcolm, 2007).

Career choices may also be evaluative and strategic or based on meeting unclear aspirations or opportunistic/unplanned situations (Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes, 2008). Ascertaining decision choice is therefore an important starting point towards understanding apprentices’ perspectives of work.

*The nature of workplace learning*

As an environment for learning, workplaces have many inherent challenges. These include challenges for both for the learner and the workplace (Billett, 2001; Moses, 2010); workplace learning as often reliant on a covert curriculum (Billett, 2006); and workplace learning as based on maxims (Farrar, 2008), the acquisition of tacit knowledge (Gamble, 2001) and processes of vocational identity formation (Billett 2006; Chan, 2008). The effectiveness of workplace learning (Billett, 2006) and vocational identity formation within a sociocultural framework (Billett, 2006) is reliant on personal agency on the part of the individual and contributions of support from the communities of practice (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995) within which apprenticeships are enacted (Chan, 2008). Apprentices may be classified as novice learners. As such, there are differences between the needs of novice and experienced workers (Cornford & Beven, 1999; Smith, 2003) and for novices who move from a formal learning environment into the workplace (Dahlgren et al., 2005).

*Workplace learning and apprentices*

Australian research (National Centre of Vocational Education Research (NCVER), 2003) identifies pre-requisites for good workplace training as (a) workplaces increasing innovative capacity; (b) organisational cultures which support and value training and learning; (c) a training and learning culture which is part of normal business, valued in its various forms, and customised to individuals; and (d) networks, partnerships and supply chains are used to facilitate training. Additionally, quality relationships must be forged between employers, apprentices and providers to support the conduct of good workplace training (Schofield, 2001). All parties are required to work together to ensure shared understandings about expectations, roles and responsibilities. These factors are also reported in a smaller New Zealand survey (Curson, 2004). Other influences on workplace learning may be the: (a) supervisor (Hughes, 2004); (b) manager (Eraut, Alderton, Cole & Senker, 2002); (c) enthusiasm, standards, knowledge, attitudinal values and skills of workplace-based mentors (Evanciew & Rojewski, 1999); and (d) contributions of institutional and workplace learning environments (Harris et al., 2001). In a paper exploring the different approaches people use to engage in workplace-based teaching and learning (Unwin et al., 2005), emphasis is placed on workplace-relationship practices that affect workplace learning. These include: (a) organisation of the work; (b) level of employee involvement; (c) organisational performance; and (d) economic, regulatory and social context within which organisations operate. Therefore, workplaces play important contributing roles in young peoples’ induction into a trade.

*Belonging to a workplace*

Learning a trade may be viewed as a form of acculturation into an existing practice community. It may bring together social influences and individual agency leading to the formation of vocational identity (Hodkinson, Biesta & James, 2008). In learning a trade, young peoples’ perspectives on work and learning over the course of apprenticeship, may be influenced by their initial experiences and induction. In the longer term, workplace practices may contribute to individuals’ construction of identities and their roles in society (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). For first-year apprentices, the need to establish either a sense of ‘belonging’ to a workplace (Chan, 2009) or an affinity to a trade’s culture of practice (Gherardi, 2010) may be pre-requisites to establishing vocational identity as trade workers (Chan, 2009). It is therefore important to determine the processes apprentices use, and to explore their commitment and how they adapt to work.

**Research Method**

A qualitative case study research approach underpinned by constructivist-interpretative research paradigms was used. This research approach matches the overall intent of the project which was not to just assemble information on apprentices but to understand in greater depth, the perspectives of apprentices as they are enacted within an indenture. The three research questions directing the project discussed in this paper are:

* 1. What factors influence young people to enter a trade and, in particular, what factors influence apprentices’ selective decisions to indenture and continue in a specific trade?
  2. What are the initial induction factors that support (or impede) apprentices settling and continuing in a trade in the first year of their indenture?
  3. What mechanisms, support and personal agency factors might assist young people towards full engagement in belonging to a workplace and eventually becoming trades-people?

The research methodology involved data collection using focus groups, semi-structured interviews and document collection. Each ITO facilitated the organisation of a focus group meeting with between fifteen to twenty first year apprentices in their respective industries and provided contacts for training providers of pre-trade programmes. Focus group meetings of first-year apprentice and pre-trade students were used to establish interim data on participants’ perceptions of occupational choice and apprenticeship expectations. A sub-group of apprentices were invited to take part in individual interviews. These interviews provided in-depth data on specific apprentice perspectives of the beginning stages of the indenture including indicators of their personal agency (resilience, motivations), engagement with the trade and intentions to continue (or withdraw) from the indenture. ITOs also provided contact details for apprentices who had disengaged during the first year of apprenticeship. These apprentices were interviewed through telephone to find out about their apprenticeship experiences and factors that contributed to withdrawal. Documents relating to information provided to apprentices and employers before and after formal indenture were provided by each individual ITO. These were analysed for commonalities and variations. During the interviews, apprentices were interviewed about their perceptions on the documents availed to them before and during their induction. Apprentice perceptions on the efficacy of these documents were also explored in both focus groups and individual interviews.

Data obtained from focus groups, structured interviews and collected documents were analysed separately. The various data sources were then collated into narratives. Analysis of the narrative data focused on comparisons of cases. The cases form the basis from which comparisons using within-case analysis and the congruence method (George & Bennett, 2005) were made to find out factors which support or inhibit the entry and continuance of young people in trade apprenticeships. Apprentices’ induction experiences and how prior information provided by ITOs on the trade matched or did not match their experiences of indenture were also investigated.

*Participants*

In total, there were 251 research participants. These included:

* 116 pre-trade students in focus group meetings
* 86 first-year apprentices in focus group meetings
* 56 of the above apprentices were also interviewed either face to face or through telephone interviews in mid-2010
* At the beginning of 2011, 10 months after initial interviews, any of these 56 apprentices who had subsequently discontinued were re-interviewed through telephone interviews
* 34 apprentices who had discontinued their apprenticeship at the beginning of 2010 were also interviewed by telephone.

**Findings**

To illustrate the themes discussed in the next section, three narratives collated from the information provided via interviews and survey questionnaires are provided. The first narrative provides indication of the strength of ‘vocational imagination’ (Higgins et al., 2010) found in the majority of the participating apprentices. Here, Lily provides an example of the determination displayed by apprentices in sought after trades exampled by boat building, cookery, building and hairdressing to obtain a position.

***Case study: Lily – apprentice hairdresser – persistence with obtaining an apprenticeship***

*Lily completed National Certificate in Educational Attainment (NCEA) level 1 and left school at the beginning of Year 12. In common with many other hairdressing apprentices, Lily worked in several salons before finally obtaining an apprenticeship. She also worked part-time while still in school at the ‘local’/neighbourhood salon.*

*“I have always wanted to do hairdressing. I think I have very much to offer to the industry. I think I am very much a people person, I am very much into hair and I enjoy talking to people all day. Yes. Always, there was never a plan B.”*

*“If you are looking for an apprenticeship, you really gotta put yourself out there and if you are not getting anywhere, you gotta ask. Don’t just expect it to be handed to you. You really gotta work for it.”*

*Lily works in a small salon, well-recognised for quality work. She is progressing well in her training and happy with the workplace opportunities provided.*

*“I have training usually at least once a week; generally my boss, who will take me through training and show me what I need to do.”*

*Despite the Christchurch February earthquake damaging the premises of her salon, Lily is still engaged in her apprenticeship as the salon has managed to shift to alternative premises.*

In this second narrative, the need for the apprentice to realise his ‘vocational imagination’ (Higgins et al., 2010) leads to eventual dis-engagement with the workplace but on-going commitment to the trade. 75% of the discontinued apprentices persisted with involvement in their chosen trade. These apprentices had either moved on to another workplace, embarked on full-time training programmes or were working in a related trade but still looking for a position in their trade of choice.

***Case study: Nathan– apprentice engineer – discontinued – an example of mismatch between what an apprentice perceives needs to be learnt and the learning offered at the workplace***

*Nathan completed University Entrance (the equivalent of NCEA level 3) several years ago. He worked in a series of engineering related occupations and studied for some years at university before obtaining an apprenticeship through an apprenticeship company.*

*“There is a company called [ ] who look after apprentices. I have been doing the apprenticeship for a year and it got to a point where I thought to myself, if this doesn’t change, then I am going to leave.”*

*Nathan found he was not obtaining any training at all and that the tasks he undertook had nothing to do with learning to become an engineer.*

*“The actual crux of the thing, with the company I was with, had me involved in just labouring tasks. Not related to engineering whatsoever, so like a bun boy. And that is understandable as an apprentice, you get a bit of that. For a year or so it’s alright and then it’s time to learn a bit more.”*

*He perceived that he had little support from with the apprenticeship or engineering company. Therefore, Nathan decided to terminate his apprenticeship. Currently, Nathan is working for a work agency that places workers into engineering-related jobs.*

Below, the third narrative illustrates an apprentice’s strong motivations to become a chef. Despite challenges with his first workplace, Tony perseveres with his ambition by moving to another workplace. He has carefully selected the second workplace to ensure he obtains the training he perceives is required to fulfil his occupational choice. This narrative also examples the long hours of work required by some occupations. Other trades studied in this project with long work hours include dairy farming, hairdressing and front of house hospitality service.

***Case study: Tony– apprentice chef – persevering in an apprenticeship despite poor workplace support***

*Tony left school at the end of Year 12 after completing NCEA level 1. He has always been interested in cooking.*

*“I didn’t do too well at school and the only subjects I really liked was PE and cookery. I had a really good cookery teacher and she got my interest into chefing and it kind of just picked up from there.”*

*He completed a full-time level 2 cookery course and then started work as a dishwasher in a hotel. His mother knew the owner of his first workplace, a fine dining restaurant. He was able to obtain an apprenticeship after working there as a dishwasher for 3 months. As an apprentice chef, he started work at 11 am, but at least 1 day a week, he commenced work earlier, at 9.30 am. His workday did not usually finish until after midnight. He worked Tuesday to Sunday with a day off on Monday and another rostered day off every fortnight.*

*During the interviews, Tony revealed he had to fall back on the training he had completed during his full-time course as he was not receiving sufficient training.*

*“I have to say no, unfortunately. There are quite a few reasons but I would probably say, the biggest one at the moment is our business is going under and there is a lot of pressure. I would also say lack of communication between the owners and the head chef.”*

*When contacted almost a year later, Tony was still working in the trade but at a different restaurant.*

**Discussion**

*Tempering vocational imagination*

The participating pre-trade students and apprentices portrayed a strong sense of ‘vocational imagination’ (Higgins et al., 2010). However, for some apprentices who decided to discontinue, there was a mismatch between what they envisaged would be learnt in the workplace and what occurred in reality. Specifically, apprentices were sensitive to access to training. If the training provided did not lead apprentices towards attaining their vocational goals, they were more likely to dis-engage and explore alternatives.

A survey of the information provided to potential apprentices, through a comparison of ITO websites and the Careers Rapuara website, reveals career information from these sources as having a marketing focus. Narratives of successful apprentices were used on many ITO websites to provide information on the positives aspects of an apprenticeship. On some websites, the disadvantages of an occupation exampled by long hours of work are provided. However, the portrayal of advantages far outweighed the reporting of work realities. In order to moderate the strong “vocational imagination” of aspiring apprentices, it is perhaps important to provide an opportunity for industry outsiders and potential apprentices, to evaluate occupations from more balanced descriptions.

*Role of workplace relationships*

Many of the apprentices interviewed reported examples of adjustment of behaviours and beliefs to accommodate workplace relationship requirements. This is the case with apprentices who work in very small workplaces. As supporting ITOs and modern apprenticeship coordinators often cover large geographical areas and may not always be accessible, phone assistance should be provided promptly from within ITO regional or national office structures. In summary, support from employers, family, ITOs, and training providers is crucial for apprentices’ resilience. Prompt and relevant support may prevent apprentices discontinuing an apprenticeship.

### *Need for workplace support*

Concurrently with apprentices’ recognition of the need to maintain good workplace relationships with co-workers, peers and supervisors, there is the need for workplaces to be more conversant with the learning of novice workers. As detailed above in the short literature foundation, novice workers often need more time to become acquainted with specialised workplace practices and expectations. Additionally, as reported by Vaughan et al. (2011) workplace trainers are supported as a group of professional practitioners. Therefore provision of training opportunities for workplace trainers may improve deployment of workplace learning opportunities for workplace learners. Consequently, importance needs to be placed on helping workplace trainers become not only effective assessors, but better trainers.

*Setting goals and objectives aligned with vocational imagination*

It is important for goals and objectives of indenture to be couched in terms of becoming a trade worker and not solely based on completion of competency standards. An example of applying the precepts of ‘learning as becoming’ is to use the ‘old’ pre-competency era designation of apprentices as junior/first-year, intermediate/second-year and senior/third-year and beyond. This establishes attainable goals, often observable through the workplace tasks apprentices are assigned. Progress forward may be measured by apprentices moving through skill acquisition, as recognised by their ability to undertake more complex tasks and transition into becoming independent workers, rather than mere completion of competency standards. Validation of skills by workplace assessors/trainers/peers and through documentation of work completed over the course of each year of apprenticeship may provide a more holistic recognition of apprentices’ progression from novice to trade worker. A structured process for validation of workplace-based skill attainment and application, supplemented by methods to quantify ‘underpinning’ knowledge, is a step beyond current reliance on competency-based approaches; a proviso is that implementation of the recommendation in this section, will, as noted in the section above, require capable/knowledgeable workplace trainers.

### *Assisting the formation of vocational identity*

There is a need to help apprentices acquire a vocational identity that is compatible with their vocational imagination, or to help adjust vocational imagination to account for realities of work. The literature provides several recommendations. Firstly to assist potential apprentices with clarifying occupational goals by having them answer the question ‘who do I want to be?’ rather than focus on the question ‘what do I want to do?’ (Higgins et al., 2010) Secondly to leverage on opportunities availed through workplace attachment/experiences while still at school by ensuring students are provided with structures to reflect on workplace experiences. In particular, have structured guided sessions to understand better the advantages and disadvantages of entry into work, workplace learning possibilities and post-school options (Billett & Ovens, 2007) Thirdly to match perceived strengths to envisaged occupational goals (Vaughan et al., 2006) through guided activities provided at school, career fairs or through ITO information and websites.

**Conclusion**

The themes presented and discussed in this paper offer a ‘snapshot’ view on how some apprentices in New Zealand choose to enter into a trade occupation, and their perspectives of initial induction into work and workplace learning. Recognising the situated socio-cultural context, the project here is therefore an effort to assist potential apprentices to affirm career choice, leading to positive engagement with the task of attaining skills, knowledge and dispositions. In doing, apprentices not only learn a trade, but also transform into skilled trade workers, with clear occupational identities.

**Acknowledgements:** This project was funded by Ako Aotearoa National project funding. A copy of the full report can be downloaded from <http://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/ako-aotearoa/ako-aotearoa/resources/pages/belonging-becoming-and-being-first-year-apprentices-experiences-workplace>

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