

# 1 **Challenges facing a Māori Prison Education Leader**

## 5 **Abstract**

6 Māori are severely over-represented in the prison population of Aotearoa New Zealand, making  
7 up over half of all prisoners, despite being only about 15 percent of the national population.  
8 These Māori statistics are well-known, and support racist perceptions of Māori in general.  
9 There is substantial literature on Māori imprisonment in Criminology and related fields, but it  
10 mostly focuses on ‘fixing’ the prisoner. Prison education is a neglected topic in extant  
11 educational research. Little research exists on the experiences of those who work in prisons,  
12 and little or none about the experiences of Māori prison educators. Prison education focuses on  
13 changing behaviours that lead to offending and helping prisoners to gain work and life skills.  
14 But security concerns and managing the prison population take precedence and restrict the  
15 availability and priority given to education. The recent Hōkai Rangi strategy has generated  
16 enthusiasm, but has yet to translate into positive results.

## 18 **Keywords**

19 Agnotology, Cultural programmes in prisons, Hōkai Rangi policy, Kaupapa Māori, Prison  
20 education

## 22 **Introduction**

23 Education within prison walls is a complex topic that reflects overlapping layers of history,  
24 culture, belief systems and politics, erected from the minds and hearts of the people that fill  
25 such a space. Drawing on the literature and informed by experience, this article highlights and  
26 theorises the challenges in the everyday work of a Māori prison educator. Prison education  
27 receives almost no attention from educational researchers, and there is little if any prior  
28 research published on the work of Māori prison educators. The single extended reference on  
29 the use of Māori culture in prisons is the doctoral study by Riki Mihaere (2015), which is leaned  
30 on in the section (below) on Māori culture in prison education. A second key source is also co-

31 authored by Mihaere (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018) in which the concept of *agnotology* or  
32 managed ignorance is applied to the context of high Māori imprisonment.

33

34 Opening and closing the article are two autoethnographic sections by the first author, NAME,  
35 whose experience of being a Māori prison educator motivates the work overall, and given the  
36 sparseness of research on the topic, infills the literature-based sections, the first of which  
37 delineates what prison education means. The second section introduces the concept of  
38 agnotology to examine how Māori imprisonment has been normalised in the national  
39 imaginary. Next comes a description of education provided for prisoners in Aotearoa New  
40 Zealand, followed by a synopsis of how Māori culture has been included in prison education  
41 over the years. The final section sums up the expectations placed on a Māori prison educator.

42

### 43 **Opening statement: NAME**

44 Growing up in the small rural town of Te Puke in the Bay of Plenty, all the ‘naughty’ kids at  
45 the back of the class were my whānau (extended family and its members). I spent years  
46 watching them get growled at and given no one-to-one teaching time. They regularly got kicked  
47 out of class, placed on detention, and told they were useless.

48

49 But at home on the pā (Māori community), things were different. There was no place where  
50 the naughty kids sat. To our elders we were all naughty, but we were all loved, and we belonged  
51 to everyone. The dynamics were different from school. Everyone, including the children, had  
52 a job and a purpose. The people washing dishes and peeling potatoes were just as valued as the  
53 elders giving speeches. We worked as a unit, and everyone pitched in. We were all important.  
54 That’s why I could never separate myself from those my teachers called ‘the naughty ones’.  
55 We were part of one whole. Our families reminded us we come from the same whenua (lands)  
56 and bloodlines. So it was our duty as a Māori family to take care of each other.

57

58 The local gangs were always recruiting and would usually pick up ‘the lost ones’ if they hadn’t  
59 already. How could these lost souls say ‘no’ to a family who accepted the worst parts of them?  
60 But for most of these whānau, the gang patches and red bandanas they donned were inherited.  
61 In our small town there aren’t many opportunities for work. Locals don’t usually get hired  
62 because migrant workers are cheaper and don’t complain. What did pay well was selling drugs.  
63 So eventually I went on to watch some of my whānau get arrested.

64

65 Fast forward twelve years and I was an established Community Youth Worker and Teacher. I  
66 was working with poverty-stricken families and hard-to-reach teenagers from across South  
67 Auckland. My youth, knowledge in sport and health, and sister-like relatability made me an  
68 attractive candidate for health-related roles in Māori organisations, and I jumped at every  
69 opportunity. When I accepted a position as Education Tutor in a men’s prison, I knew it would  
70 be demanding, guessing it might be my toughest gig yet. And I was right, but not for the reasons  
71 I initially thought it would be.

72

### 73 **Definitions of prison education**

74 This article investigates aspects of prison education in Aotearoa New Zealand, so it is important  
75 to consider what is meant by ‘education’ and ‘prison education’ in this country (Devine, 2010).  
76 Education is a contested idea. Aristotle said that “educating the mind without educating the  
77 heart is no education at all” – stressing that true education develops good morals and human  
78 character alongside the intellectual mind. Nelson Mandela stated that “education is the most  
79 powerful weapon you can use to change the world” – education is a tool that should be used to  
80 remove inequality and foster peace. Yet such positive assessments must be weighed against the  
81 fact that schooling has also been one of the most successful vehicles for assimilating the Māori  
82 ‘other’ to colonising Pākehā/British norms.

83

84 Education in the prison world differs from how the rest of society understands it. Prison culture  
85 has its own norms and etiquette. The prison *learning* culture also has its own nuances. It holds  
86 intersecting and competing principles, such as ‘education is a privilege’ versus ‘education is a  
87 right’; or ‘culture is a solution to offending’ versus ‘culture is the reason for offending’.  
88 Opposing positions of inmates, staff, and prison authorities make prison education a  
89 contentious space. Education within prison walls is an intercultural phenomenon, mixing  
90 teaching culture, prison culture and the political rhetoric of society on the outside (Wright,  
91 2005).

92

93 Two levels of meaning of the term ‘prison education’ are distinguished below; these processes  
94 operate during the term of the individual prisoner to contribute to their personal trajectory of  
95 experience and emotional impact. First, when a person arrives in the prison environment, a  
96 form of ‘prison education’ comes into play, which is commonly known as ‘prison life’—a

97 reference to the need for the prisoner to rapidly develop skills and strategies to help them  
98 survive their incarceration, within the micro-level norms and power dynamics at play in their  
99 particular prison milieu. The (re-)acculturation process begins (Andrae et al., 2017). There are  
100 hierarchical dynamics between the staff and the prisoners, and amongst the prisoners  
101 themselves. The tenuous relationships compel disingenuous behaviours in order for inmates to  
102 manage power struggles as much as possible. Prisoners quickly learn that surviving prison  
103 requires foresight, tact and discipline.

104

105 The second level of the term ‘prison education’ refers to the formal systems and programmes  
106 of education provided for prisoners; its official meaning. The New Zealand Department of  
107 Corrections bases its definition of education in prisons on what is outlined as the minimum  
108 entitlements to education for prisoners in the Corrections Act, 2004 (New Zealand Legislation).  
109 The Act states “a prisoner is entitled to access to further education that, in the opinion of the  
110 prison manager, will assist in (i) his or her rehabilitation, or (ii) a reduction in his or her  
111 reoffending, or (iii) his or her reintegration in to the community” (Corrections Act, 2004). The  
112 Crown is not required to provide a prisoner with any of the education mentioned “unless (a)  
113 there is an entitlement to receive that education free of charge” or “(b) the education is (i)  
114 provided to a prisoner with poor literacy skills; and (ii) designed to improve those skills”  
115 (Corrections Act, 2004). The Department of Corrections aligns its approach to education with  
116 the legal minimum entitlements, offering a narrow window of information and access to  
117 knowledge and learning for inmates.

118

119 The prison population is so heavily weighted towards Māori men and women that prison  
120 education can also be considered a form of Māori education. The penultimate section below  
121 considers how Māori cultural knowledge has been incorporated into formal programmes of  
122 prisoner education. The Department of Corrections takes the stance that applying Māori  
123 cultural frameworks to all programmes ensures the Māori perspective is considered, thereby  
124 being more responsive to Māori learners. This policy is intended to give the prisoner a stronger  
125 sense of cultural identity, translating to positive behaviour change and reducing the probability  
126 of re-offending (Campbell, 2016). Today, prison in Aotearoa New Zealand is a space where  
127 Māori wrestle with the government over Māori culture. The image of the prison population as  
128 being predominantly Māori supports residual racist beliefs to the effect that Māori are  
129 inherently at risk of becoming criminals.

130

131 **Agnotology: Normalising Māori imprisonment, pathologizing Māori**

132 Agnotology is succinctly defined as “managed ignorance” (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018, p. 114),  
133 a process involving social amnesia and propaganda that is intimately tied up with power  
134 relations in society; in this case, the power relations between Māori and Pākehā in Aotearoa  
135 New Zealand. Agnotology is useful in understanding the workings of national discourses  
136 relating to Māori imprisonment (Proctor, 2008). Originating in colonialism, and retained in a  
137 small but influential set of anti-Māori fallacies and blindspots, agnotology plays an important  
138 role in *normalising* Māori crime and imprisonment in social discourse in Aotearoa New  
139 Zealand. The concept of normalising Māori imprisonment also concomitantly means the  
140 pathologisation of Māori: two sides of the same conceptual coin.

141

142 Agnotology in relation to Māori crime and incarceration has “deep roots that cut across  
143 multiple sites of power” (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018, p. 114):

144

145 Colonisation has always depended on the construction of ignorance - about the  
146 culture, language, beliefs and being of the ‘Other’ - and the situation within New  
147 Zealand has been no different. The colonial history of violence, suppression and  
148 incarceration of Māori by Pākehā settlers remains largely ignored, and the impact  
149 of neo-colonial harms is, in partial consequence, neutralised. The ‘success’ of  
150 colonial power is such that the over-representation of Māori as prisoners is now  
151 regarded as a normalised, inevitable feature of life. (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018, p.  
152 114)

153

154 Māori incarceration rates have been significantly higher than non-Māori as far back as records  
155 show. Māori constitute about half of the incarcerated population at any one time, while only  
156 about 15% of the national population - an enormous level of over-representation (Tauri &  
157 Morris, 1997). During the early phases of the post-1852 settler government, Māori were  
158 arrested as part of a subjugation process to help emerging colonial political structures assert  
159 their dominance (Rumbles, 2011). Legislation facilitated over-policing of Māori to create an  
160 orderly society that reflected colonial aspirations. Prisons operated to quell pockets of  
161 resistance among iwi, and worked to develop a national identity among Pākehā. The policing  
162 and imprisonment of Māori helped the Crown build confidence among Pākehā settlers, as it

163 affirmed state control, in an example of “social control and containment of ‘problem’  
164 populations” (Andrae, McIntosh & Coster, 2016, p. 2).

165

166 The 1960 Hunn report, commissioned by the Department of Māori Affairs, was one of the  
167 earliest studies of criminal justice statistics for Māori (Webb, 2013), The Hunn report stated  
168 that Māori people would be better off conforming to a Pākehā or ‘modern’ way of life, wherein  
169 modernity equals progress (Bishop, 2005). It emphasised Pākehā norms and values as superior,  
170 and advocated that Māori would need to shed their culture and adjust to Pākehā modern life in  
171 order to advance. While the report acknowledged that colonialism ravaged Māori society, it  
172 omitted any reference to its devastating impact on Māori people. In accordance with Western  
173 views, Hunn individualized Māori offending, disregarding social contexts or constructs in  
174 seeking explanations for criminality.

175

176 Mass media in the modern age has been another institutional force that reinforces negative  
177 stereotypes about Māori and reproduces divisive rhetoric (Moewaka Barnes et al., 2013). The  
178 constant portrayal of Māori as violent, criminals, protestors and child abusers reiterates long-  
179 held stereotypes, which are used to justify and naturalize overt racial discrimination towards  
180 Māori (Gregory et al., 2011). Most of the knowledge Pākehā have of Māori culture comes from  
181 indirect channels such as the media, making it a powerful purveyor of these stereotypes. Moana  
182 Jackson (1987) goes further, stating that media reiterates the shortcomings of Māori,  
183 contributing to a negative self-image held by many individual Māori people. When systems go  
184 unchallenged, deficit views can endure (Henderson, 2013). It was not until 2020, after 160  
185 years and an internal review, that the largest New Zealand media outlet Stuff made its first  
186 public acknowledgement and apology for their biased, unfair portrayal of Māori people, a  
187 monoculturalist journalism approach, and ignoring the voices of Māori (Shimmin, 2020).

188

189 Agnotology as strategic ignorance is an insidious ‘process of forgetting’ that misleads public  
190 perceptions and perpetuates neo-colonialism. Moreover, it diverts attention away from  
191 political, economic, social and cultural inequalities and their role in Māori incarceration.

192

193 National state agencies have defended imprisonment of Māori as the inevitable result of their  
194 pathological and socio-cultural deficits (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018). The Hunn Report portrayed  
195 Māori offending and inability to adapt to Pākehā law and society as resulting from inherent  
196 flaws in Māori culture. This deficit narrative has defined the Māori offender ‘as an urban misfit,

197 a cultural maladept, an educational retard' (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018, p. 121). The commonly-  
198 held belief that Māori are inheritors of the 'warrior gene' further contributes to the  
199 pathologizing of Māori. This myth claims that the stresses of war and ocean exploration created  
200 a 'warrior' society. Consequently, so the myth holds, Māori inherited behavioural disorders  
201 including propensity towards crime, violence, risky behaviour and aggression. The claim is  
202 disputed by Gary Raumatī Hook:

203

204       There is no evidence to indicate that the behavioural characteristics of Māori as a  
205       people are in any way unusual. Māori are not borderline psychotics, retarded,  
206       hyper-aggressive, depressive, antisocial, impulsive, suicidal risk takers, and to  
207       suggest otherwise is irresponsible and not supported by the facts. An explanation  
208       for the high conviction rates of Māori for violent crimes is to be found not in his  
209       nature but elsewhere perhaps such as in his victimhood arising out of 160 years of  
210       colonization, or in how the justice system deals with people whom most of its  
211       Eurocentric white administrators perceive as being excessively violent. (Hook,  
212       2009, p. 7)

213

214 The consistent pathological representations of Māori people by the state reinforce the narrative  
215 that Māori offending results from their "inability to cope in the modern world because of  
216 inherent flaws in their character or culture" (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018, p. 121). Agnotology in  
217 relation to Māori is referred to as a "socially constructed silence [in which] nobody is prepared  
218 to talk" about racism and structural discrimination against Māori (Workman, 2016, p. 100).  
219 These narratives maintain the belief that Māori prisoners need to be 'fixed' that in turn affects  
220 how education is provided for prisoners (Devine, 2010).

221

## 222 **Education for prisoners in Aotearoa New Zealand**

223 Prison life has its own set of physical and mental lessons for inmates. Prison is an environment  
224 where the incarcerated learn to navigate dangerous power struggles, manage treacherous social  
225 dynamics, and survive within oppressive systems and rules (Novek, 2019). There is a normally  
226 unquestioned chain of command embedded in the policies, procedures and practices of prison  
227 staff. The prison system has an culture of white superiority and an entrenched ethos of 'Māori  
228 bad, Pākehā good' so that even Māori staff become involved in discriminatory treatment in  
229 order to fit into the culture of the institution (Brittain & Tuffin, 2017). Prison organisational

230 cultures are authoritarian in nature, so survival depends on the ability to be obedient and  
231 unquestioning of authority (Novek, 2019). Inmates learn to be manipulative and train  
232 themselves to answer with scripted mechanical responses that they believe the Judge,  
233 Psychologist, Case Manager, Teacher or prison staff want to hear. The ‘school of hard knocks’  
234 imparts wisdom that can only come from experience and ‘doing time on the inside’.

235

236 Consistent learning in formal spaces within prison is difficult to achieve and sustain. Regimes,  
237 management of different security classes, and managing prisoner movements around the site  
238 make enrolment and attending classes and programmes very difficult at times. Approval into  
239 any education programme is usually only for inmates who are: serving sentences longer than  
240 12 months; housed in a medium security unit or lower; and in the final third of their sentence  
241 or nearing their parole eligibility date. Even once they gain approval to join an education  
242 programme, the social dynamics can affect the ability for learning to happen, since inmates are  
243 normally engaged in power struggles amongst themselves and with the staff (Michals &  
244 Kessler, 2015). Prison norms and routines dominate and repress the inmates’ ability to learn or  
245 engage in meaningful education. Noise, dirty spaces, social tensions, a ‘bad news’ phone call  
246 – all these can have a negative toll on the mental and emotional health of inmates to an extent  
247 that even the best teachers cannot overcome (Scott, 2013).

248

249 Submissiveness and compliance are habits that prison educators aim to dismantle, in favour of  
250 critical questioning, problem posing and engagement in debate and discussion. But inmates  
251 have learnt that submissive behaviours are more advantageous when dealing with prison  
252 authorities. Prisoner students, knowingly or unknowingly, are not free to practice the skills that  
253 teachers often seek to develop. Prison teaches the incarcerated that formal prison education is  
254 a narrow, manipulated version of what education means on the ‘outside’. Formal learning in  
255 prison is slow, inconsistent, and for most ‘short stayers’ it will never be an option afforded to  
256 them. That is the lesson ‘of’ prison.

257

258 The Corrections Act 2004 outlines the minimal educational entitlements for prisoners in  
259 Aotearoa New Zealand. Inmates are entitled to education that contributes positively to their  
260 rehabilitation, reintegration, and reduction of recidivism. The Department of Corrections has  
261 narrowed their definition of education in line with these minimal entitlements. In prison,  
262 rehabilitation is promoted as a primary form of education (Department of Corrections, 2020).  
263 Priority is given to education programmes that prison authorities believe assist in rehabilitation,

264 reintegration and the reduction of recidivism (Devine, 2007). Rehabilitation programmes  
265 include anger management and violence prevention programmes, drug and alcohol treatment  
266 programmes, sexual violence prevention programmes, cultural programmes, motivational  
267 programmes, and tikanga Māori based programmes (Department of Corrections, 2020). The  
268 shift to education as rehabilitation has accompanied the popular support for policies that focus  
269 on mass incarceration and punishment of criminals (Michals & Kessler, 2015). At first glance,  
270 the emphasis on education as rehabilitation seems in keeping with the 2017 Corrections mantra  
271 of ‘Change Lives, Shape Futures’, but closer inspection reveals serious limitations in its  
272 implementation.

273

274 Rehabilitation is the primary form of education in prison. Although Corrections state they are  
275 “committed to improving the educational outcomes of prisoners and offenders so they gain the  
276 skills needed for everyday life, and are ready for further education and training to develop the  
277 skills and experience that employers require” (Department of Corrections, 2020), they  
278 contradict themselves. Rehabilitation is a priority behind keeping criminals contained.  
279 Corrections takes the position that it is their responsibility to ensure the safety of the public,  
280 which is best achieved by ‘prisoner containment’. Rehabilitation is only pursued if it is  
281 convenient and manageable for prisons. High musters mean inmates can be transported to other  
282 prisons to manage numbers, and thereby lose their position in rehabilitation programmes  
283 (Webb, 2013).

284

285 In 2019, 17.9% of the total sentenced population, or around 1700 people, were classified as  
286 high or maximum security (Department of Corrections, 2020). Because of their classification,  
287 they are likely to have no access to rehabilitation programmes. This is due to the prison  
288 environmental restrictions and high staff manpower required to manage their movements.  
289 Operationally, the cost is too high, even though these are the groups that require the greatest  
290 intervention and support. Many prisoners, especially ‘lifers’ and ‘long ladders’, may spend  
291 years in prison with no eligibility for rehabilitation programmes, since acceptance into  
292 rehabilitation programmes for individuals is only approved once the parole eligibility date  
293 draws closer.

294

295 The emphasis of formal prison education in Aotearoa New Zealand has shifted in recent  
296 decades away from a support mechanism for rehabilitation, towards a strategy to enhance  
297 public safety . The goal of education for prisoners is not to help the prisoner and their family,

298 but as a method to enhance public safety on the prisoner’s release. In other words, prison  
299 education is not for the good of the prisoner, it is for the good of everyone else. Prison education  
300 is not provided to serve the needs of the incarcerated person, but as a process the prisoner  
301 undergoes for the benefit of the community.

302

303 Formal prison education is intended to create safer communities, but forgets the systemic biases  
304 and institutional, historical and political constructs that contribute to the pathway to  
305 imprisonment (Devine, 2007). The Department of Corrections has a priority to keep the  
306 community safe, but forgets that the people in their care are also part of that community.  
307 Prisoners are instead treated as an underclass who present a safety risk to the rest of the good,  
308 law-abiding citizens (Workman, 2016).

309

### 310 **Māori culture in prison education**

311 In 1988, the Department of Justice made reference to the over-representation of Māori in  
312 offending statistics, and noted the estrangement of Māori from their cultural roots (Mihaere,  
313 2015). It acknowledged that Pākehā institutional dominance has led to the weakening and loss  
314 of Māori culture, and therefore it would be appropriate to provide opportunities for inmates to  
315 participate in culturally based initiatives within prison. Māori-led programmes include bone  
316 carving, waiata, and Te Reo Māori language programmes. These Māori cultural identity  
317 programmes are perceived as types of ‘Māori education’ and valuable opportunities for Māori  
318 inmates to connect to their culture.

319

320 In 1995 the Department of Corrections took over from the Department of Justice and began to  
321 establish initiatives that they believed to be culturally appropriate for Māori inmates. In 1997,  
322 the first of five Māori Focus Units opened, which aim to strengthen cultural values, kinship  
323 and knowledge. Māori Focus Units are kaupapa Māori units, in which inmates participate in  
324 group-based rehabilitation until their completion of the programme (Mihaere, 2015). Tikanga-  
325 based programmes are delivered by local providers, and vary from site to site. They are  
326 motivational programmes for offenders who identify as Māori, designed to motivate offenders  
327 to engage more fully in rehabilitation programmes by helping them understand their cultural  
328 identity, and encouraging them to embody the kaupapa (principles) and tikanga (customs) of  
329 their tīpuna (ancestors) (Department of Corrections, 2020). Whare Oranga Ake are kaupapa  
330 Māori Rehabilitation units—housing units located outside the prison perimeter, designed to

331 support inmates to transition back into the community during the final part of their sentence  
332 (Webb, 2013). Other formal Māori-based programmes include Māori therapeutic programmes  
333 that “combine cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and tikanga Māori principles to address a  
334 range of offending behaviours by helping offenders to identify triggers for offending, and then  
335 give strategies to overcome or avoid these triggers” (Mihaere, 2015, p. 96).

336

337 Māori programmes come under the umbrella of ‘rehabilitation’ since Corrections takes the  
338 view that regenerating Māori identity and values encourages the motivation of inmates to  
339 address their offending needs (Department of Corrections, 2020). The literature published  
340 by Corrections repeatedly illuminates the importance that Māori cultural identity continues to  
341 hold in contemporary Māori society; stressing that Māori cultural identity is a key determinant  
342 of Māori social and personal wellbeing. The belief is that a strengthened sense of Māori cultural  
343 identity will help fortify Māori inmates against ongoing effects of colonisation (Mihaere,  
344 2015). But Māori cultural identity “should not be seen as a panacea that will miraculously  
345 reduce Māori reoffending” (Mihaere, 2015, p. 105). Māori cultural identity might be important,  
346 but it does not follow that Māori cultural identity is a magic solution to reduce reoffending  
347 (Mihaere, 2015).

348

349 Incorporating Māori cultural identity also serves as a strategy to meet Treaty obligations and  
350 engage Māori prisoners in to Pākehā psycho-therapeutic programmes. The Department of  
351 Corrections has invested considerable effort into meeting its Treaty obligations by  
352 systematically ‘sprinkling’ Māori cultural identity initiatives throughout the New Zealand  
353 prison system. It is a co-option strategy, in which cultural ideas are used to make the  
354 Corrections system more culturally appropriate, and to make Pākehā developed programmes  
355 and services more likely to ‘work’ for Māori (Mihaere, 2015). When these programmes failed,  
356 the blame was placed on the individual offender and the limitations of Māori culture in  
357 improving lives, rather than the ineptitude of the program, the staff or participating agencies  
358 (Mihaere, 2015). The commitment to a Crown-Māori partnership was shown as being only  
359 superficial.

360

361 Over the years, the Department of Corrections has implemented a succession of Māori  
362 cultural models and programmes, many of them with Māori names. Each programme is  
363 designed internally, with limited consultation or input from Māori communities. In the  
364 process, Corrections appropriates and repackages Māori culture, often in superficial or

365 distorted forms, within their rehabilitation programmes in attempts to better control and engage  
366 Māori prisoners, and arguably also “as a subterfuge for meeting Treaty obligations” (Stanley  
367 & Mihaere, 2018, p. 124).

368  
369 Corrections asserts that its Māori kaupapa-based initiatives nestle comfortably within  
370 Western-based concepts, but this assertion is refuted by Māori academics (Mihaere, 2015).  
371 Jackson (1987) claimed Corrections had inappropriate methods of working with Māori  
372 offenders, but “this body of knowledge was largely ignored by public servants, politicians and  
373 the press” (Workman, 2016, p. 97). “Ultimately, the Department of Corrections determines the  
374 meaning and level of Māori cultural identity in ways that Māori viewed as a case of distortion  
375 and misappropriation and override Māori people to determine what Māori kaupapa means”  
376 (Mihaere, 2015, p. 125).

377  
378 A new strategic policy document called Hōkai Rangi was recently released by the Department  
379 of Corrections (2019). Hōkai Rangi was adopted as the overarching strategy for Department of  
380 Corrections, which was hailed as a bold move. Hōkai Rangi is seen as an innovative strategy  
381 that incorporates te ao Māori across all sectors and staff of the Department of Corrections,  
382 aiming to achieve “effective and authentic partnerships, that build towards elimination of  
383 disproportionate reoffending by Māori” (Department of Corrections, 2019, p. 2). A core focus  
384 is “to work in partnership with Māori communities to rehabilitate and transition whānau back  
385 in to their care” (p. 5), but these are not new goals for Corrections. Can the drivers of crime be  
386 addressed by a Māori cultural focus? The ability of Hōkai Rangi to succeed where previous  
387 cultural initiatives have failed remains to be seen.

388

### 389 **An impossible task: The Māori prison educator**

390 Prison educators are not prison officers or prison authorities, but as government employees  
391 they are still obliged to work and deliver services within policy and systems. Being a prison  
392 officer means being part of the ‘blue machine’ – the ever-present authority figure within  
393 prisons. However, prison educators do not fit well in that category. What little research there  
394 is on the work of prison staff focuses on security issues, and how staff manage risk within  
395 prison walls. Regardless of job title, all prison staff must prioritise security given their work  
396 environment.

397

398 Security and safety are the most important considerations for prison staff: for themselves, other  
399 staff, inmates and the public (Drake, 2013). Order and control are the key ways used to maintain  
400 a safe prison environment. The authoritarian, militaristic, and inflexible nature of prisons is not  
401 only for inmates, but also extends to staff (Novek, 2019). Educators are subject to searches and  
402 viewed with suspicion for choosing to work in a prison (Michals & Kessler, 2015). In the name  
403 of security, all communications by prison educators are heavily monitored, including personal  
404 social media use, and they are instructed on acceptable dress and body placement. These  
405 systems can be experienced as disrespectful, demeaning and offensive, but unquestioned,  
406 unhesitating compliance is expected at all times (Wright, 2005). Like other countries, prisons  
407 in Aotearoa New Zealand operate a security-first culture, and have become increasingly  
408 punitive, concerned first and foremost with mitigating risk (McIntosh & Goldmann, 2017).

409

410 Educators embark on the journey of teaching in prison because they want to help others  
411 (Wright, 2004). The call to teach in a prison is often fuelled by a drive to advocate for positive  
412 social change. For Māori educators, the expectation to fight for social justice goes beyond the  
413 prison perimeters, extending out to the Māori communities (Hohepa, 2013). Māori educational  
414 leaders are expected to establish positive relationships with a variety of institutions,  
415 communities, sectors, and iwi (tribal kingroups) and be familiar with systems of knowledge  
416 from the past, present, and future. Māori educational leaders are expected to know how to lead  
417 and carry out Māori cultural practices in social situations, and be able to operate in Māori  
418 cultural contexts. They are also expected to know how to conduct themselves in professional  
419 educational settings and activities that may have little link to Māori society in general. Effective  
420 Māori leadership is that which is “expert in navigating within te ao Māori” (Māori society)  
421 “and exploring te ao whānui” (wider society) (Hohepa, 2013, p. 621). To develop strong Māori  
422 leadership is no easy feat in the prison, which must be considered as an epitome of colonial  
423 structures. Given the negative statistics for Māori, there is a critical need for leaders who will  
424 uplift Māori success.

425

426 The work of meaningfully educating people inside prison is almost an oxymoron. There are  
427 strong ideological tensions over prison education between teachers and the state. Teachers in  
428 prisons are trained to be part of a helping profession, but are charged with educating people  
429 within a system designed to objectify and punish people. Tino Rangatiratanga (self-  
430 determination) is what all Māori strive to achieve for their people, but when one chooses to  
431 teach inside a prison, self-determination is not always possible (Drabinski & Harkins, 2013).

432

433 Working inside a prison means working within the historical logic of imprisonment. Prison is  
434 not a neutral environment: ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation  
435 and offender status all feature in the power dynamics of prison. Prison educators must accept  
436 that they are not separate from the power structure in which they operate: “they cannot escape  
437 it, they can only respond within it” (Scott, 2013, p. 26). Working inside a prison in Aotearoa  
438 New Zealand means working in a context in which one is constantly confronted and reminded  
439 of the results of Māori social disparities. Just as policies attribute Māori culture with an almost  
440 magical ability to help Māori inmates, similar expectations are also placed on a Māori prison  
441 educator. The term ‘prison education’ contains an element of contradiction within itself, which  
442 is greatly increased in the case of ‘Māori prison education’. A Māori prison educator is caught  
443 between the conflicting parts of their role: as a Māori, as an educator, as a prison staff member.  
444 The unreasonable challenges and unrealistic expectations mean the work of a Māori prison  
445 educator can fairly be described as an ‘impossible’ task.

446

447 **Closing statement: NAME**

448 Eventually I reached the end of my tether with the environment of prison education and chose  
449 to leave, to take up another employment opportunity in a different sector. But educating male  
450 prisoners was a role I found very fulfilling. As dangerous as these men were known to be, as  
451 students they were people asking for help, searching for the beginnings of a life beyond their  
452 crimes. Each week I taught convicted murderers, paedophiles, rapists, and drug dealers. We  
453 laughed, we argued and we learned together. The men received an education, and I got to see  
454 glimpses of how the minds and brains of these people worked. A highly exclusive position that  
455 I valued. It was not the threat of danger or being hurt by them that deterred me from that work:  
456 I learned from them as much as they learned from me. It was the daily stress from being  
457 undermined, discredited, and chastised that led to my resignation from the role of a Māori  
458 prison education leader.

459

460 It may seem odd to say that I valued helping people who had been proven to have taken and  
461 hurt the lives of others. I definitely get asked a lot – why teach these people? Why offer them  
462 any sort of mercy? It is easy to place oneself in a position of moral superiority, and look down  
463 on inmates as unworthy. This attitude is certainly the norm in prison. But if, as educators, we

464 were able to truly help the most damaged and vulnerable people in society, imagine the endless  
465 possibilities for us all.

466

467

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