



Challenges facing a Māori prison education leader

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

Agnotology; cultural programmes in prisons; Hōkai Rangi policy; Kaupapa Māori; prison education

Introduction

Education within prison walls is a complex topic that reflects overlapping layers of history, culture, belief systems and politics, erected from the minds and hearts of the people that fill such a space. Drawing on the literature and informed by experience, this article highlights and theorises the challenges in the everyday work of a Māori prison educator. Prison education receives almost no attention from educational researchers, and there is little if any prior research published on the work of Māori prison educators. The single extended reference on the use of Māori culture in prisons is the doctoral study by Riki Mihaere (2015), which is leaned on in the section (below) on Māori culture in prison education. A second key source is also co-authored by Mihaere (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018) in which the concept of *agnotology* or managed ignorance is applied to the context of high Māori imprisonment.

Opening and closing the article are two autoethnographic sections by the first author, Mereana Te Pere, whose experience of being a Māori prison educator motivates the work overall, and given

the sparseness of research on the topic, infills the literature-based sections, the first of which delineates what prison education means. The second section introduces the concept of agnotology to examine how Māori imprisonment has been normalised in the national imaginary. Next comes a description of education provided for prisoners in Aotearoa New Zealand, followed by a synopsis of how Māori culture has been included in prison education over the years. The final section sums up the expectations placed on a Māori prison educator.

Opening statement: Mereana Te Pere

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

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

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

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

Definitions of prison education

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

Education in the prison world differs from how the rest of society understands it. Prison culture has its own norms and etiquette. The prison *learning* culture also has its own nuances. It holds intersecting and competing principles, such as ‘education is a privilege’ versus ‘education is a right’;

or ‘culture is a solution to offending’ versus ‘culture is the reason for offending’. Opposing positions of inmates, staff, and prison authorities make prison education a contentious space. Education within prison walls is an intercultural phenomenon, mixing teaching culture, prison culture and the political rhetoric of society on the outside (Wright, 2005).

Two levels of meaning of the term ‘prison education’ are distinguished below; these processes operate during the term of the individual prisoner to contribute to their personal trajectory of experience and emotional impact. First, when a person arrives in the prison environment, a form of ‘prison education’ comes into play, which is commonly known as ‘prison life’—a reference to the need for the prisoner to rapidly develop skills and strategies to help them survive their incarceration, within the micro-level norms and power dynamics at play in their particular prison milieu. The (re-)acculturation process begins (Andrae et al., 2017). There are hierarchical dynamics between the staff and the prisoners, and amongst the prisoners themselves. The tenuous relationships compel disingenuous behaviours in order for inmates to manage power struggles as much as possible. Prisoners quickly learn that surviving prison requires foresight, tact and discipline.

The second level of the term ‘prison education’ refers to the formal systems and programmes of education provided for prisoners—its official meaning. The New Zealand Department of Corrections bases its definition of education in prisons on what is outlined as the minimum entitlements to education for prisoners in the Corrections Act (New Zealand Legislation, 2004). The Act defines a prisoner’s entitlement to education that will assist in rehabilitation, reduction in reoffending, or reintegration to the community (New Zealand Legislation, 2004). The Crown is not required to provide a prisoner with any of the education mentioned unless they are entitled to receive that education free of charge, or to improve their literacy, if identified as a need (New Zealand Legislation, 2004). The Department of Corrections aligns its approach to education with the legal minimum entitlements, offering a narrow window of information and access to knowledge and learning for inmates.

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

Agnotology: Normalising Māori imprisonment, pathologizing Māori

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

Agnotology in relation to Māori crime and incarceration has:

deep roots that cut across multiple sites of power . . . Colonisation has always depended on the construction of ignorance - about the culture, language, beliefs and being of the ‘Other’ - and the

situation within New Zealand has been no different. The colonial history of violence, suppression and incarceration of Māori by Pākehā settlers remains largely ignored, and the impact of neo-colonial harms is, in partial consequence, neutralised. The 'success' of colonial power is such that the over-representation of Māori as prisoners is now regarded as a normalised, inevitable feature of life. (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018, p. 114)

Māori incarceration rates have been significantly higher than non-Māori as far back as records show. Māori constitute about half of the incarcerated population at any one time, while only about 15% of the national population—an enormous level of over-representation (Tauri & Morris, 1997). During the early phases of the post-1852 settler government, Māori were arrested as part of a subjugation process to help emerging colonial political structures assert their dominance (Rumbles, 2011). Legislation facilitated over-policing of Māori to create an orderly society that reflected colonial aspirations. Prisons operated to quell pockets of resistance among iwi, and worked to develop a national identity among Pākehā. The policing and imprisonment of Māori helped the Crown build confidence among Pākehā settlers, as it affirmed state control, in an example of 'social control and containment of "problem" populations' (Andrae et al., 2017, p. 2).

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

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

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

National state agencies have defended imprisonment of Māori as the inevitable result of their pathological and socio-cultural deficits (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018). The Hunn Report portrayed Māori offending and inability to adapt to Pākehā law and society as resulting from inherent flaws in Māori culture. This deficit narrative has defined the Māori offender 'as an urban misfit, a cultural maladept, an educational retard' (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018, p. 121). The commonly-held belief that Māori are inheritors of the 'warrior gene' further contributes to the pathologizing of Māori. This myth claims that the stresses of war and ocean exploration created a 'warrior' society. Consequently, so the myth holds, Māori inherited behavioural disorders including propensity towards crime, violence, risky behaviour and aggression. The claim is disputed by Gary Raumatī Hook (2009):

There is no evidence to indicate that the behavioural characteristics of Māori as a people are in any way unusual. Māori are not borderline psychotics, retarded, hyper-aggressive, depressive, antisocial, impulsive, suicidal risk takers, and to suggest otherwise is irresponsible and not

supported by the facts. An explanation for the high conviction rates of Māori for violent crimes is to be found not in his nature but elsewhere perhaps such as in his victimhood arising out of 160 years of colonization, or in how the justice system deals with people whom most of its Eurocentric white administrators perceive as being excessively violent. (p. 7)

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

Education for prisoners in Aotearoa New Zealand

Prison life has its own set of physical and mental lessons for inmates. Prison is an environment where the incarcerated learn to navigate dangerous power struggles, manage treacherous social dynamics, and survive within oppressive systems and rules (Novek, 2019). There is a normally unquestioned chain of command embedded in the policies, procedures and practices of prison staff. The prison system has a culture of white superiority and an entrenched ethos of 'Māori bad, Pākehā good' so that even Māori staff become involved in discriminatory treatment in order to fit into the culture of the institution (Brittain & Tuffin, 2017). Prison organisational cultures are authoritarian in nature, so survival depends on the ability to be obedient and unquestioning of authority (Novek, 2019). Inmates learn to be manipulative and train themselves to answer with scripted mechanical responses that they believe the judge, psychologist, case manager, teacher or prison staff want to hear. The 'school of hard knocks' imparts wisdom that can only come from experience and 'doing time on the inside'.

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

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

The Corrections Act 2004 outlines the minimal educational entitlements for prisoners in Aotearoa New Zealand. Inmates are entitled to education that contributes positively to their rehabilitation, reintegration, and reduction of recidivism. The Department of Corrections has narrowed their definition of education in line with these minimal entitlements. In prison,

rehabilitation is promoted as a primary form of education (Department of Corrections, 2020). Priority is given to education programmes that prison authorities believe assist in rehabilitation, reintegration and the reduction of recidivism (Devine, 2007). Rehabilitation programmes include anger management and violence prevention programmes, drug and alcohol treatment programmes, sexual violence prevention programmes, cultural programmes, motivational programmes, and tikanga Māori based programmes (Department of Corrections, 2020). The shift to education as rehabilitation has accompanied the popular support for policies that focus on mass incarceration and punishment of criminals (Michals & Kessler, 2015). At first glance, the emphasis on education as rehabilitation seems in keeping with the 2017 Corrections mantra of 'Change Lives, Shape Futures', but closer inspection reveals serious limitations in its implementation.

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

In 2019, 17.9% of the total sentenced population, or around 1,700 people, were classified as high or maximum security (Department of Corrections, 2020). Because of their classification, they are likely to have no access to rehabilitation programmes. This is due to the prison environmental restrictions and high staff manpower required to manage their movements. Operationally, the cost is too high, even though these are the groups that require the greatest intervention and support. Many prisoners, especially 'lifers' and 'long ladders', may spend years in prison with no eligibility for rehabilitation programmes, since acceptance into rehabilitation programmes for individuals is only approved once the parole eligibility date draws closer.

The emphasis of formal prison education in Aotearoa New Zealand has shifted in recent decades away from a support mechanism for rehabilitation, towards a strategy to enhance public safety. The goal of education for prisoners is not to help the prisoner and their family, but as a method to enhance public safety on the prisoner's release. In other words, prison education is not for the good of the prisoner, it is for the good of everyone else. Prison education is not provided to serve the needs of the incarcerated person, but as a process the prisoner undergoes for the benefit of the community.

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

Māori culture in prison education

In 1988, the Department of Justice made reference to the over-representation of Māori in offending statistics, and noted the estrangement of Māori from their cultural roots (Mihaere, 2015). It acknowledged that Pākehā institutional dominance has led to the weakening and loss of Māori culture, and therefore it would be appropriate to provide opportunities for inmates to participate in culturally based initiatives within prison. Māori-led programmes include bone carving, waiata (music), and Te Reo Māori language programmes. These Māori cultural identity programmes are

perceived as types of ‘Māori education’ and valuable opportunities for Māori inmates to connect to their culture.

In 1995 the Department of Corrections took over from the Department of Justice and began to establish initiatives that they believed to be culturally appropriate for Māori inmates. In 1997, the first of five Māori Focus Units opened, which aim to strengthen cultural values, kinship and knowledge. Māori Focus Units are kaupapa Māori units, in which inmates participate in group-based rehabilitation until their completion of the programme (Mihaere, 2015). Tikanga-based programmes are delivered by local providers, and vary from site to site. They are motivational programmes for offenders who identify as Māori, designed to motivate offenders to engage more fully in rehabilitation programmes by helping them understand their cultural identity, and encouraging them to embody the kaupapa (principles) and tikanga (customs) of their tīpuna (ancestors) (Department of Corrections, 2020). Whare Oranga Ake are kaupapa Māori Rehabilitation units—housing units located outside the prison perimeter, designed to support inmates to transition back into the community during the final part of their sentence (Webb, 2013). Other formal Māori-based programmes include Māori therapeutic programmes that ‘combine cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and tikanga Māori principles to address a range of offending behaviours by helping offenders to identify triggers for offending, and then give strategies to overcome or avoid these triggers’ (Mihaere, 2015, p. 96).

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

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

Over the years, the Department of Corrections has implemented a succession of Māori cultural models and programmes, many of them with Māori names. Each programme is designed internally, with limited consultation or input from Māori communities. In the process, Corrections appropriates and repackages Māori culture, often in superficial or distorted forms, within their rehabilitation programmes in attempts to better control and engage Māori prisoners, and arguably also ‘as a subterfuge for meeting Treaty obligations’ (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018, p. 124).

Corrections asserts that its Māori kaupapa-based initiatives nestle comfortably within Western-based concepts, but this assertion is refuted by Māori academics (Mihaere, 2015). Jackson (1987) claimed Corrections had inappropriate methods of working with Māori offenders, but ‘this body of knowledge was largely ignored by public servants, politicians and the press’ (Workman, 2016, p. 97). ‘Ultimately, the Department of Corrections determines the meaning and level of Māori cultural

identity in ways that Māori viewed as a case of distortion and misappropriation and override Māori people to determine what Māori kaupapa means' (Mihaere, 2015, p. 125).

A new strategic policy document called Hōkai Rangi was recently released by the Department of Corrections (2019). Hōkai Rangi was adopted as the overarching strategy for Department of Corrections, which was hailed as a bold move. Hōkai Rangi is seen as an innovative strategy that incorporates te ao Māori (the Māori world, Māori society) previous cultural initiatives have failed remains to be seen.

An impossible task: The Māori prison educator

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

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

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

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

Working inside a prison means working within the historical logic of imprisonment. Prison is not a neutral environment: ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation and offender status all feature in the power dynamics of prison. Prison educators must accept that they

are not separate from the power structure in which they operate: ‘they cannot escape it, they can only respond within it’ (Scott, 2013, p. 26). Working inside a prison in Aotearoa New Zealand means working in a context in which one is constantly confronted and reminded of the results of Māori social disparities. Just as policies attribute Māori culture with an almost magical ability to help Māori inmates, similar expectations are also placed on a Māori prison educator. The term ‘prison education’ contains an element of contradiction within itself, which is greatly increased in the case of ‘Māori prison education’. A Māori prison educator is caught between the conflicting parts of their role: as a Māori, as an educator, as a prison staff member. The unreasonable challenges and unrealistic expectations mean the work of a Māori prison educator can fairly be described as an ‘impossible’ task.

Closing statement: Mereana Te Pere

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

It may seem odd to say that I valued helping people who had been proven to have taken and hurt the lives of others. I definitely get asked a lot—why teach these people? Why offer them any sort of mercy? It is easy to place oneself in a position of moral superiority, and look down on inmates as unworthy. This attitude is certainly the norm in prison. But if, as educators, we were able to truly help the most damaged and vulnerable people in society, imagine the endless possibilities for us all.

Notes on contributors

Mereana Te Pere works as the Māori Health Promotion Strategist for The Health Promotion Forum of New Zealand. HPF is a national umbrella organisation for all those who identify health promotion as part of their work. Prior to this, Mereana worked in the education and programmes division within the Department of Corrections prison system.

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