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# **Literacy in Corrections Inmate Employment**

A thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Management  
in  
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# PREFACE

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*‘So you write out their answers if they can’t?’ I ask. It is mid 2006 and I am interviewing a Corrections Inmate Employment Instructor for a newsletter story for Corrections. Six prisoners have just achieved National Certificate qualifications and he is telling me about teaching and learning in his industry. It is not unusual for prisoners to be able to do the job but not have the reading and writing to complete the qualifications he tells me. If they are keen and work hard he will write their answers down for them so they can be assessed. I admire his dedication. How many other teachers would do that I wonder? How many others would need to?*

From the outset I was determined my research would be useful. Like many Māori I believe that “research simply for the sake of knowing is pointless” (Stokes 1985, 3); there needs to be a purpose to the work. Working as a Communications Advisor for the Department of Corrections I was involved with communicating the organisation’s issues, successes, work, and processes to stakeholders. Working with Corrections Inmate Employment (CIE) staff I was constantly aware of their commitment to their jobs and how hard they worked in an environment of restrictions to provide training and employment experience for prisoners. Anecdotally, it seemed one such restriction was the low literacy levels of prisoners. When, in early 2006, I was offered a Masters scholarship my focus became prisoner literacy.

Literacy had been a topical issue in New Zealand since the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released its *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) in 1997. IALS found 45 percent of New Zealanders had literacy levels below the minimum required to cope easily with everyday life (Johnston 2004; OECD 1997).

In 2001, the New Zealand Government’s *Adult Literacy Strategy* tied the future well-being of the country to improved literacy. High-levels of literacy and numeracy and strong communication skills were required to transform and modernise the New Zealand economy, establish New Zealand as a knowledge society, and allow New Zealanders to fully participate in this society (Ministry of Education 2001).

Funding for my research arose from this priority. In 2004, the Government’s Foundation for Research, Science, and Technology (FRST) funded Massey University and the Wanganui District Library to investigate adult literacy and employment in the Wanganui region under its Social Research output class. This class “supports public

good research, science and technology that improve societal well being” and funds projects that focus on the changing nature of work; developing human capability and skill; disparities between groups; positive social outcomes; social well-being; social connectedness; and social and cultural identities (FRST 2004). My project was linked to Massey University’s larger *Literacy and Employment Project*.

Specifically, my research aims to provide an understanding of literacy in CIE. Early readings (see chapter 3) showed literacy as a complex phenomenon with researchers defining the concept, its purpose and value, achievement and measurement methods, and its relation to other concepts like employment or prisoner education in many different, and often conflicting ways. I chose to investigate literacy in practice in a prison-based employment training programme. To do this I profiled two Wellington-based CIE Industries: the Central Kitchen at Rimutaka Prison and the Print Shop at Wellington Prison. The result is a descriptive case study, which I hope provides insight into literacy in these industries.

It should be noted that social phenomena are complex, changeable, and often interlinked. Although I have tried to outline the main issues, inevitably, there will be perspectives that either remain uncovered or remain in the background. Thus, this research does not provide a definitive account of what literacy means, its values, quantification, function, purpose, or operation in CIE; rather, it is a description or snapshot of life in two prison-based employment training industries in New Zealand, focusing on the concept of literacy. At least, I hope the research provides the reader with practical knowledge about literacy in each CIE programme. At most, I hope it provides practical knowledge for informed change; change to allow more effective participation in existing employment training programmes.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Over the last two years, I have learned a lot; both about literacy and CIE, and about stepping into uncertainty. There are many challenges in completing a thesis, besides the academic. I wish to thank the all people who have assisted me, including my supervisor, family, friends, and colleagues; your support has been invaluable. I especially want to thank those at Rimutaka and Wellington Prisons who have both facilitated this research and have been part of the research itself – I hope the findings are as useful for you as the process has been for me.



# ABBREVIATIONS

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ALLS	<i>Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey</i>
CIE	Corrections Inmate Employment
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
FRST	Foundation for Research Science and Technology
IALS	<i>International Adult Literacy Survey</i>
ITO	Industry Training Organisation
NCES	National Certificate in Employment Skills
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
PPM	<i>Public Prison Manual</i>



# ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates literacy in prison-based employment training provided by Corrections Inmate Employment (CIE), a Government Training Establishment, in New Zealand. The descriptive case study aims to provide an understanding of literacy in CIE. It does this by combining existing research with information gained from participant observation and staff and prisoner interviews at the Central Kitchen and the Print Shop at men's prisons in Wellington. The thesis suggests that engagement with literacy in these CIE workplaces depends on whether it is safe or suitable to participate in workplace literacy activities; whether there is an opportunity to participate (including access to specialised support services like literacy programmes); and whether prisoners are interested in or see benefits from participating. For CIE to be more effective – both in providing a base for meaningful employment and lifelong learning – employment training needs to be offered in areas in which prisoners are interested, in tandem with embedded support services like literacy and numeracy training programmes.