A case study exploring the interconnections between literacy, employment and the library in Wanganui Prison’s self-care units

The Wanganui Adult Literacy and Employment Project
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Franco Vaccarino
Niki Murray
Margie Comrie
John Franklin
Frank Sligo

http://literacy.massey.ac.nz/

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Massey University
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Executive Summary

The Wanganui-based adult Literacy and Employment project is a major, longitudinal research programme that seeks to provide a more in-depth understanding of literacy and the impacts of literacy on individuals, families, communities, and workplaces. This report is a case study which focuses on Wanganui Prison’s self-care accommodation units. These units enable selected inmates to re-establish basic living skills and individual responsibility that help them prepare for release back into the community. According to the Department of Corrections, self-care units teach prisoners independent living skills, providing an intermediate step between the prison environment and life in the community by placing individual inmates in a flating-type situation with peers. Inmates take responsibility for their living arrangements with their peers, and they take control of their day-to-day living needs. As part of their reintegration into the community, inmates in these self-care units have the option of going to the Wanganui District Library on a regular basis. This case study explores these self-care inmates’ perceptions of their library experience, and the impacts the library has on their literacy and lives.

There’s this little boy that used to play around the oak tree at home. And he hurt the oak tree. Stabbed it with this stick and all this sap started coming out. And he cried because this tree … he made this tree bleed. Went to his father’s shed and got some wood putty and puttied it up; fixed up the hole. And … the poem goes, “How did that little boy get from having so much feeling for a tree to having no feeling at all, to being able to kill someone?” And it goes, “That little boy was me.” Now, I’m a firm believer of what you learn is who you become, because it didn’t start off like that.

(Written by a self-care resident about himself)
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We are indebted to many other friends and colleagues not named here for their insights and support to date in this research. However, all remaining errors and omissions in this discussion paper are of course the responsibility of the authors alone. Further, the points of view expressed in this report are those of the authors, and are not necessarily endorsed by the community groups which, as is normal in a diverse society, will have their own perspectives on the issues covered here.
Introduction

The library presents a window to the outside world and can provide much useful information for those preparing for release to the outside world.

Lehmann and Locke (2005, p. 4)

This case study which focuses on Wanganui Prison’s self-care accommodation units forms part of a larger project into Literacy and Employment in the Wanganui and Districts region. The interest in literacy and its relationship to employment was largely generated by the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey which found that 48% of New Zealanders were at a literacy level considered to be functionally inadequate for today’s workplace (OECD, 2000). This surprising result led to government policies aimed at increasing adult literacy provision to enhance literacy skills and therefore employability (Ministry of Education, 2001). However, there is much more to employment than obtaining literacy skills. Through the Literacy and Employment project we aimed to explore the relationship between training programmes, knowledge acquisition, skills, and employment to further define the literacy and employment relationship.

In the Western world, there have been changes in the philosophy of what represents the nature and purpose of incarceration in society, and as Lehmann (1999, p. 3) states, “the pendulum has swung back and forth between emphasis on rehabilitation and punishment/retribution”. The Department of Corrections in New Zealand aims to provide prisoners with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to live successfully in the community to reduce their likelihood of re-offending. For the final few months of their sentence, approved minimum-security prisoners stay in the prison’s self-care units. Wanganui Prison’s self-care accommodation units enable selected prisoners to re-establish basic living skills and individual responsibility that help them prepare for release back into the community. Self-care units teach prisoners independent living skills by providing an intermediate step between the prison environment and life in the community by placing individual inmates in a flating type situation with three of their peers. They take responsibility for their living arrangements with their peers, and they take control of their day-to-day living needs, including housekeeping, cooking, budgeting and purchasing of food and household requirements (Department of Corrections, 2008). As part of their reintegration into the community, prisoners in these self-care units have the option of going to the Wanganui District Library, escorted by a corrections officer.

The Wanganui District Library service to inmates of the self-care units has the potential of being a very strong link for inmates to the outside world in terms of their integration, their literacy, and their employment. This case study was designed to provide the Wanganui District Library with valuable information on the self-care inmates’ literacy, employment, and use of the library.

The case study explores self-care inmates’ perceptions of their library experience, and the impact the library has on their literacy. We provide a brief literature review covering the rela-
tionship between education, literacy, and reading in prisons; prisons and libraries; benefits of libraries to prisoners; materials and collections; library access and usage; censorship; and, technology. This is followed by a brief overview of the self-care accommodation units in the Department of Corrections. Then, findings from the interviews with inmates in the self-care units, and the librarians from the Wanganui District Library who interact with these inmates are presented.

As far as possible we have allowed the voices of the residents of the self-care units to emerge in this report and provide a detailed interpretation of their perceptions of using the Wanganui District Library. This is congruent with our overall approach in the broader Literacy and Employment Project which has been to explore and foreground the lived experiences of individuals and their understandings around the topic of literacy.

A Literature Review of Prisons and Libraries

Education, literacy, and reading in prisons

Reading is an extraordinary act of creativity. It is one of the most adventurous, mind stretching and challenging activities there is. Reading has even more importance in prison. For readers who can’t move outside physically, reading offers the opportunity for exploring inner and outer space, it offers an escape from stress, and provides an exclusive, private space. It is not surprising that prisoners who have never felt motivated to read outside suddenly see the value and potential that rests within the reading experience.

Wilkinson (2004, p. 3)

“Literacy and education are keys to opportunity in this society, and perhaps no one realizes this more clearly than prisoners”. This is the opening sentence of the Literacy Behind Prison Walls Report (NCES, 1994, p. 1). One often reads that prisoners have lower literacy levels than the general population: “In most countries around the world, the majority of individuals who make up the prison and jail populations have limited education and life skills and do not come from a background where reading was a frequent or popular pursuit. Indeed, a significant number of prisoners have been found to have low literacy and insufficient employability skills” (Lehmann & Locke, 2005, p. 5). Lehmann (1999, p. 2) adds to this list a “lack of educational attainment and insufficient vocational skills”. One also comes across statistics like the ones quoted by Rubin and Souza (1989, p. 50): “According to the Correctional Educational Association, 75 percent of all adults in correctional facilities are functionally illiterate”; or “70 percent of prisoners scored in the lowest two levels of the National Adult Literacy Survey. This means that while they have some reading and writing skills, they are not adequately equipped to perform tasks like writing a letter to explain an error on a credit card bill” (Dixen & Thorson, 2001, p. 53). Seventy-six percent of prisoners in New Zealand have no formal qualifications: “Around half of all prisoners left school before Year 11 ... Thirteen percent of prisoners are identified as having a literacy need” (Corrections
News, 2007, p. 5). However, in the interpretation of their research conducted in Ireland, Morgan and Kett (2003, p. 36) found that it wasn’t that the average literacy level of prisoners is much lower than the general population, but rather that “the prison population has a much larger group with very poor literacy skills, compared to the general population, a much smaller group with moderate literacy skills and a minority with excellent literacy skills”. They found that over two-fifths of those in the oldest age group scored at the highest level. This is significant as this is the opposite of what is found in the general population. The “IALS showed that older age groups had very substantially lower scores in literacy tests than was the case with younger age-cohorts” (Morgan & Kett, 2003, p. 36).

In many prisons around the world, inmates are provided the opportunity to access education to improve their literacy or to improve or further their education. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions’ (IFLA) Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners stipulate that “The prison library should provide the offenders with the opportunity to develop literacy skills, pursue personal and cultural interests, as well as life-long learning. The library should provide resources for all these activities” (Lehmann & Locke, 2005, p. 4). The New Zealand Department of Corrections provides education and employment training to inmates in order to “reduce barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration and make positive contributions to reducing re-offending” (von Dadelszen, 2006, p. 1). Reintegration into the community is an important aspect of the Department of Correction’s work to reduce reoffending. In its Annual Report, it highlights that “Many prisoners lack any type of formal qualification and have little or no experience of work when they come into prison - assisting them to gain the skills and qualifications that enable them to obtain and sustain employment on their release is integral to reducing re-offending” (Department of Corrections, 2007a, p. 20). Literacy and numeracy programmes “are available to all prisoners with an identified need in accordance with their sentence management assessment” (Department of Corrections (2005, p. 166). Inmates without formal qualifications automatically have “an educational objective added into their sentence plans”, and “last year, this led to 40 percent of prisoners leaving prison with a New Zealand Qualifications Authority unit standard or full qualification (Corrections News, 2007, p. 5).

According to the NZ Department of Corrections (2007a, p. 13), “while prisoners are restricted in relation to many aspects of their lives while in prison, under the Corrections Act 2004 (section 69 – 82) there are minimum entitlements that all prisoners are entitled to receive while under the care and custody of the Department. These include such things as a bed and bedding, food and drink, access to private visitors, access to legal advisers, physical exercise, access to information and education, to send and receive mail and to make outgoing telephone calls”.

The NZ Department of Corrections recognises that education can have a positive impact on the lives of inmates, and in its Statement of Intent, 1 July 2007 – 30 June 2008, emphasizes that it seeks “to improve the education standards of prisoners through the provision of foundation learning (literacy, numeracy, ESOL) and secondary school education that improve education skills and ability to gain employment after release” (p. 92). It provides inmates with the opportunity to participate in educational training programmes with the objective of raising “the literacy and numeracy levels of inmates with needs in these areas, through the provision of basic literacy and numeracy programmes, National Certificate in Employment Skills (NCES) and other general education activities” (Department of Corrections, 2004, p. 146). In addition, as education is likely to increase an inmate’s chance of finding a job, education interventions aim to increase inmates’ opportunities to obtain employment once their sentence is complete, and thus contribute to a successful release (Department of Corrections, 2004). Business De-
velopment Manager Brendan Anstiss states that the Department of Corrections plans to invest more in prisoner education and says “we’ll be expanding the high quality educational courses that are working well, such as increasing the availability of basic literacy and numeracy courses and National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) modules” (Corrections News, 2007, p. 5). He goes on to say that it’s good to provide more courses in “basic literacy and numeracy as these skills are critical to prisoners being able to engage in more advanced qualifications and employment … Having strong basic literacy and numeracy skills will enable prisoners to engage better in society, have greater access to services, be more employable, be able to undertake further education or training and increase access to rehabilitation programmes (Corrections News, 2007, p. 5).

Mayrink Da Costa (2003, p. 5) emphasizes that “the promotion of reading and the improvement of writing skills are important steps toward social re-integration and the exercises of full citizenship”. She quotes the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who, in his book *A Importância de Ler* (The Importance of Reading) states that “to speak of making adults literate is to speak of public libraries, and, among other things, of the problem of reading and writing” (2003, p. 5).

**Prisons and libraries**

“As modern societies gradually adopt a more humane and enlightened practice of criminal justice and incarceration in accordance with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they shift their focus from punishment to education, rehabilitation, and constructive use of time. The prison library then becomes an important part of the entire prison environment in its support for educational, recreational, and rehabilitative programs” (Lehmann & Locke, 2005, p. 4). Shirley (2006, p. 1) points out that “prisons were first established to banish and confine the offender, subjecting him or her to hard labor”. Wilkins (1977) asserts that in the nineteenth century, books were given to prisoners mainly to evangelize prisoners, and Shirley (2006, p. 1) adds that “reading was confined to the Bibles and similar religious material aimed at inculcating morality, the guardian of this genre was the prison chaplain, whose responsibility was to assure the reader’s penitence”. Things have changed drastically, and inmates have more rights, including the right to access information. Burt (1977, p. 36) points out that in the United States, “correctional institution libraries have come a long way, from the few personal books loaned by chaplains to inmates to the well-stocked libraries manned by professional librarians”. Different countries obviously have different rules and regulations, but generally, there has been a paradigm shift from prisons being places of punishment, to becoming correctional institutions.

As Lehmann and Locke (2005, p. 4) point out, the prison library also “provides a level of ‘normalcy’ in a highly regulated environment as a place where individuals are free to make their own choices and engage in self-directed pursuits”.

Recommendation no R(89)12, adopted by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers on 13 October 1989, and the explanatory memorandum on ‘Education in Prison’ state the following about the library: “Libraries in the community are a source of education, information and recreation, as well as centres of cultural development. Library services for prisoners must have the same wide range of functions as progressive libraries for the public, and the same professional standards should apply” (Kaiser, 1992, p. 12).
Benefits of libraries to inmates

… an excellent library service in … prisons is of vital importance to not only the prisoners but to society as a whole

Kaiser (1992, p. 14)

Those books made the walls transparent! This is how an inmate-patron expressed what a prison library meant to him whilst inside (Vogel, 1995, p. 125). When serving time behind thick walls, it’s a big bonus to think that books make the cold, aloof walls transparent. On a more concrete level, what benefits do libraries afford inmates?

Kaiser (1992, p. 21) provides a good overview of the positive role libraries play in the lives of prisoners:

They provide resources to support educational, recreational and welfare programmes, assisting in the acquisition of new skills. They alleviate attitude problems and difficulties in coping with prison life, in addition to providing for psychological needs. Prison libraries form a non-threatening link to the outside world, and in that sense are an obvious benefit not only to prisoners themselves but to the entire correctional system.

Dixen and Thorson (2001, p. 49) emphasize that prison libraries provide an important means of self-improvement for prisoners, and “can act as a supplement to educational programs and can lead to better work opportunities, which in turn creates more stable and productive citizens”. Coyle (1989, p. 67) stresses emphatically that “the great value of prison libraries lies not in their recreational use but in their rehabilitative or enabling capacity”.

Kaiser (1992, p. 16) stresses the benefits of using the library after the prisoners’ release, by saying that reading can enable “prisoners to remain in touch with the outside world. It thus helps to prepare detainees for their return to society at large”. Dixen and Thorson (2001, p. 49) add that “many believe that libraries are vital to the rehabilitation of the prisoners, helping them to strengthen character and lessening the rate of recidivism (returning to prison)”. 

Many believe that libraries are vital to the rehabilitation of the prisoners, helping them to strengthen character and lessening the rate of recidivism (returning to prison).

Dixen and Thorson (2001, p. 49)

Westwood (1994, p. 154) quotes an inmate who says that the library “is our window to the world – our link to the past, present, and future”. This is indicative of how inmates in many studies view the services provided by a library.
Materials and collections

In terms of materials in the prison library, the IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners stipulates that “the library collection should include materials in print and other formats to meet the informational, educational, cultural, recreational, and rehabilitative needs of the prison population. Included should be a wide variety of current print and non-print materials similar to those found in a public or school library” (Lehmann & Locke, 2005, p. 11). Rubin and Souza (1989, p. 49) highlight that “Inmates use library materials of all types and read in every area. Inmates use the library ten times as heavily as their counterparts on the outside”. Kaiser (1992, p. 16) highlights that it is “essential that prison libraries have materials on topics of current interest” to the prison population.

Using an online prison library listserv, Shirley (2003) gathered information about collections used by inmates. Popular non-fiction reading included self-help, career, biographies, poetry, medical, psychology, religion, art, true crime, sports, body building, writing, and paranormal. Popular fiction genre included horror, mystery, action/adventure, romance, and science fiction. Andrews (1973) states that the largest demand by inmates in his study was in the following categories: art, essays, heritage, history, religion, poetry, philosophy, politics, and occultism. He adds that “naturally, there was an overwhelming call for escape matter: detective, romance, adventure, western, science fiction” (1973, p. 271). Koons (1988, p. 53) says that “the demands for popular psychology materials, for materials that help them figure out who they are and where they might go from here, is intense”, whilst Coyle (1989, p. 66) adds “Westerns, sf [science fiction], comic books, and other formula and serial fiction”.

Dixen and Thorson (2001, p. 49) note that “people who have been incarcerated are entitled to legal information. Trained librarians can find it for them, sometimes changing inmates’ lives in the process”. In the United States many prisons have a law library, in addition to a regular general library (Andrews, 1973), or as Hemp (1996, p. 46) points out “prison libraries have long doubled as law libraries”. Dixen and Thorsen (2001, p. 50) add that prisons without law collections “allow legal information to be brought in by law librarians”. Campbell (2005, p. 6) refers to the case of “Bounds v. Smith in 1977” which “mandated that prisons have law libraries”. Wilhelmsen (1999, p. 116) states that “the reason for providing inmate-patrons with legal reference materials is “to enable them to access the judicial system in fulfilment of their court-established right to judicial access”. However, Vogel (1997, p. 36) points out that “these law book collections did not provide access to the courts to the illiterate, or the non-English-reading, or inmates in lock-down units”.

Library access and usage

Reijnders (1996, p. 129) states that Dutch law grants the “right to each prisoner to use the library at least once a week”. In Italy too, De Carolis (2000, p. 347) points out that according to “law no. 354 of July 26th 1975”, the “Italian penal institutions should have a library providing books and journals to prisoners”. Kaiser (1992, p. 15) concurs and believes that “prisoners are entitled as other citizens to have access to information and therefore to proper library facilities. They are entitled to have access to reading materials just as they are entitled to take part in sports activities and/or attend courses to improve their education”, whilst Rubin and Souza (1989, p. 48) note that although prisoners are isolated, “they are entitled to the services of the community”.


Reijnders (1996) provides insight into library services for multicultural groups in Dutch prisons. By Dutch law, each correctional institute is obliged to have a library for prisoners. She adds that with a growth of international criminality, “the western world prisons are melting pots of cultures and languages” (1996, p. 128). In Dutch prisons, there are many inmates who do not speak Dutch. Prison libraries in Holland therefore purchase books in foreign languages to assist these inmates to feel less isolated. In the United States however, Shirley (2006, p. 3) reports that in her research, “collections and services are limited or almost non-existent for non-English speaking prisoners. Lack of budget and inability to communicate due to language differences are reasons for this deficit”. She mentions a librarian who relies on bilingual inmates to help her understand non-English speaking inmates. However, the IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners stipulate that “special attention should be given to meeting the needs of multicultural and multilingual users” (Lehmann & Locke, 2005, p. 4). Andrews (1973, p. 271) points out that in the prison where he did his study, “because of the high percentage of Spanish-speaking inmates, a good part of the prison library had to be devoted to a Spanish language collection”. Burt (1977, p. 34) adds that “the limited vocabulary and reading skills of many inmates also needs to be taken into consideration in the selection process in correctional institutions”.

Shirley (2006, p. 4) highlights that inmates’ access to the library in the United States “varies by institutions, with some libraries operating day and evening hours, seven days a week, to any inmate who is on recreation, while others have limited hours and more controlled access”. Librarians also provide services to inmates who are in segregation. These inmates receive library services by writing requests using the in-house institution mail. Shirley (2006, p. 4) adds that “physical access to the library, especially during summer months, is sometimes hindered by institution lockdowns, when there is no inmate movement on the compound”. The IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners state that inmates “should be able to visit the library every week for periods sufficiently long to select and check out materials, ask reference questions, order interlibrary loan items, read materials that do not circulate, and participate in cultural activities organized by the library” (Lehmann & Locke, 2005, p. 7). In the United Kingdom, every prison must have a library and all categories of prisoners must have the opportunity to visit the library where they are entitled to a “minimum browsing time of 30 minutes per week” (LSU, 2005, p. 24).

Kozup (1992, p. 37) points out that “certain prison formalities require that the library be closed at certain times during the day – especially when a head count of inmates is taken”. Staffing also influences the amount of time a prison library can be open.

One of the national prison library goals in Holland is to “promote free access to information by use of all kinds of materials in writing, pictures, and sound. Advising on and stimulating the use of these materials and, as a result, contributing to the well-being of the inmates” (Reijnders, 1996, p. 129). Suvak (1973, cited in Burt, 1977, p. 32) adds that “it is the responsibility of the library to provide materials which will facilitate learning for all groups”.

The IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners specify that “An incarcerated person has not relinquished the right to learn and to access information, and the prison library should offer materials and services comparable to community libraries in the ‘free’ world. Restrictions on the access to library materials and information should be imposed only when such access is known to present a danger to prison security” (Lehmann & Locke, 2005, p. 4).

How much access inmates have to the library also varies. In Kozup’s (1992, p. 39) research, a factor which influences library access is the reason for wanting to use the library, for example
“those inmates wanting to use the law library to prepare their legal cases have greater access to the library than those inmates wanting to use the regular library”. Another reason is the actual size of the library – physical space limits the number of inmates allowed into the library. Other reasons include inmates having their library privileges revoked for a period of time; and inmates being in segregation.

**Censorship**

The issue of censorship is very important in prison libraries, and generally, guidelines “prohibit books and materials that are considered pornographic, that would incite inmates to riot or in some way cause or promote unruly conduct, or that would give inmates insight into the manufacture or design of weapons or explosives” (Kozup, 1992, p. 21).

Shirley (2006, p. 4) points out that although the Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions in the United States assert “Prisoners’ right to read, and non-censorship except for obvious security and pornographic issues, many librarians face intense and often unwarranted scrutiny by prison security staff who try to impose restrictions on certain library materials”.

Liggett (1996) conducted a survey to develop a profile of Ohio’s prison libraries. Included in this survey was the question of censorship, and she found that the problem of censorship varied according to the institution in which librarians worked. She (1996, p. 39) says that “of the responding librarians, 72.7% feel censorship is a problem while 27.3% do not”. One of the librarians who said there was no problem with censorship did however admit to a personal bias against providing violent materials to inmates. Liggett continues by stating that “in those libraries where censorship is considered to be a problem, 87.5% of the librarians feel there is a problem with medical materials; 75% with sex materials; 62.5% with occult materials; 62.5% with violent materials; and 12.5% with mythology. Other materials being censored in at least one institution are Free Masonry, engineering, chemistry, and the Foxfire series” (1996, p. 39).

The Offenders’ Learning and Skills Unit (OLSU) in the United Kingdom, states that it has been Her Royal Majesty’s (HRM) Prison Service’s policy to accept on the shelves of its library the same literature as appears on the shelves of the public libraries. Nevertheless, the Unit (OLSU, 2005, p. 31) points out that “the custodial situation is a volatile one and in the interests of good order and an acceptable quality of life, the Prison Service must continue to reserve to itself, through its Governors, the right to remove literature or to forbid certain prisoners or trainees access to it, if the situation so demands”, and “Where ‘censorship’ is used, it generally has a bearing on literature which may facilitate the commission of crime, or may adversely affect a particular prisoner’s or trainee’s medical treatment, is pornographic, or may compromise prison security”.

According to research done by Kozup (1992), censorship can cause inmates to cool their interest in using the library if they cannot obtain some materials; they can also become frustrated and angry and take this out on the librarians; or they stop using the library as they cannot obtain what they want. Kaiser (1992, p. 16) believes that libraries should contain “uncensored material expressing various viewpoints so that prisoners may make free choices when it comes to forming opinions and developing interests themselves”.

8
Technology

In the United States prisoners have access to computers with applications, but do not have access to the Internet. Shirley (2006, p. 5) says that the implication of this is that “a prisoner with a long incarceration period, who is returning to the community, will be at a disadvantage in seeking and retrieving information for his or her survival”. She (2006) adds that prison librarians do have computers with Internet access; however, these computers need to be kept in an area which is inaccessible to inmates. The IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners stipulates that “the prison library should make use of current information technology to the extent possible without compromising prison security”; and “where prison network security permits, prisoners shall be given supervised Internet access for education and treatment purposes” (Lehmann & Locke, 2005, p. 9). Dixen and Thorson (2001, p. 52) point out that “another impact of the newer technologies is higher expectations among prison patrons. They know more information is available and they want more. They have all heard about various sites on the Web, but are not allowed access to it”. Shirley believes that an important component of educating and preparing inmates for re-entry into society “should include use of technology, especially technology to access information. Technology use varies in prison libraries with some librarians reporting that they did not have computers or access to the Internet” (2003, p. 72).

Self-care units

As part of the NZ Department of Corrections’ objective of reducing re-offending, a number of programmes are available to inmates, particularly those inmates nearing the end of their sentence. Harpham (2004, p. 35) states that “in addition to the core programmes, structured activities are available including employment training in specific prison industries, unit-based employment, education and organised recreation”. Furthermore, inmates have the choice of living in special focus units, where their daily activities are structured around the achievement of specific rehabilitative objectives. One of these options is the self-care unit. Currently, there are eight sites in NZ with self-care units: Arohata Prison, Auckland Region Women’s Corrections Facility, Christchurch Prison, Christchurch Women’s Prison, Hawkes Bay Prison, Northland Region Corrections Facility, Rimutaka Prison, and Wanganui Prison.

These residential-style units inside the prison allow inmates to get used to living in a house or flating-type environment with three of their peers. Barry Matthews, Chief Executive of the NZ Department of Corrections, states in the Annual Report (2005, p. 8) that these “self-care units … help offenders learn independent living skills as they approach the end of their time in prison”. These units provide an intermediary step between the prison environment and life in the community. It is a way of getting inmates to take responsibility for their living arrangements with their peers. It enables them to take control of their day-to-day living needs, including housekeeping, cooking, budgeting, laundry, co-operative decision-making, and purchasing of food and household requirements. Under supervision, inmates may be temporarily released to do household shopping for themselves and others in their self-care unit. “Self-care units increase inmates’ general competence, self-responsibility, and self-reliance before their release from prison” (Corrections News, 2005, p. 6). To live in the self-care units inmates must sign a contract agreeing to comply with self-care unit conditions. They need to remain drug-free, behave in a responsible and cooperative manner, complete any structured programme required by their sentence plan, and work actively towards the community reintegration objectives in that plan (Department of Corrections, 2007b).
Hawke’s Bay Prison Acting Site Manager Blythe Wood says that self-care units “are an ideal way to bridge the gap between prison life and the community” and “working in a supported community setting helps inmates develop life skills and build confidence before their release” (Corrections News, 2005, p. 6).

The Corrections Minister in 2005, the Hon Paul Swain, said that successfully rehabilitating and reintegrating inmates is the most effective way to reduce re-offending (Corrections News, 2005, p. 6).

Recommendation no R(89)12, adopted by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers stipulates that “Wherever possible, prisoners should have direct access to an outside public library, which they should be able to visit from the prison on a regular basis, otherwise, effort must be made to provide a full service within the prison” (Kaiser, 1992, p. 13). Residents of the Wanganui self-care unit visit the Wanganui District Library on a regular basis. Residents not in the self-care unit have access to the library through Wanganui District Library’s mobile library service. This mobile library started as a trial in 1968 in a converted Bedford van carrying 2,000 books. Currently, the service has increased to 60 stops per fortnight, 8 hours a day, and 6 times a week, including Wanganui Prison (Wanganui Library, n.d.).

Methodology

Once approval was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee and the Ethics Committee of the Department of Corrections, arrangements were made to notify inmates at the self-care units of our intention to interview them. We asked officials at Wanganui Prison to talk to the inmates, and flyers were distributed. To take part, inmates had to volunteer to be interviewed. A date when the interviewers would be available to meet with inmates was set and two researchers from the Literacy and Employment research team went to Wanganui Prison to interview the inmates at the self-care units.

Information sheets and consent forms

Information sheets were distributed to the inmates by the prison authorities, and a date for the interviews was set. Inmates who were willing to be interviewed were given a consent form. The purpose of the interview was explained again to each inmate, any questions were answered, and permission was obtained to record the interviews.

Interviews

Seven of the inmates in the two self-care units volunteered to be interviewed. These interviews ranged between 15 to 60 minutes, depending on how much the inmates wanted to talk
about their experiences. Inmates were asked about their views on employment, literacy and learning, and the library (see Appendix A for an interview schedule). As this case study was part of the larger Literacy and Employment project focusing on literacy and employment issues, inmates were asked about their employment plans and possibilities after they were released, as well as their views on literacy and learning. As the Wanganui District Library was involved in the Literacy and Employment project and inmates from Wanganui Prisons visited the library, one section of the interview related to issues around the inmates’ perceptions of the library.

Two librarians from Wanganui District Library who work with the self-care inmates were also interviewed. They were asked to share their experiences of working with the self-care inmates.

Below we report on the perceptions of both sets of interviewees. In keeping with our case study approach, these perceptions have been presented as much as possible without intervening interpretation and analysis.

**Perceptions of self-care residents**

**Employment**

When the self-care unit residents were asked what they would like to do in terms of employment once they leave the prison system, they all reported optimistically that they would be able to find employment. One resident wanted to start his own business doing bone carvings and sculptures. However, he did mention that setting this up would take some time, so a short-term solution would be to enter the construction industry as a builder, as he had done some building in the past.

Another resident said he had various drivers’ licences so he would be able to do any type of driving work, or he could load boats, a job which he had done in the past, where he still had some contacts. He also mentioned agencies such as Workbridge that assist individuals to find employment. He said that he had “never struggled for work” and was quite sure that he would find employment when released, even though he might have to do “a geographical”, that is, move around to different places.

One of the residents mentioned that if he did not manage to secure a job, his mind would start “to wander back to ...ah ... easy money”. He went on to say that he had “a few skills ... a few lab skills” where he could turn “a couple of hundred dollars into a couple of grand” by manufacturing drugs. He said “I think to myself, well why slog your guts out here [on a job]? Um, you know, go and do a bake and make a couple a grand, instead of waiting for a week’s wage next week, three or four hundred dollars. I could have it all over and done within an hour or two and have three or four grand. So those sorts of things play on my mind.” However, he was well aware that there was a price to pay: “I know that I can’t entertain that sort of thinking because otherwise there’ll be more jail attached to it”.

A further resident already had a job offer with a construction company, whilst another said he would want to work for someone for a year or so either as a top grader digger or driving trucks. But his “ultimate thing is to open up my own workshop ... yeah ... for ... doing up old vintage cars and stuff like that” which he had done before.
Another resident said he would probably end up in the advertising industry. If not, he would become a “knife hand” or could “probably get a job at any butchers”.

Another respondent said that his “employment will be ... something in the service industry, you know ... helping out in the community, that sort of thing. Food banks, that sort of thing ... I can help with that ... And I can turn my hand to ... I’m a carpenter by trade, so... “.

One resident said: “I wanna be involved in ... with social service groups such as helping young people not go into prison after being in prison myself. That sort of thing, you know. Um ... even working with anger management, even though I’m going through, you know, to study up and become like a ... a facilitator sort of thing ... Train myself up and get trained and ... 'Cause, you know, I believe I’ve still got a lot to give to the community ... I look at prison and the community actually pays for me being in prison. So in some ... way I feel that I owe it back to the community”.

A number of the residents had contacts outside “the wire” who would help them secure a job.

**Finding a job**

When asked whether it was easy to find a job, one resident said “yeah ... it’s the person; it’s all in yourself. It’s how you present yourself. So if you want the job, you’ll get the job ... if you wanna get off your arse; backside I should say”. He said “there are jobs there. It doesn’t matter what ... you can get employment to hold you by”, and “there’s always labourer jobs”. He continued by saying that “You gotta show how ... how honest you are. ... willingness ... your strengths; what they’re gonna get out a you ... what knowledge they’re gonna learn from you and what you’re gonna learn from them”.

In terms of finding employment, another resident said that “it depends on what you want to do. If you’re willing to work, well it shouldn’t be no problem”, whilst a further resident said “the blocks are very real because ... I’ve been to jail a couple of times now and ... that’s ... the dilemma I see facing a lot of people getting out of prison”.

Another resident said that it would be easy finding a job as “Criminal history doesn’t sort of come into effect at the ... meatworks and that ... unless you’ve got ... because of the knives of course ... unless you’ve got ... stabbings and stuff”.

One of the residents said that:

> it’s hard for me to find my groove, to find where I click in, or to find something that I click into. But ... yeah ... just through reading and things I hope to find a better niche to fit into. You know, like I’d like to work with youth, to find, you know, help them off drugs and things like that. Because I’ve been down that road and I know quite a bit about it. And, through my experiences I hope to ... I could help other people. That would give me feedback. That would give me the nuts and bolts of the meaning of life, so to speak. So, they’re the sort of areas I’d like to get into.

This resident went on to say: “Because of my experiences and fifteen years of addiction I know that I’ve got a lot to offer other people. I could help a lot, I’m sure. Very sure.” He says that:
there’s nothing worse than getting somebody that knows about it through reading, and I call them a textbook addict. And ... you know, they don’t, they don’t really know; they don’t really know what it’s like to be addicted to a substance. And to wake up every day and f***ing have to go out there and score it, make it or, or sell themselves to get it. If someone has not had the direct experience of doing drugs and merely reads it from a textbook, that person says ‘Oh this should happen’, and ‘This is what you should do’. It just falls short of feelings and falls short of, of the true guts of what they need to tell the person.

Skills

When asked what skills are required for employment, one resident said “I think it’s more word of mouth and ... your history ... it’s not so much what’s down on a piece of paper. And some jobs ... [qualifications] don’t count really, the higher paying jobs; for the higher paying jobs. But then again, for myself, I don’t seem to have any problem ‘cause I’m ... mechanical engineering”. Another resident said he believed that the skills required for employment were “motivation and willingness to work”.

Study

A number of the residents had tried to study and improve their situation before being released, some doing study in psychology and/or criminal psychology, but most mainly doing computer courses. As one resident said “Part of the reason why I’m doing computer skills now is ... to upgrade myself to try and get into the ... updating of all things ... you know I find that good”.

In terms of studying certain courses to improve oneself, one of the residents said that he had started studying psychology and enjoyed it, but said: “I found out halfway through the psychology course that I could never practice it, or put it to good use because of my criminal convictions. I couldn’t actually become a psychologist or ... do work with the community as such.”

However ...

Despite the fact that the residents interviewed were positive about gaining employment, one of the residents said that because of his criminal convictions, he could not do what he would really like to do, so his choices of employment became limited, even though he might have had the right qualifications, skills, and knowledge. He said, “if you’ve been a criminal and you’ve basically had convictions, then you’re f***ed. You’re, you’re actually ... held back ... and in lots of areas”. The person getting out of prison finds it harder to gain employment because, with a criminal conviction, “they get cut down” or “tagged”.

One resident mentioned that a lot of employers don’t want to employ individuals who have spent time in prison, and, on many employment applications, “you fill in nowadays it says, ‘Have you had criminal convictions?’”. If this question is not answered honestly and the employer becomes aware of it, they will “put you through the mincer”.

Another interviewee mentioned that:
the only experience I’ve had work-wise is in jail. And every time I’ve tried to get a job, because of my tattoos for a start … which they’re coming off at the moment … people stereotype you; look at you and think, ‘Nah, I don’t think so’. And then when you tell them your only experience is in jail … I believe in being honest. I don’t believe in bull****ing an employer, because … they find out, and you’re out of a job anyway. But, yeah, I’ve found it really hard to find employment. So I’ve always been on the dole or alternative means of income.

For many inmates, the fact that they know they cannot be employed in certain sectors doing what they would like to, is a problem, or as one resident put it, “a slight dilemma”. Many inmates therefore “settle for something shorter than what they probably … possibly could have done”. One interviewee stated “It feels like a … brick wall and, you know, just finding the ability to overcome that brick wall and to get round it and to try and have a different approach or a different thought … But … I’m sure that a lot of crims … coming out of prison face this dilemma that I’m talking about. And … it’s unfortunate, and then they have to settle for something that’s less fulfilling, less achievable”.

He went on to say:

we’ve made that decision without knowing it, and then you face the consequences of it, all the way through your sentence. But consequences carry on into later life because of the mistakes you’ve made earlier. So you have to get over that hurdle too ‘cause you’ve put your head in the noose and … it’s like being on a leash. You can only go so far and you get pulled back.

This respondent believes that those in the outside world think that:

‘we don’t like you going into that area’, so they pull you back and then, you know, even if you had something to say; if you ran for parliament or whatever, it would be a pullback, ‘Oh, this guy’s got a criminal past’, and it would be brought up wouldn’t it? For sure, because that’s the artillery they look for on each other. Imagine if Winston Peters or someone had a criminal conviction of … jail, you know, it would be dug up. The dirt … the dirt flicking would happen. So there’s all that sort of side of things.

In conclusion, a resident sums up the relationship between having a conviction and employment, by saying that:

right down from travel to living to job prospects to … to just about the whole rest for everything, you know, it comes down to what’s your past. What are you? What have you done and who are you? You know. So almost, you need an identity change, not just a mind change, a mindset in what you were, because if you’re to be honest you’re cut down. That’s what I see wrong. That’s what the breakdown is, and that’s what the whole hold-up is for people reaching their full potential; their full …
person. And I see it clearly and ... I know within myself that that is going to be a problem, and has been a problem in the past.

Is there any hope? One resident said there’s always hope, “although it’s a very dangerous thing ... hope ... in prison”. When asked why hope was dangerous he responded by saying that “you teach yourself over the years that you don’t ... Hope is ... a failed concept because if you live in hope then things don’t happen. So it’s a dangerous area to think of.” However, he concluded that “we all live for hope. We all live for another tomorrow”.

School and learning

The residents were asked to reflect on their schooling years, and what it was like for them. One resident said “Horrible. I hated it. I couldn’t keep up with the rest of the class”. He went on to explain that he didn’t learn much, and was expelled because he kept running away from school. He also “found it really hard to get on with kids”. Further, he stated that when he was at school “... they don’t cater for individual children ... they didn’t back then, they catered for a whole classroom. And if you can’t keep up... So you act out. Twiddle your thumbs, don’t listen”.

The interviewee ended up in a Boys’ Home, but he believed that it “didn’t teach you much, I mean ... I was there with a lot of older kids and it was very violent. Lot of sexual abuse, stuff like that”. He said that “like all the good things; if you ever had any empathy or compassion or things like that, you couldn’t afford to keep it. You know what I mean? So it got buried under all the bulls***t ... otherwise I wouldn’t have survived”.

When this resident was of school leaving age, the school he was at sent him back home with a report stating:

I’m ill-equipped to go into a more exacting, less forgiving environment. And that I have not gained any ... what was it ... I don’t deserve to be released because I haven’t ... oh, what was it? Can’t ‘member the exact words but I hadn’t basically the things I needed to be released; and that, one day hopefully digs himself out of the hole that he’s in. And that they were afraid that I was gonna go into the next form and fail, and ra-ra-ra, See, they knew all these things, but what did they do about it? They put me back in an abusive home, into society that I was ill-equipped for.

So what were the effects of “not learning much”? This resident said that there were:

lots of effects, like personally, mentally and that. You know, you withdrew into yourself. You believe that you couldn’t trust anybody but yourself. And because I had no skills in ... in life, I didn’t know what the f**k I was doing.... you got all the advice in the world from different people and that, but you didn’t trust people. ‘Cause people you meant to trust were the ones that are supposed to love you and take care of you, and if you can’t trust them, you don’t trust anybody, so you trust yourself. And people will tell you things and it’s just like, ‘Well, what the f**k do you know?’ ... And so you went on your own decisions anyway. And nine times out of ten they were all wrong.
This resident was asked what he had learnt in prison. He replied that:

the things I’ve learnt here I should’ve learnt growing up. You know, while in prevention unit I went to … I basically learnt about life there. How to manage my moods, how to identify my moods. I didn’t know any of that stuff. I, you know, when I went there I was mad actually. I asked the psychologist, ‘Am I mad? I wanna know if I’m mad. Why don’t I have the feelings that other people have?’ … because of the years of abuse and that, that I’ve suffered, it had changed my personality to the extent where I had … got away with all the feelings; got rid of all the feelings of empathy and things like that. And by … through learning about empathy and things like that, I only just started to get it back. And then I had too much. It became overwhelming. I … thought what I’d done and, and things like that. It actually became too much for me. And … I’m on medication now. I’ve been on medication since that programme. Yeah, so, antidepressants ‘cause I was … clinically depressed or whatever. Have been for a long, long time and nobody diagnosed it. And I, I feel a lot better now too. I don’t … I’m not worried about things all the time. You know, ‘cause I continually worried and continually had to check things to make sure I was safe and things like that. So it does affect your life … where … everything is a threat to you, or becomes a threat to you and you’re thinking about being safe. You know?

This resident felt that he knew who he was now: “I know my weaknesses, my strengths. I know my high risk situations. And most of that I learnt through the VPU (Violent Prevention Unit).”

Another resident said: “I was a rebel at school and I sort of went to the … the back of the classroom and … the principal’s office. And a bit of a bully at primary, and then intermediate was girls, and college it was over. So I didn’t really … I learnt more from reading. And, and having time out in prison and allowing myself to learn to read, learn to write.” This resident taught himself to read in prison and said that he “got sent to all the good schools and all the rest of the things, but I didn’t really learn at school.” He feels that he didn’t learn in school because there were “too many children in the classroom. Thirty five kids or something in our primary school; in our class. It was just too many. And if you didn’t wanna learn, the teacher never really had the time to one-on-one you. So you were ousted or pushed away.”

Yet another resident said that primary school was good, but then he ended up in boarding school, which was “bloody horrible … it was atrocious”. He left school when he was fifteen.

“I hated it, ‘cause I couldn’t read or write. When I left school I couldn’t read or write. Oh … I could read a little bit but I couldn’t … write you a letter” was the comment from a resident who added that “Teachers never took the time out … they thought you were a bad egg.” At high school this respondent could not spell nor understand a lot of words as he felt they were “the wrong way.” Understandably, school was very stressful and difficult for this resident who said that the reason for him going to school was “to play rugby and for metalwork.” He had a kinaesthetic learning style which involved doing things like “cooking and… even sewing and stuff like that”, and he has learnt many things just “by standing there and watching people, over and over”. This resident did not know how to use the library when he was at school. He started going to the library at the age of twenty-three and took out books by Barry Crump, "‘cause it was something that interested me. It was a story that interested me and
stuff like that. So that’s how I actually learnt how to read and write”. What prompted this resident to go to the library at the age of twenty-three? He said: “I got sick and tired that I couldn’t spell things and I didn’t understand the words in front of me and I needed it for my work. He went on to say that I self-taught myself reading to my kids. Started reading books to kids; I’d go get a library book and then they’d bring a library book home. I wanted my kids to be better than what I was”.

Another resident, when asked the question of what school was like for him, said “Do you want the honest answer?” and proceeded to provide the answer: “I went to school to sell dope and root”. Educationally, he chose electives like drama, music, sports, and typing, as he felt that subjects like science and maths didn’t interest him “because to me they’re no use in the real world anymore”. He justified his response by saying that employers want to know what else you can do besides Maths, Science, and English. He believed that employers are looking for “hands on experience … practical experience”. He continued:

I think employers are looking for somebody that’s gone out there and physically done the work … hence the reason I left school and went to work … I mean, I left school … halfway through fourth form and went and pulled tits for six months … milking cows … just went and done it. Mm, I done what I wanted when I wanted. I think … basically part of the reason I’m here is … I had no boundaries as a kid … at thirteen I disappeared for weeks at a time, you know? Ring mum up, ‘How’s it Mum? I’m still alive’. ‘Where are you?’ ‘Oh, I’m in ***’. And I remember at fourteen, in the period of a week, I hitched from *** to ***, back to *** and back to *** again. Over a period of a week. Fourteen years old. Stopping off at every pub I could, and, getting picked up by gangsters and smoking dope. Picking kiwi fruit here and there for a day’s work.

A different resident said that with some of the subjects he took at school, he had a hard time. He was bullied until he could handle it and then dealt back what was given to him.

The New Zealand Department of Corrections offers NCEA classes that inmates can take whilst in prison. One of the residents said that “in the self-care units there’s access in as much as you want to put into it”, so the opportunities are available for those who want to take advantage of them. The Open Polytechnic also offers inmates the opportunity to further their studies. One resident spoke about the importance of self-improvement when serving a sentence. He believed that focusing on the person was important “because if they were better productive member of themselves, then they’d be a better productive member of the community. He continues by emphasising that if they understood themselves more and knew how they ticked and what made them work, and what was best for them, then they would be richer for it. More whole”.

One resident believes that growing as an individual is “the ticket” to success. He said that he would not like to see inmates just focus on employment opportunities, which they do do. And like there’s reintegration employment and things like that … Although it’s not a job they
like, they do it because of the money. They do it because it’s a progressive stepping stone to society. But they don’t do it for self-improvement. They don’t do it for self-recognition of any description. They do it because everybody else is doing it. It’s the done thing and it’s what’s available. I’d like to see them and myself work for other reasons, but I fall short because I’ve only got a short time to go. Normally I’d be kept in another wing. I’ve been lucky to get here. Only because I know how to fill out paperwork and to push things through that I got here. So my education, it’ll help me get there.

**Literacy**

When the self-care residents were asked what they thought literacy was, there was a range of responses:

Literacy is something that is written; the written word of any given subject. To be able to understand it … And literacy is something that’s written down, and read.

Being able to read properly. And understand.

Like reading a piece of paper and that. As for that … nah I wouldn’t know what that word means to tell you the truth.

What is literacy? (Sighs) Well, back when I was at school literacy was, you know, so long as you could write your name, do ABCs and cross your Ts and dot your Is, you know, join a sentence together. Now … so I’ve learnt through doing, doing my studies - if your punctuation and grammar is up the shit you fail. Um, I mean, my punctuation back when I came in was; it was shocking. I had no full stops in my writing. No exclamation marks, no commas, no, nothing. Just words. You know? Just words.

Literacy is to be able to read and to be able to understand what you’re reading. It’s I think that’s the key thing in literacy. It’s all very well reading the words but you gotta understand what those words mean and how they connect; those words connect with one another.

It deals with figures, like numbers, being able to do mathematical equations.

But the greatest to me is to be able to understand and then to be able to convey that understanding to other people so that they can understand. That to me is what literacy is…

Communication is one of the key things.

They were asked whether the prison system encourages literacy, and one resident said “They don’t”, and in the same breathe said “Um, okay. They do in some areas”. He explained that “They take you to the library if you know how to. But a few people don’t go because they don’t know how to access things”.
Library

Before residents at Wanganui Prison are accepted into the self-care units, they make use of the Wanganui District Library’s mobile library which travels regularly to the prison. Residents in the self-care units have the opportunity of going to the Wanganui District Library in Wanganui, every two or three weeks. We asked self-care unit residents about their views of the library.

Resident’s views of the library

All the residents enjoy going to the library, and one resident said that getting this privilege is like “getting something that I enjoy”.

Generally, the residents we interviewed were happy with the Wanganui Library as it has

a lot of knowledgeable things for guys like me that are trying to learn new things. You can go to the library and actually ask for help. You know, people do help you. You know, you don’t have to feel so stink that you don’t know, and people will still help you. And that’s what I’ve found since I’ve been in jail, going to find this library.

Another resident said that the library is “normally pretty bloody good”.

Although residents valued their visits to the library and found it an essential and significant experience, one resident told this story of his first visit to the library:

Well my first day in there, because it was my first time in the public in ten years... it was in the afternoon and it was school holidays. Needless to say it was packed. And the anxiety was just phenomenal. You know, after twenty minutes I said to the staff, ‘Oh look, take me back to jail. Just take me back. I’ve had enough’. I was freaking; I literally put my hands on the desk and I was just; I went white. You know, I freaked out.

We wanted to know why residents went to the library, and what attracted them to these trips into town. One resident said “it’s an outing from jail. It’s a bit of normalcy, you know, as opposed to prison life”. This was echoed by another resident who said that “it’s out of the mundane, day-to-day, boring life of jail. I mean, you know, we’ve got it made in the self-care units here, don’t get me wrong. You couldn’t do any easier jail than this”. He continued by saying that he enjoyed going to the library as it had “a wider range of things you can look for and that. And you’re socialising too, you’re socialising ... with ordinary people as opposed to prisoners”. Another resident mentioned that going to the library

sort of gets us used to not having that anxiety about being around... You know, I mean, we live in a situation where we live with the same guys for months, sometimes years at a time. I mean I was in one wing at one stage for three and a half years. And in that time I seen four people go home. You know? So, we’re living in close quarters and small quarters at that. So you’re not used to being around so many people you don’t know.
This respondent explained that if someone greeted him and started talking, he responded, even though he said Corrections “don’t like us to talk to them, but I mean, that’s why we’re here; to be integrated. It sort of reassures you that you’re normal, not just a prisoner”. Another resident added that he was “able to walk up and down an aisle and say, ‘Hello’ to somebody” and he even may have the opportunity to “strike up a conversation with somebody that isn’t about, ‘Oh, how long you doing bro?’ or, ‘Where have you done your time bro?’’. This was echoed by another resident who felt that when he went to the library he saw other people just like himself who were there for the same purpose, namely looking for books. A further resident said that it’s an opportunity to go to the library and choose your own reading material, as he believed there was nothing in the units. This was echoed by another resident who said that “it’s not only a trip away from here but you get a chance to get in there, have a look around, get what books you want”. Another resident said that he enjoyed being among books, the atmosphere of the library, and looking around to see different things, but the main thing for him was that the library was knowledge: “Knowledge is one of the key things in the library. That’s why I go; for knowledge, the enjoyment of perusing, having a look through all the different things. And Wanganui Library I consider is one, one of the best set-ups I’ve seen”. This was also mentioned by another resident who said that he gained information that he needed. One resident said that “one good thing about having the Wanganui Library is that if there is a new book out, it goes to the library and there’s usually a couple of copies. And if it’s not there you can book it, you know. You can’t do that in a prison library”.

**Favourite sections**

We asked residents what their favourite sections were in the library, and as mentioned in the literature review earlier in this report, the range of favourite reading material for each individual was as varied as the personalities of the residents. In general though, most of the residents expressed their favourite sections and books. One resident said the “cooking section. I like to go in the cooking section and get a different cooking book now and then. Sometimes I’ll go and have a look at some astrology or some woodworking books. Sometimes I just go for the pictures”. Another resident mentioned that he enjoys the “psychology section and the science. And poetry. I like all types of sections in the library. Yeah. I’m well read”. He continued by saying that he had “just found a new section in the library where they’ve got audio. Um … you know, French; to learn how to speak French and, and things like that. And I put that on the other day and I thought that was amazing. The time in here could be very, very well constructed by learning different languages because of the audio”. He said that he had a lot of potential which was being tapped through reading, listening, and learning and many new fields were opening up for him. He added that unfortunately he falls short “because of the criminal element in having to be reminded every time you apply for a job or apply for anything that you’re a criminal. But I’m sure I’ll find something that … I can be utilised in”. Jokingly, one resident said his favourite section was the “leather couch … and that’s probably ‘cause I can smell that fresh coffee”.

**Reading preferences**

Linked to the resident’s favourite sections were their reading preferences. One liked “historical novels … and non-fictional books, and a certain amount of nature things, scientific stuff … that sort of thing. And of course, I’m into Bible, theology, that sort of stuff as well”. Another resident reported that he was “following two authors: Christopher Nicole and Bernard Cornwall”. However, if he could not find what he wanted, “then I’ll look around and try and track something down that I like to read. I look around. I have a good look all around the library. I don’t just go to one place. If I can’t find anything I’ll go to whoever’s on and say, ‘Hey, can you let me know if this is in stock?’”. Another resident enjoyed “doing research. I
like getting into research ‘specially family history research. That’s... genealogy and the whakapapa, yeah. And even a subject. You know, research on a subject; get all the information I can on that subject and bring it out. Wilbur Smith and that sort of thing. Cooking books and picking up recipes, that sort of thing. I love cooking too so ...I can pick up recipes”. One resident enjoyed books on intelligent memory.

Residents were allowed to take out six books at a time from the library. Most said that this was enough, and this was reflected in one of the resident’s comments: “It is plenty for me, you know, for the knowledge that I need to take in. Like I get the magazines now and then too, like ‘Deer Hunting’ ‘cause I’m right into my hunting. So they got the old; they also got that magazine section which is good for information as well”.

When residents went to the library, they had around one to one and a half hours to look around and choose books or magazines. Most felt this was sufficient time, whilst one resident said that

sometimes it’s enough and then sometimes; other times it’s not ...it depends on what you’re looking for at that stage. You know, like with me ... panel beating or something like that there’s books that you can read about it. You already know what’s in that book ... sort of. You gotta look through it. By the time you do that they’re ready to go. And it’s a bit hard to, you know, to get to find the books you want.

Should residents find it difficult to find what they’re looking for, they can go to the main desk and ask for assistance, but as one of the residents pointed out, some guys are too scared or embarrassed to ask. Some may not be familiar with using a library and feel that if they ask for help, they may expose their inability to find their own information. It was suggested that it would be beneficial for the residents if someone from the library went to the self-care units and explained how the library works, how to use the library, what to look for, how to use the cataloguing system, and where to ask for help.

**Reasons for not using the library**

Thus far it seems clear that the residents who make use of the Wanganui Library are very satisfied with the services provided and the variety of books they can choose from. However, not everyone makes use of the library and the reasons for this vary. One resident for example, could not go as he was working outside the prison during the time of the library visits. Another resident said that some guys did not go to the library because “they don’t know what to get out or they don’t know how to access it. Once they do access something that’s of interest, it’s more of a ... at what level are they at. You know, do they wanna look at the pictures?” He goes on to say that some of the guys would not want to be interviewed by us because we would find out that “they’re illiterate and they’re probably scared”.

Some people may find it difficult to access information in the library. One resident said: “if they knew what to look up and it was more simplistic for illiterate people I think that it would be more accessible”. This resident went on to say that the library is

like a big learning institute. You can’t just expect to be a dummy and walk into a big learning institute and be able to learn. So, you know, just if people have it pointed out that they are easy to use... I mean, you could ask the librarian. And he’s approachable; the one at Wanganui here is very approachable. And the ladies and that there, they’re very helpful. And they’ll
point you in the right direction, only have to ask. So it comes down to self as well I think and ... self-confidence to ask.

One resident said that some guys don’t use the library because they “can’t read. I’d say that would be their biggest thing, or they’re not interested”. This was echoed by another resident who said that in general, guys in prison “can’t read. Majority of them”.

When asked why some of the residents in the self-care units do not attend the library, the following discussion was had with one of the interviewees:

Interviewee: “Well the only reason the guys won’t be using the library here is be cause they’re not allowed to go. Otherwise they will go. Because it’s an outing. If they can get out there ...”

Interviewer: “Even if they can’t read?”

Interviewee: “Yup. Um, but in jail in general, people that don’t use the library, majority of them either can’t read, don’t wanna learn to read, don’t want to read. Um, don’t wanna look weak. Think that they’ve gotta, you know, standard to maintain, you know?”

Another resident mentioned that some don’t want to go ... some are tired from work or, they’re coming back from work, that sort of thing. And of course you have some that just can’t be bothered. You know, it’s ... even if the facility’s there, it can be used, they just can’t be bothered with the situation. But, you know, that, I think, is normal in society anyway. You know, you still get those ... it’s the old common saying: you take a horse to water but you can’t make the horse drink. It’s the way I look at it. But with those that don’t go in the house I’m in, I’ll say, ‘Do you want a book’ or ‘What type of book do you want?’ And I’ll go and get it for them ... They’ll give a good response. They’ll say, ‘Yes, we want a National Geographic’. ‘Okay’. And I basically know what Geographics they’ve read and the ones they haven’t. And I get ‘em a Geo graphic or something like that so in some way I’m doing a service.

Any gaps in library service?
Residents were asked whether there were any gaps in the service provided by the Library, or any areas which they thought could be changed or improved. Most residents were pleased with the services and residents said, “I see my needs being well serviced. And the people there are friendly, you know, ‘How are you?’ and that sort of thing. So that communication; the help is there when you ask for it. And if you’ve got a problem they’ll soon come out and help you”. However, one resident pointed out that there’s a big gap on what sections to look at for illiterate people. Because they don’t know, and the prospect of walking into a learning place like a library is quite daunting and overwhelming for some people, especially if they’re illiterate or they can’t read or they’re not very good at looking up catalogues. And myself, I’m not very good on computers and it’s all computer age now. So I wouldn’t like to see the actual old catalogue go because they don’t know how to use the computer. They might know how to use a catalogue. And something more simplistic like a touch screen computer. So having a simplistic thing in libraries is a must. Because a lot of the guys
here can’t read, don’t know how to look up catalogues, can’t use a computer. And they quite often come and ask me if I could look up whatever section … and things like that.

This respondent mentioned that residents often ask each other for help rather than ask a librarian on duty “because they don’t want to be looked at as an idiot, or looked at as an illiterate. It’s like confrontational”. He mentioned one of the other residents who has spent half of his life in prison and doesn’t want to ask although he is very interested in a particular topic. When the interviewee showed the other resident some books in his topic of interest, it opened up a whole new field for him. He reported that the other resident “was too afraid to ask … he’s been too afraid to ask for ten years”.

One resident wanted access to newspapers from outside the Wanganui area:

There’s a lot of people in Wanganui that aren’t from Wanganui. And might wanna catch up with what’s going on at home. You know? I mean, the newspaper is a big thing for us in here. And ‘specially if we can get our home newspaper, you know.

Another resident wanted access to reference books like “mechanical books and stuff like that”. Yet another found that because of the smaller size of the library in Wanganui,

I get cookbooks to teach me to cook ‘cause I like to experiment with cooking here. And the books that you get … they’re in pounds or ounces and stuff like that … and no good to us. And some of the Edmond books are missing stuff. Key things for the recipe. You know, you’ve got the recipe but it doesn’t tell you how long to cook it. You know, things like that. So they’re, they’re not that good in that department I believe, personally.

One of the interviewees mentioned that many inmates were not exposed to going to libraries before they went to prison, so there’s “a culture barrier gap for some people too in libraries”. One respondent suggested that,

a lot of them need information in their own lingo. So maybe at the front of the library it needs to have … something on the tape. Just get that tape out. Put it into their little tape machine and play it. ‘You will find blah-blah-blah section on the da-da…’ in their own lingo and they’ll go, ‘thank you’, and put the tape back. And it can be had through the librarian even. And can ask the librarian for the Samoan tape on carving and tattooing, and they put it in and it says, ‘Go to section da-da-da and you’ll find…’ There you go, I’ve come up with an idea.

So, you know, if you’d have a catalogue of tapes introducing them to their own library. And they could put that in the paper. You could send out flyers and say that every culture is catered for. And here’s the ABC of how to access your library.

We asked residents whether they’d be using the library after release. They all said they would be: “I have no qualms about doing that”. Another resident said: “I always will. There’s always
something you use the library for. And you know, whether it be for your kids; take your kids there or for yourself”. Another said that he’ll still use it,

because you know, it’s hard out there. It’s harder out there than what it is in here, bro. I’ll still use the library heaps. I love the place now. It’s sort of like um, you ask me, like ah, back in careers and that what I thought of the library I would say, ‘What’s that?’ (Laughs). Yeah, well okay, you go and do a class or something and you gotta find it in the library I wouldn’t know where to look ’cause I couldn’t say the words. But now you’re not shy of asking that.

Another resident “wouldn’t mind working as a librarian …you know, that’s quite a good job too”.

**Perceptions of Wanganui library librarians**

We interviewed two of the librarians who have been working regularly with residents from the self-care units who go to the Wanganui Library. One of these librarians also goes out to Wanganui Prison with the mobile library bus to visit the other units.

The librarians agreed that there was a difference between the residents in the self-care units and residents in the other units, the main difference being in their approach. The self-care residents are “more sort of relaxed and they can find their stuff and have a good time and have their little ways of going around and doing stuff”. One librarian mentioned that it was known that the residents were from the prison as a group of men all together in the library was not seen often. The librarians commented that members of the public generally came in and looked for books on their own, got their books and left, whereas the residents chatted with each other about the books they wanted to take out. There was a friendship amongst themselves and if one resident did not have his card with him, his friend would take the book out for him. The residents were used to being together the whole time and being part of a group.

The librarians echoed what the residents had said regarding the great variety of books they took out. Generally, the residents tended to take non-fiction books on a topic that interested them. One librarian mentioned that “one of them, week after week after week takes out books on chocolate making”. The other librarian adds that they had another resident who “was very keen on making guitars, actually making them. He took out several books on that, but then we had to stop that because most of our books on guitars had a disc or a video with it and they couldn’t take that. Even the guards couldn’t understand why we couldn’t allow them to take it out”. Other residents have taken medical books, books on different types of exercises, farming and growing vegetables, wood carving designs, animals, futuristic books, SAS books, Greek mythology, and Māori language and culture. Some self-care residents as well as residents in other units wanted to take out dictionaries and reference materials. Some took out crime books, and as one of the librarians said, “members of the public take out a lot of those!” One librarian said that a resident asked for a world atlas. He had heard about the Grand Canyon and said “I’m never going to get to these places, but when I open up the book, I can see these places. I can sort of close my eyes and I can imagine myself being there”.

Some of the requests that the librarians received consisted of a list of books by a particular author. Some residents were reported to “just go through the books like a hot knife through butter”. Once they had read all an author’s works, the librarians would say “we don’t have
anything more on this author, but there’s another author who writes the same way. And he’s suddenly going, Wow! And you bring him a list of that author and he completes a request form for that author”.

The librarians treated the residents like they treated any other member of the public; however, this was difficult at times. The residents are only allowed six books out at any one time. The librarians relayed that if they had to say, “sorry, you didn’t bring one of them back, therefore you can only have five”, the residents accepted that. Residents were also not allowed to take out magazines, however, the residents were doing so, and one librarian said “I didn’t realise they weren’t allowed to take out magazines”. Some residents wanted to take out magazines on bodybuilding to give them some ideas on what exercises they could do. Many preferred magazines as the articles were shorter and more current. However, no magazines were allowed. When the mobile library goes to the prison, all magazines are taken off, and anything with a disc is removed. The Department of Corrections makes the decisions as to what residents are allowed to use from the library and the Department also pays the bill for any items that go missing. Residents have their library cards cancelled if things go missing. If the self-care residents lose something, they often personally pay for the item as they do not want to have their library card cancelled. One of the librarians said, “I guess it’s good to teach them that actions have consequences and that they can make choices, which is the sort of tools they need when they get out anyway”.

The library also has the Internet available to members of the public; however, are self-care residents allowed to access it? One librarian said, “they’ve never asked ... maybe because they have to buy a time ticket and I don’t know that they come with money. I’ve never actually seen them anywhere except the non-fiction, and, you know, that sort of area”. In addition, residents cannot use the interloan service as this is provided by the National Library.

We asked the librarians whether they had observed any literacy problems or issues with the self-care residents. One of the librarians said that the “ones that come into the library come because they want a library book. We don’t see any others”.

The other librarian said that he has come across some residents who are looking for a certain book, and when he has pointed it out to them, they say “Oh, it’s too much writing”. Some books have too many words and they want some pictures included. Another resident said “I’m not too fond of reading”, but he wants to take out a book.

One of the librarians said that “the guards try to be as unobtrusive as possible. One of them says he sits on the couch pretending to look at TV, but in actual fact he’s watching the reflection in the glass doors so he can see, because he doesn’t want to embarrass them in front of other members of the public”. The guards are not noticeable and don’t look like guards in that they do not wear uniforms.

We asked the librarians what the benefits might be of the self-care unit residents going to the library, rather than having a library at Wanganui Prison. One pointed out that “if they had a library in there, for the self-care, I don’t think it would teach them because they’re learning to live by free rules”. The other librarian pointed out that “for some of them ... just generally talking to a few of them on Thursday or Monday night, that little bit different contact with someone different means so much to them”. He provided an example of one man who came to the library and chatted to the librarian about the rugby world cup: “for him it seemed to be like his week, like wow, you know ... he got to talk to someone different about something”.
Concluding Thoughts

We were unable to find evidence that any other library offers the chance for inmates to travel to a public library to choose their books. In most international cases, a library is established in the prison. With a small population as in New Zealand it is difficult to establish adequate libraries in all the prisons. In this case, Wanganui has turned a disadvantage into a strength, providing opportunity and learning for both residents and librarians.

The Wanganui District Library is able to service the inmates in two ways. The Mobile Library regularly takes books to those who are confined “within the wire”. For the self-care unit residents the chance to visit the library provides a vital link with the outside world and is part of the reintegration process.

Lehmann and Locke (2005, p. 5) point out that “the prison library can be the vital information resource that makes the difference of whether or not a newly released ex-offender fails or succeeds on the outside”. One of the advantages of inmates having a full library service in the prison is that inmates have regular access to collections, compared with the Wanganui prison where public library access is limited to once a fortnight. On the other hand, we consider that the opportunity to go out to a public library provides the additional advantage of helping inmates prepare for their release.

Dixen and Thorson (2001, p. 53) emphasize that “the central role of a library in a democratic society – contributing to lifelong learning and self-improvement, informing citizens so they can be active in government and the community – becomes even more vital in a prison situation, where a change of direction is essential for rehabilitation and a chance at a non-criminal life when prisoners are returned to the community”. We believe that encouraging self-care unit residents to visit the public library in Wanganui is a useful step towards reintegration, although we are aware that there are many other aspects that lead to successful community living that need to be addressed in concert.

In the United Kingdom, “to encourage resettlement and reduce re-offending, prisons are working wherever possible to build bridges with the community, and make connections with community organisations which can provide vital support for prisoners when they are released” (Kings, 2004, p. 3). The New Zealand Department of Corrections’ self-care unit in Wanganui is an example of how bridges can be built between the prison and a community organisation such as the Wanganui District Library. We commend both the Department of Corrections for their forward-thinking initiative, and the Wanganui District Library for the admirable service they provide.

It appears that the self-care unit residents interviewed are pleased, satisfied, and appreciative of the services they receive from the Wanganui District Library. They value their visits to the library and find them to be an essential and significant experience which makes them feel “normal” as they socialise with ordinary people. Residents are grateful to have the oppor-
nity of going to the library and choosing their own reading material. This is important because, although these inmates are confined to a limited area for a given period of time, they are still citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand, and as Burt (1977, p. 36) aptly points out, “there should be special concern that residents of correctional facilities be provided with the best possible service, because those on the ‘inside’ now will be on the ‘outside’ soon. Every means of assuring that inmates return to society as good citizens should be utilized”. They are members of the past and future “public” who, for whatever reasons, are temporarily removed from the community.
References


Appendix A

Interview Schedule
Self-Care Unit participants who use the Wanganui District Library

Employment

1. What would you like to do in terms of employment once you are out of the prison system?
2. Do you think it will be easy or difficult to get a job? What sorts of things would stand out as getting in your way? (Prompt for types of skills, what they believe they may/may not have picked up from their programmes).
3. What skills are important for adults to get a job in today’s world?
4. What are your expectations upon release?

Literacy and Learning

1. What does literacy mean to you? When you think of literacy, how does the Library fit into that?
2. What was school like for you? Possible (prompt about what you liked and hated). Was there anyone (family or teacher) who inspired you to learn?

Library

1. What do you think about libraries in general?
2. When you think about going to the Library, what is the first word that comes to mind? (to determine feelings or dominant impressions of the Library)
3. What attracts you to the Library trips? What’s the best thing about the Library trips?
4. When you are in the Library what do you do? What’s your favourite section?
5. How many books do you usually take out? Is this enough?
6. How often do you go to the library? If a regular, what keeps you going back? Do you feel this is enough time?
7. What would you like to see more of in the Library? What experiences/resources would make the Library more enjoyable or useful for you?
8. What do you think you are gaining from going to the Library? What do you hope to gain from your Library experiences? What do you most want to gain from your Library experiences?
9. Thinking about the other people in the self-care unit who do not come to the Library – why do you think they do not come? What in your view would it take to get them there?
10. How likely are you to continue to use the Library after your time with the self-care unit finishes?