A hunched figure shuffles into the reception room.

Head down watching leaden feet, a name plus a few particulars are mumbled with little conviction. A hesitant stop-start stumbling gives way twitching nerves.

The figure moves on, going through the motions of entry mechanically, looking as if he has done it before and expects to do it again pretty soon.

A well-hardened expression sets his features, hiding all thoughts.

One wonders at his age, probably drawing a blank.

One wonders too at the thoughts behind the mask, probably able to make a good guess with the majority — insecurity, fear and helplessness at the least.

One could look even futher and come up with a whole barrage of typically inherent points of concern; stripped self-esteem, stripped self-respect, low morale, low expectations, and it goes on.

For the new entrant and for those he will be with for the next few weeks, months or years, these root grey-area matters, so far, still remain intellectual fodder...

The reception room: Waikeria Youth Detention Centre.

The hunched figure: Any one of its largely transient inmates.

The poor self-image and esteem attitude amongst the centre's inmates has become the focal point for a pilot scheme which could, if successful, see a marked decline in reoffending rates at the institution.

A cultural advisor, merely a convenient official tag, has been appointed to the centre in an effort to raise the low inmate morale and carry it on after release.

The new innovation, brainchild, of now retired Justice secretary John Robertson, is part of the positive moves being made currently in penal reform. And if successful at Waikeria, the scheme will be implanted in other youth institutions then finally in the major prisons.

Bearing the breakthrough measure burden as the appointed advisor, is Tom Winitana, a behind-the-scene type catalyst.

Seated in this spartan, old-styled office, the still black-haired 50-year-old seems out of place, even uncomfortable in his four-walled surroundings.

Deeply etched lines and calloused looking hands further back up the impression.

Not mixing words, he gives the official line; "We work on the assumption that if we can help these boys discover themselves as people then maybe it is a way of helping them to identify and associate with groups outside the centre which cater for some of the things we have taught them.

"If the identity is established he can then get to like himself better as a person and contribute to society in a more positive and acceptable way."

Few qualifications

As good as the ideal sounds, he realises his job is a tough one calling for perhaps unorthodox treatment to achieve results. He knows it involves "feeling the way through" rather than any sort of officious table-talking.

He explains his credentials for the job, making it easy to see why he was selected as advisor.

He has few white paper qualifications and much of his early days were spent wherever money could be made.

Born and bred in Tuhoe-land (Urewera Bush) his Maoriness is instinctive, his knowledge of its mechanics, extensive.

This, he says, is important because although the cultural umbrella is open to all inmates, the emphasis is on the Maori offender due to his high rate of re-offending.

About 70 per cent of the centre's population is Maori, and of the 340 inmates, about 220 — those under 20-years-of-age — are dealt with by Mr Winitana.

"We have to help all the boys identify with the race they belong to culturally.

"Our emphasis is on Maori offenders because of the high incidence in prision and the high re-offending rate. If others want to be involved, that's fine, because they are all New Zealanders anyway."

Speaking in retrospect, Mr Winitana reassesses his role, explaining it without the frills.

"Basically we have been given a person badly shaped by society with all the negative things. We have to remould them and try to bring to life the person they could be — make human beings out of them."

"This has to be done within the