

Kohanga Reo

The jewel in the crown of the Department of Maori Affairs' achievements was the kohanga reo (language nest), which provided the world with a model language-recovery programme. Knowledge of kohanga reo has spread around the Pacific rim as far afield as Vancouver. Television documentaries have been made of kohanga reo for showing to other speech communities, such as the Welsh and Gaels, whose language survival has been threatened by English.

Despite reversal in the 1970s of the colonial policy of suppressing the Maori language by its inclusion in the education system, the language continued to retreat. Research by Benton indicated that Maori, as a consequence of Pakeha domination, was dying out.⁴³ Benton's survey of who speaks Maori in New Zealand was based on a sample of 33,638 subjects in selected towns and cities. The data substantiated his dire prediction of imminent death of the Maori language unless something revolutionary was done about it. At the time of the survey in the seventies, 50 per cent of the Maori population was under fifteen years of age. Only 15 per cent of this age group could speak Maori. The age group above forty-five, which constituted only 12 per cent of the population, accounted for 38 per cent of the Maori speakers.⁴⁴ Since this was the age bracket that was being phased out by death at a time when there was insufficient replacement in the lower age groups, Benton's conclusion of language death was the only one that could be drawn from the data.

The elders at the 1981 Hui Whakataurira faced the challenge posed by Benton to rescue the Maori language by proposing the concept of kohanga reo, run by kuaia, koro and mature women who were native speakers of Maori. In effect, the kohanga reo was to be a pre-school conducted entirely in the Maori language. The aim was to make every Maori child bilingual by the age of five, because 'Without the Maori language there can be no Maori culture, and the survival of a unique Maori identity; this is the spiritual force behind the creation of Te Kohanga Reo.'⁴⁵ Once the first pilot scheme established in 1981 at Pukeatua Kokiri in Wainuiomata proved the feasibility of the concept of kohanga reo, the idea was extended to other districts. Every new kohanga reo received an establishment grant from the department of \$5,000. But for the programme to be viable, management teams had to take a koha of \$25 as a weekly contribution from the parents.

Despite the cost of sending children to kohanga reo, the movement flourished as mothers up and down the country who were deprived of

their language wanted a better deal for their children. By November 1983 there were 188 kohanga reo in operation, of which only thirty-four were licensed and qualified for the \$18 per child subsidy from the Department of Social Welfare. To rationalise this new development, the Kohanga Reo Trust was established. One of its first tasks was to draw up a draft syllabus to be referred to the Consultative Committee on Child Care for official approval and recognition of kohanga reo for the purposes of state funding. These developments encouraged more growth so that by 1988, the number of kohanga had increased to 521.⁴⁶

Ostensibly kohanga reo aimed to nurture Maori language among pre-school children. But there were other spin-off effects as mothers too, strove to learn the language in order to provide reinforcement at home. The mothers also became politically active as they grappled with bureaucracy for resources. Symptomatic of this politicisation was the attendance of 1,000 people at Turangaawaewae Marae in January 1984 for the Kohanga Reo Conference. Kohanga reo is as much a political movement as it is a language-recovery programme and as such is an element in its own right of the modern Maori renaissance.

After two years in a kohanga, mothers are faced with the problem of where to send their children for primary schooling. There are only twelve bilingual schools in New Zealand where some instruction is conducted in Maori. There are approximately forty bilingual units within regular primary schools, nowhere near enough to cater for the needs of new entrants from kohanga reo. Parents unable to find such schools within reach put pressure on existing schools to make such provision, or decided to keep their children back in the kohanga until they were six, the age when it becomes compulsory for them to enrol for primary school.