



Preschool parents and children — kohanga reo and playcentre

Research has calculated that there are well over 100,000 of them, mostly under three years old. Statistics Department people estimate that there are fewer Maori children at pre-school than there could be, given their proportion in the general population. The Kohanga Reo Trust aims for 28,000 children in the language nests within ten years, not all of them with Maori blood. That still leaves more than two hundred thousand children under five for the other preschools to pick up.

Like playcentres, the kohanga reo survive on voluntary labour. But unlike playcentres, they operate five days a week and many have longer hours. Yet only one in three, or fewer, of the

workers are paid. Some see this as a strength: Donna Awatere told the Early Childhood Forum that "the kohanga reo is based on the abilities and strengths of ordinary people, not trained or paid." The Minister of Maori Affairs, Mr Koro Wetere, also sees "the strength of the kohanga reo is in its voluntary nature".

John Bennett developed this theme at the Early Childhood Forum. "The annual value of the people contribution in facilities, services and fees is in the vicinity of twelve million dollars," he said. "No one anticipated the reaction of the Maori people to this Maori language programme, and the complete dedication with which it has been ac-

cepted and pursued."

But with 448 language nests now operating, and more than 8000 children enrolled, the resources are becoming stretched. The Maori Women's Welfare League estimates that one-third of all its members are involved in kohanga reo. "Most of our kaiako are over 50," says Carol Love of the Kohanga Reo Trust. "This makes our training programme so very important. There is such a demand for Maori language speakers now, in schools and other places where they can offer good pay. Now the VOTP scheme is being phased out, which helped pay some of our people, and there may be problems till the replacement scheme settles down."

Other resources needed include buildings, suitable places for adults and young children to spend five days a week. While nearly half the language nests use marae, others are based in private homes, in school buildings, playcentres, churches and halls. Some establishment grants come through Maori Affairs, but they don't go anywhere near buying property. When the childcare services — and kohanga reo with them — shift across to the Education Department, they may have access to building subsidies. But even so, there is a lot of community fundraising, time and energy involved.

The shift to Education Department administration, so loudly demanded by the childcare services, is not so eagerly sought by the kohanga reo. Maori experience with the education system has not been happy in the past. There are fears that, with four major pre-school services and a host of smaller ones to feed, the Education Department cake is going to be sliced rather thin, and some services will end up with only a few crumbs.

Waiting for their turn.

