



The mokopuna live up Parliament

Kohanga challenging pre-school movement

The kohanga reo are challenging — and changing — the pre-school movement in New Zealand. This was obvious at the Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education, held at Parliament late last year. Speeches followed by songs featured throughout the two-day conference, and children from local kohanga reo were well in evidence during the informalities of the opening ceremonies.

But the impact of the kohanga reo goes a lot deeper than a superficial nod to Maori style. As the fastest-growing pre-school service in the country, kohanga reo affect kindergartens, playcentres and child care centres alike. Those involved in the other groups are beginning to see that they must accept the differences, acknowledge special needs and, hardest of all, be fair about shares of the funding and resource 'cake'.

Until recently, kohanga reo were lumped in with child care centres as far as Government funding went. They found a convenient cubbyhole in the Social Welfare Department, and some kohanga reo were licensed as child care centres and their numbers listed there. This made the child care statistics look pretty good, giving them a 75 per cent growth over the last four years. It also meant that some parents, after income testing, got help with the fees. The vigorous growth of the kohanga reo boosted the lobby working

hard for increased funding of child care generally. But when the money did come, in 1985, a lot of it was reserved for centres with "trained" staff — and the kohanga reo training didn't qualify. There were some subsidies available for "approved" building projects... and the kohanga reo usually didn't build. Latest figures show that two-thirds of the growth in child care numbers from 1981 to 1985 was in the registered kohanga reo, yet the kohanga reo saw little of the extra money that was granted because of their life and growth. At the Women's Forums in 1984, Maori women voiced their concern and resentment at the situation, at the lack of recognition of their skills and about the rigid system. Some said they had supported the child care lobby for increased funding, because they hoped to gain support for kohanga reo from it. But they found they did not.

The kohanga reo have run into some snags on the education front too. Learning by rote is frowned on by some

educationalists. Some parents get a bit edgy at the lack of pre-school 'equipment'. They feel their children may miss out, because of the bare surroundings, emphasis on natural materials and no toys, and that they may not be well prepared for school.

The established pre-schools more or less accept the kohanga reo. Both kindergartens and playcentres don't like being called "privileged pre-schools", a label used by some people at the early childhood forum. So they want to appear understanding and welcoming. But there are some sideways looks. Kindergartens note that their rolls include as many Maori children as ever. Playcentres, which were described by John Bennett of the Kohanga Reo Trust as "the soil from which kohanga reo sprang", have in some places converted to kohanga reo management. Officially, playcentres welcome the kohanga reo and recognise the justice of their claims for separate consideration and funding. But privately, there is some fear that kohanga reo, especially in rural areas, could reduce playcentre rolls and leave them vulnerable to claims that playcentre's day is past.

But there are still a lot of children under five, of Maori and other races, who get no preschool time at all. Trudy Keenan of the Institute for Economic