

Kei te pehea koe?

Sorry, I don't speak that language now



That could be the response from any of our three hundred kohanga reo graduates who'll be starting their school lives in February 1984. But newly appointed director of Maori and Island Education, Wiremu Kaa is confident the education system can cope with these Maori-speaking youngsters. And says the main influx of kohanga reo children won't be starting school until a couple of years, and by that stage primary schools will be geared to utilize the strength of the Maori language with more Maori-speaking teachers and resources.

Since kohanga reo began for Maori pre-schoolers nearly two years ago, parents have had to put in a lot of hours and make sacrifices to keep their children at kohanga reo. For some parents it's meant going to Maori language night classes to keep pace with the language their children bring back to the home. For others it's been financial sacrifices. But for all it's been a new way of life.

To see and hear te reo rangitira being picked up by the children is an experience no parent would want to forgo. Many parents justifiably want to know how the education system will handle their children when it comes time to start school.

Tu Tangata magazine spoke with Wiremu Kaa to find out his views and departmental policy on kohanga reo.

connie riddell

Mr Kaa's appointment as Director of Maori and Island education coincides with the first trickle of Maori speaking infants from Te Kohanga Reo into schools and many of the parents of these children are worried that their children may lose what they have learnt when they begin school. Mr Kaa, however, believes that a lot is being done to accommodate them at the primary school level.

"The department is advising districts to identify Kohanga Reo and also that schools set up some sort of programme in Maori language and culture to accommodate the children from Kohanga Reo. The

itinerant Maori language teachers, (ITM), are helping other teachers to become more confident and competent to teach the language also."

However, with the lack of money, there is also a lack of ITM's so teachers have inservice training and the department also runs three regional marae courses for primary and secondary school teachers.

Parents, he feels, can be of great help in schools.

"Parents can start by ensuring that their children attend school and are properly cared for. They can support Maori language in schools by going along to the parent-teacher meetings and talking things over with the principal but don't only talk things over, put them

in writing as well.

"Perhaps with this support from the parents we can ensure that our children will grow up knowing who and what they are."

He says that the Education Department is developing a greater awareness of Maori society and that it sees the way forward as being through bilingualism.

"People should learn one culture first and, having understood and appreciated it they would be able to adapt another," he said.

Mr Kaa believes that the Maori language and culture is a part of being New Zealanders and should be recognised. It is also readily available in society.

"We have many resources — both human and in institutions like the marae."

He also believes that the Maori language should be recognised as an official language of this country. But, he says, that this must not be used as an excuse for NON ACTION from the Maori people.

"What I am saying is that we, (the Maori people), should korero Maori whenever possible, in a variety of circumstances and in the company of many different people."

He feels that the young Maori should be encouraged to speak the languages and spread the initiative of the Kohanga Reo movement.

At first glance you might think him a "laid back, easy going" sort of guy. But Wiremu Mangai Kaa — alias the Director of Maori and Island Education is a man who sees a future for Maori people in education.