

Maori language revitalisation: history, rhetoric and practice

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The words 'language revitalisation' imply that the process of ethnic relinguification is about the revitalisation of an endangered language. However, Fishman reminds us that revitalisation movements typically involve 'larger ethnocultural goals' (Fishman, 1991, p. 18). This is certainly the case in New Zealand where language revitalisation initiatives can be said to have begun with the beginning of the kohanga reo language nests in 1981. However, histories and descriptions of the development of kohanga reo tend to focus solely on its role in language revitalisation, to the exclusion of its wider aim of Maori development (Puketapu, 1982). This wider focus has always been strongly endorsed by the founding CEO of the kohanga reo movement, Iritana Tawhiwhirangi, who was in charge of Te Kohanga Reo National Trust for twenty years (Diamond, 2003). It appears that in the twenty years since the beginning of kohanga reo, the development focus has become internalised amongst adults so that committed second language speakers of Maori see themselves as having a very personalised relationship with the Maori language and that they do not have as their main focus the revitalisation of the language for its own sake (King & Gully, 2008). This paper will use results obtained from interviews with committed second-language speakers of Maori (King, 2007) as the basis for an examination of language-centered rhetoric and promotional focus at both government and tribal level in order to challenge some of the beliefs about what it is we are revitalising in New Zealand.

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