

Revitalizing the Maori Language: A Focus on Educational Reform

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ABSTRACT

By the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century, it had become clear that the Maori language, the natural vehicle of Maori culture, was in danger of dying out. From the 1980s onwards, the Government of New Zealand, in collaboration with Maori community leaders, has invested substantial resources in an effort to revitalize the language. As a means of learning from the success of this project, the present study focuses on New Zealand's language-in-education policy. It presents a descriptive review of historical factors and of educational programs and policies devised in response to the indigenous people's call to save the Maori language and culture from extinction. Problems with the reform programmes are also addressed, taking into account economic, social, cultural and attitudinal factors prevailing in New Zealand society at the time.

Keywords: Maori, language revitalization, language planning, history of Maori, Kohanga reo (language nursery programs, tomorrow's schools)

INTRODUCTION

Since the age of imperialism and colonization, indigenous people in lands permanently occupied by settlers – whether in Africa, the Americas and Australasia - have struggled against racism, inequality and legal discrimination. These problems

are well-known and widely documented; but a lesser-known problem is one resulting from assimilation policies devised by dominant cultures and governments with the aim of transforming the indigenous people into citizens who conform to the norms of the alien colonial culture. Among aboriginal peoples who have faced such struggles are Africans, Native American Indians, Australian Aborigines, the Saami of Scandinavia, and the Maori of New Zealand. Education and language preservation are issues at the heart of such struggles. For

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example, education has often been offered in the colonizers' language, while other efforts to assimilate and control the indigenes include urbanization and the division of traditionally united communities (Fleras, 1990; Douglas, 1991).

The position of the Maori language, with regard to policies implemented by the Maori community and the New Zealand government, makes for interesting scrutiny. Writing in 1976, Marie Clay lamented that the Maori people were passing through a crisis in their history, and that there was a danger that their language, the real basis of their culture, would be lost. In response to this threat, significant investments in time and resources were made with a view to restoring the rightful status of the language. As Paulston and McLaughlin (1993, 1994) noted, some of the most liberal planning in modern times for language in education has taken place in New Zealand and in direct response to persistent demands by Maori elders anxious about the survival of their language and culture (Benton, 1989, 1991; May, 1998). Thus, there has been a huge effort to reverse linguistic decline – an effort probably unmatched by any other project elsewhere to save an indigenous language under threat from an imposed immigrant tongue. This, a major attempt at reversing language shift (Paulston, 1994; Paulston & McLaughlin, 1993-1994), has been made by both the Maori people and the government, and progress is such that the Maori language is no longer threatened with extinction (Spolsky, 2008; Liu *et al.*, 1999). An examination of the context of

this success can provide valuable insights for language policy and planning in other nations, especially those who are bilingual or multilingual.

This paper, therefore, presents a descriptive review of research on the topic covering such matters as historical factors, educational inequality, and programmes and policies specifically devised to answer indigenous calls for linguistic and cultural help. Problems with the programmes are also addressed, taking into account economic, social, cultural and attitudinal conditions prevailing in New Zealand society at the time.

THE MAORI PEOPLE: HISTORY AND PRESENCE

“I come where a new land is under
my foot,
Where a new sky is over my head;
Here on this new Land I stand,
O spirit of the Earth! The stranger
offers his heart to thee.

(Chant of the Maori Voyagers;
cited in Soljak, 1946)

The Maori people are Polynesians who sailed from islands near Tahiti to make New Zealand their home more than a thousand years ago (Liu *et al.*, 1999; Soljak, 1946). They called their new land Aotearoa, which means, in some translations, “the land of the long white cloud” and in others “the long bright land.” The Polynesian people adopted the name Maori (which means *normal*) to distinguish themselves from the Pakeha or

people of European descent (ibid). It is also the name used for their language. Spolsky (2009, p. 3) describes it as “one of some 1200 Austronesian languages spoken in an area ranging from Madagascar off the coast of Africa to Easter Island (Rapanui) some 3600 km west of Chile.” It was the Dutch (under Abel Tasman), the first Europeans to discover the islands after the Maori, who named them New Zealand (Benton, 1986). The British explorer James Cook and his expedition, landed there in 1769 (Liu *et al.*, 1999), and in 1814 missionaries arrived to spread Christianity among a polytheistic people whose highly functional educational system was based on orality (Smith, 1989).

The missionaries sought to evangelize through the Maori language (Mackenzie, 1987; Benton, 1986; May, 1998), believing this would hasten conversions. It was also feared that English would provide a window onto the worst aspects of European life. Mackenzie writes, “By containing them culturally within their own language, they [the missionaries] hoped to keep them innocent of imported evils” (Mackenzie, 1987, p. 164).

An alphabet, however, was needed and in 1815 Kendall, the first missionary permanently stationed in New Zealand, began reducing the Maori speech to alphabetic form. By 1830, an alphabet was created consisting of five vowels and nine consonants. However, two forms were left unsettled, namely, the frictionless continuants *h* and *w*. Today, the five vowels remain and the consonants amount to ten: *h*, *k*, *m*, *n*, *p*, *r*, *t*, *w*, *ng*, and *wh* (pronounced

like *f*). The first major book printed in Maori was Colenso’s *Maori New Testament* and the people were so enthusiastic about the acquisition of literacy that the practice was reported to have spread rapidly and widely (Mackenzie, 1987; May, 1998).

However, seeking to keep the Maori population innocent of imported evil, the missionaries restricted their reading to biblical texts, thus, confining their literary repertoire within an ancient middle-eastern culture. This also made Maoris dependent morally and politically on the missionaries as interpretive guides to European realities. Nor did it adequately prepare them for the new wave of British and European settlers soon to arrive (ibid).

A POLICY OF ASSIMILATION

The British explorer James Cook arrived in New Zealand in 1769, a time when the Maori people numbered 25,000 (Paulston, 1994). After the proclamation of British sovereignty in 1840, with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, British and continental Europeans began arriving in large numbers, bringing, *inter alia*, all types of disease to which the Maori had no immunity. Also introduced were firearms and alcohol, the latter eventually causing serious problems of drunkenness hitherto quite unknown in Maori experience (Holmes, 1992; see web page: <http://landow.stg.brown.edu>).

Although the Treaty of Waitangi promised to protect the Maoris and their language, and assumed a kind of Maori-Pakeha partnership, this was not translated into practice (Douglas, 1991). Only a decade

after its signing, European settlers already outnumbered Maori people in the country as a whole. A hundred years later, those of Maori descent constituted only 5% of the entire population (Benton, 1986) and were concentrated in the north, central, and eastern parts of the north island. Just before the end of the twentieth century, only 12 or 13% of the New Zealand population was deemed to be of Maori descent (see Paulston, 1994; Statistics New Zealand, 1994).

Before the 1970s, a Maori assimilation policy was overtly pursued by the government (Malgan, 1989) though, according to May (1998), this had been implied in the state education system that began in the 1860s and 1870s. "The teaching of English was considered to be a central task of the school, and the Maori language was often regarded as the prime obstacle to the progress of Maori children" (May, 1998, p. 284). Thus, the perception of the Maori language as a problem and the Maori communities as backward led to the introduction of special boarding schools and to children being taken from their homes for adoption - a procedure running counter to Maori belief in the importance of close community and family ties (Jones *et al.*, 1990).

Schools were seen as essential for promoting assimilation into the immigrants' mainstream European culture, for taming those "uncivilized" Maori people, and for forging a nation similar to Britain's (May, 1998). English was the language of instruction and Maori was banned from school precincts - a prohibition

often enforced by corporal punishment up to the 1950s (*ibid*). Thus, the Pakeha, largely succeeding in replacing Maori with English, relegated Maori culture to an almost obsolete status. This was seriously disruptive for a people cherishing a strong belief that their language and culture were inseparable and vital for their ethnic pride and identity.

Urbanization was another facet of the assimilation policy. This began especially after World War II, when many Maori people left their rural communities seeking economic advantages and incentives in the growing towns (see <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/maori-language-week/history-of-the-maori-language>). They not only assimilated but even became advocates of assimilation themselves, encouraging an English-only policy among their children (*ibid*; <http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz>). Exogamy, which became common after contact with urban Europeans, was another agent that fostered assimilation, with the result that now most people of Maori descent (perhaps all according to some sources), have some Pakeha blood (Benton, 1986; Malgan, 1989; May, 1998). However, it is left for individuals to classify themselves. A declining Maori birthrate became another problem. Statistics showed a particular decline after 1963. For example, while 6.3% in that year, the rate further declined to 2.3% by 1993.

Some sources suggested that before 1960 no primary school in New Zealand offered an officially organized Maori language programme and that the handful

which included piecemeal aspects of the language contented themselves with only a few minutes of daily instruction in it. On the other hand, Spolsky (2009, p. 5) contended that before the 1960s “There was some encouragement of Maori Arts and crafts in the schools and Maori was taught as a high school subject.” He also mentioned that another important development was “the opening of courses in Maori in the Universities” (ibid., p. 5). The first-ever Maori course at the tertiary level was offered by the University of Auckland in 1951. Despite those efforts, the speaking of Maori continued to decline until the 1980s (ibid.).

By the 1960s, it became clear that the Maori language was dying and estimates were made that within 25 years, or after just one generation, it would be extinct. Sensing the dangerous consequences of this, community elders began voicing their concerns (Paulston, 1994). Benton (1986) suggested, however, that the influx of Maori people into the cities led to a demand for the language there and for it to be taught as a second language.

While an English-only policy was not perceived as threatening when it was initiated (and, as mentioned above, even received some Maori support), this no longer held true after the 1960s (May, 1998; Malgan, 1989). In fact, Malgan (1989) asserted that integration into Pakeha society was rejected, and that assimilation, a process felt to be worse than integration, was seen as totally illegitimate and a prelude to destruction of the entire Maori culture. Malgan (1989) indicated that the Maori

people eventually asked the government to honour the Waitangi Treaty, which promised to protect the Maori language and culture. The government responded positively, and in 1967 the Maori people were given political representation in parliament and full integration into the school system (Paulston, 1994). In the same year, New Zealand’s education policy shifted from perceiving Maori culture in a deficit light and its language and children as problems in the school system to a positive acknowledgment of cultural difference. Indeed, the schools and educational system as a whole assumed some responsibilities for the under-achievement of Maori children. When a survey carried out by Benton in 1973 revealed that speaking Maori was common practice in only one or two small communities, increased attention was given to the problem (Spolsky, 2009). Consequently, bicultural education policies were developed during the 1970s and Maori language and culture were to be included in the curriculum at all stages (Holmes, 1992). Unfortunately, timing and methods were left to individual schools and principals (Benton, 1986). *Taha Maori* (the Maori perspective) was to be integrated into the curriculum too though, without a clear policy on details and chronology, the attempt became but one extra curricular element that produced little effect in terms of Maori language acquisition. Holmes (1992) asserted that the failure of government policies to meet legitimate demands led to the Maori people themselves asking for autonomous control over their educational development.

Community elders pressed for bilingual education and, between 1976 and 1980, the first four Maori/English schools were approved by the Minister of Education, the first of which, Ruatoki School, opened in 1978 (http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/english/issues_e/hist/index.shtml). These schools were established in predominantly Maori-speaking communities. However, Benton (1986) argues that this measure was also ineffective because English, a ubiquitous presence, still threatened the survival of Maori. If the overwhelming effect of English was to be countered, says Benton, it would have to be countered everywhere. Bilingual education suffered from other drawbacks too, such as a lack of teacher training, funds and resources, strong support from the dominant European group, and opportunities to hear Maori used in the community since the mass media were predominantly English-based (ibid).

The year 1977 saw the start of a movement called Tu Tangata, which sought to revive Maori through programmes developed throughout the country (Spolsky, 2009) and, between 1979 and 1980, the Te Ataarangi movement was established to teach the language to Maori adults (http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/english/issues_e/hist/index.shtml) using what was called the Silent Way (ibid). Te Ataarangi became, and remains, largely an informal endeavour, supported mainly by Maori extended families rather than by external sources (Spolsky, 2008).

Nonetheless, there was still a feeling that more had to be done to keep the language alive. Hence in 1982, a pre-school programme called *kohanga reo* or language nests (a species of language nursery program) was devised, in which the entire communities collaborated in providing not only language instruction but care and nurture for the children. In 1985, an initiative called Kura Kuapapa Maori began to offer education in Maori to students who had studied in the Kohanga reo schools. The government also supported other projects, such as the Tomorrow's School programme, which aimed at establishing a contractual arrangement in which parents, government and schools could equally devise ways of providing bilingual education. The following section discusses the programmes that both Maori authority and the New Zealand government employed to help revitalize the language.

“TOMORROW’S SCHOOL” PROGRAMME

Benton (1991) describes the programme launched by the New Zealand government to restructure education throughout its schools. As mentioned above, the programme sought to establish a contractual arrangement in which parents, schools and government would be equal partners in decisions relating to children's education. However, the word *equal* is inappropriate since the policy stated that the minister of education would have the final say in approving the charters

under which the schools would operate. In addition, he/she would have the right to include non-negotiable terms or clauses which every charter had to incorporate. There was no provision for second opinions.

Because of the presumed new partnership, the Department of Education and the education boards were abolished and boards of trustees for each school elected. The old Department of Education was replaced by a smaller Ministry of Education. Individual schools were given their funds with the freedom to decide what services to acquire. In view of this, one would expect a competition for funds between the English-medium schools and the bilingual education programmes, to the detriment of the latter. Funding was calculated according to a formula which considered the number of pupils and other factors, including the number of children of Maori descent. A child of Maori descent brought annually an additional \$75 (US\$45) to the school to assist bilingual education and Maori-related activities. No additional funds were allotted to bilingual schools or programmes, even if the majority of children were Maori. In most cases, however, the money granted for Maori children's presence was inadequate to cater for the resources needed to educate pupils effectively in both English and Maori (Benton, 1991).

The Maori people found one element of the new system encouraging. This was a provision that when a local school could not meet the children's legitimate educational needs, parents could set up their own schools within the state system.

However, this included built-in hurdles, just in case many Maori parents might opt for it, since this was exactly what they had asked for previously. Hence, for example, a condition that parents could not set up their own school unless they had exhausted every means of having their children's needs met through the existing school system. In that case, they were required to provide proof of such inadequacies. However, the Minister of Education was also empowered to block the establishment of such schools, even if the specified conditions were fulfilled (Benton, 1991).

As a result of the legislation, existing state schools retained their previous status which could not be changed without ministerial approval. Thus, the officially bilingual schools remained without provision to be considered as special types of school. In Benton's (1991) view, these schools became educational fossils and their future development would depend on parental pressure and the way the state schools wrote their charter (*ibid*).

A major problem with many governmental bilingual policies was their lack of precision. In other words, they lacked clear procedures for all the elements of the bilingual education process. Much was left to the will and interpretation of the principals and schools. This resulted in a wide variation in policy, which in turn created variations in standards, inputs and educational outcomes. It also made evaluation hard since there could be no standardized instruments to accommodate diversity. Furthermore, no clear statement

existed of even the rationale for supporting Maori revitalization (Benton, 1991; Paulston & McLaughlin, 1993, 1994), an obvious essential for guiding national policy implementation.

1995: A YEAR FOR CELEBRATING THE MAORI LANGUAGE

Chrisp (1997) reported another attempt to support Maori, which came as an initiative from the Maori Language Commission of New Zealand when it promoted 1995 as a year for the celebration of the Maori language. This programme was targeted at the whole population, Maori and Pakeha, and had the following goals:

1. To encourage the Maori people to learn and use their language;
2. To celebrate the place of the language in New Zealand history and modern society;
3. To generate goodwill among the general population towards the Maori language.

This initiative was based on the premise that a “theme year” would facilitate a concerted promotional effort to raise the status of the Maori tongue across the population in general and among the Maori people in particular. However, there was no evaluation for the participants and so the degree of gain during this year could not be measured with any degree of certainty. Chrisp (1997), however, mentioned some of the year’s accomplishments. One was that the promotion of Maori (He Taonga Te Reo) made it possible for the commission to distribute financial and other resources to

communities in the hope of creating social environments and motivation for Maori use.

During the year, stamps and coins were produced for the first time in Maori as part of He Taonga Te Reo. Also, the Minister of Education, citing the theme year as a shaping factor, approved a plan to oversee programs and expenditure in different sectors, including Maori language education, broadcasting, inter-generational language, and religion. Given the year’s general goodwill objective, a research exercise to gauge the attitudes of New Zealanders toward the Maori language found that many considered Maori essential to both Maori people and the country as a whole. This suggested a significant achievement.

This finding is fairly similar to that of Nicholson and Garland (1991), who, in a mail survey of 225 New Zealand adults, sought their opinions about the role of the Maori language in contemporary New Zealand society and their support for it. Two thirds of the respondents felt there was a place for the language in New Zealand society, but only a quarter thought that it should be more widely used.

Among other efforts to promote the use of Maori in both schools and the society, the most important was the declaration of Maori as a New Zealand official language in 1987. Then came supports through other initiatives, such as the Maori Week and Maori broadcasting in the media, which climaxed in 2004 with the beginning of the Maori Television Service (see <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/maori-language-week/history-of-the-maori-language>).

KOHANGA REO

At the beginning of the 1980, it had been clear to the Maori community that the governments' initiatives were not producing the desired effects because their language teetered on the brink of extinction and their children were failing at school. Therefore, they decided to tackle the problem as a community by helping to help teach Maori to young children whose parents could not speak the language. Hence, the opening of the Kohanga Reo centres to immerse preschoolers in the Maori language and culture before starting regular school at the age of five. This was immersion to the extent that Maori was the only language allowed

at the centres, at least in the presence of children. Butterworth and Young (1990) claim that the programme began as an experiment in 1981 in Wainviomata and was successful enough to receive support from the Department of Education. The first Language Nest was opened in 1982, with some help from the Department of Maori Affairs, though it was largely built without government support. The centres were run by Maori volunteers, most of whom were community elders. The programme was then, by and large, successful (Butterworth & Young, 1990; Paulston & McLaughlin, 1993-94) and grew so rapidly that by 1992 its centres numbered 719 (Statistics, New Zealand, 1994). Holmes (1993) provided

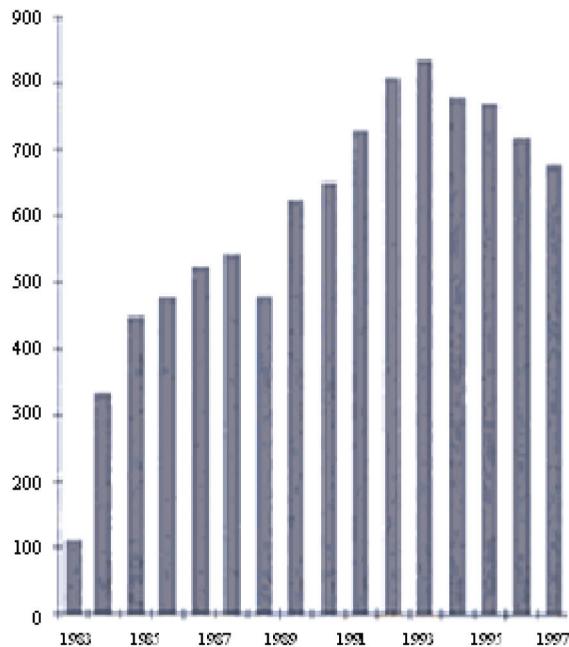


Fig.1: Number of Kohanga Reo Centers

(Source: Introduction to the Maori Language by Ken Hale, in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*, p.115)

a figure of about 10,000 children enrolled in the Language Nests by 1992, compared with 70-80,000 in all other early-childhood projects. According to Hale (2001), the number of Kohanga Reo centers plateaued after 1993, suggesting that they had reached a stabilization point, after which both the number of the centres and even the number of children began to decrease.

From 1996 to 1998, their number decreased from 767 to 646, while the number of children enrolled decreased from 14,000 to 12,000, as shown in Fig.1 above. In a more recent assessment, Ringold (2005) provided a count of 526 Kohanga Reo pre-schools, which represented a continued decline from 1998. Nevertheless, even in their years of decline, after they peaked in 1993, the number of the Kohanga Reo centres always exceeded the 100 centres in operation after the first year of operation. It was no surprise, then, that Ringold (2005) reported that participation in Maori immersion schools escalated in 2003 (after 10 years of continuous decline).

One problem facing this project, from its inception until after 1985, was that retaining the Maori acquired in the language nests during the first five years of a child's life could not be guaranteed because only a small minority of the children left the programmes to attend bilingual schools. Most went on to attend schools that only taught Maori as a second language. According to Benton (1986, 1991), the proportion of the Maori children who had attended schools where Maori had the same status as English was a mere 5%. Only that miniscule percentage

stood a good chance of retaining their native language. In effect, the other 95% were disadvantaged from the start and had little or no prospect of maintaining their proficiency in Maori in the long term (ibid).

Moreover, even though government acknowledged the success of these language nests, it was feared that the Maori community's ability to sustain its own programmes might lead to demands to leave the teaching of Maori exclusively to Maoris themselves. Thus, the centres became government-supported (ibid).

Another threat to the nests' long-term success was the aim to develop a spoken language which was not present for the most part within the community, and, when actually present, was usually overwhelmed by the ubiquity of English and bombardment by its media. Most job opportunities required English, and this had a dampening influence on motivation, leading to some degree of language loss among children graduating from the language nests (ibid; May, 1998). This calls to mind Paulston's (1994) remark that group bilingualism is unusual since the norm in prolonged-contact situations within one nation is for the subordinate group to shift to the dominant group's language. Despite these fears, the centres continued to proliferate until they plateaued in 1993 and then increased once more in 2003.

KURA KAUPAPA MAORI

Maori dissatisfaction with New Zealand's bilingual education policies produced two reactions. First came a request for a separate

education authority parallel to that of the state system, extending from pre-school all the way up to the tertiary level. This, however, was not included as government policy in the reform process following 1989. Second, the Maori community developed what are called *Maori Agenda Schools* (Kura Kaupapa Maori). These schools aimed at subordinating the entire educational system to Maori aspirations and needs by using the Maori language as the main medium of instruction and allotting only a small amount of time to the teaching of English to older children. Eight schools were established between 1987 (following the declaration of Maori as an official New Zealand language) and 1990 and all were in cities. This was appropriate, given that most bilingual schools supposedly providing equal education in Maori and English were located in predominantly Maori districts. An Internet article (on the website <http://www.nzmb.org/backgrounder/faqs/edsystem.htm>) provides statistics which, however, seems to contradict official figures. According to the article, in 1990, there were six officially designated Kura Kaupapa Maori (or Maori Agenda Schools), but, by 1994, there were 1,667 students in 28 schools. These figures suggest an increase in the number of Maori-medium schools. In 2006, there were 71 separate Kura Kaupapa schools and in 2008, 68 of them, enrolling 6104 students (Spolsky, 2009). Spolsky (2009) cited Bishop (2003) who had described the Kura Kaupapa project as:

“a powerful mechanism for addressing the imbalances that

have discriminated against Maori. They support self-determination and Maori cultural aspirations, and also present a collective vision that promotes home-school relations and wahanau [family] values” (Spolsky, 2009, p. 12).

However, Spolsky (2009) noted that most Maori children are enrolled in mainstream schools and that “only 15% of Maori learners are in Maori medium education” (ibid, p. 13). Reflecting on the overall situation of the Maori education in New Zealand, one can assert that there has been a steady growth in its status. The fact that Maori is now an official language in New Zealand suggests undeniable support for it and its speakers. In the Language Strategic Plan written by the Maori Language Commission, the vision statement says:

“By the year 2011, the Maori language will have been significantly revitalized as a dynamic feature of everyday life. This will involve sustained increases in both the number of people who speak Maori, and its level of use” (quoted in Spolsky, 2009, p. 16).

The government now seeks to foster positive attitudes towards Maori so that it will become a valued presence in the society (ibid.). In addition, Maori is now offered by many universities and higher education institutions, and immersion courses are

available to whatever Maori communities or tribes (iwi) need them to counteract language loss.

CONCLUSION

Paulston wrote in 1986 that “language mirrors social conditions, mirrors man’s relationship to man” (p. 119) and that is how it is in New Zealand. What is happening to the Maori language is a reflection of the social and economic forces at work in New Zealand society and in the relationship between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Maori people have made justifiable demands for school reform, and some of these have been met by the government. Moreover, they themselves sprang into action to protect their language and thus started many grass root movements which, along with government initiatives, succeeded in rescuing the Maori language. Spolsky (2009, p. 24) contends that “There is good reason to believe that the grass root activities - the continuation of Te Ataarangi, the beginnings of pre-school and school movements - have been even more influential than the institutionalized and government-conducted activities.” While government support was essential, community activities played the major role in changing attitudes and succeeded in transmitting the language to the younger generations (ibid.).

Maori, thanks to the joint efforts of the community and government officials, is now alive and well. It is one of New Zealand’s official languages and the number

of its speakers is continually increasing. In 1999, Liu *et al.* reported that a substantial number of Maori students were enrolled in universities and that 35% of them were “majoring in Maori studies” (p. 1025). Maori revitalization initiatives have borne fruit and have demonstrated that people’s will power and governmental support can work wonders in revitalizing an endangered language. Many languages across the world would face extinction if their native speakers and national governments do not act quickly and jointly to work for their revival and preservation. Languages and cultures are intertwined and the loss of a language marks the loss of a rich historical and cultural heritage, a treasure that humanity cannot afford to see disappear.

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