

## **Media release: Benton reports on te reo Māori to be accessible to all online**

**Thursday 14 September 2017**

Between 1973-1979 Richard and Nena Benton led the first sociolinguistic survey of te reo Māori in New Zealand. Publications from the research include a set of 143 booklets that report on each community involved. Until now, these booklets have been difficult to access, but NZCER has digitised them and made them [freely available online](#).

NZCER is pleased to be able to return the reports to the whānau, communities, hapū and iwi that participated in this survey 40 years ago.

Fluent te reo speakers went into the homes of almost 6,500 whānau of over 30,000 people to research the state of te reo Māori in the 1970s. The Benton survey, as it came to be known, demonstrated the perilous state of te reo Māori. The survey was undertaken by Te Wāhanga unit at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, led by Dr Richard Benton.

This seminal research is a key milestone in the history of the Māori language, according to the Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori – the Māori language commission. The research had significant impact, with the Waitangi Tribunal te reo Māori report of 1986 noting:

“The survival of the Maori language in the 20th century had come to depend on the existence of isolated rural communities and traditional villages where Maori still predominated and was the medium of social interaction in the home and in community discussions. The extent of the threat to language survival was graphically illustrated by Dr Benton’s description of language loss in nearly all the traditional villages. It is now apparent that the expectation that the language would survive because of those villages is not realistic.”

The Waitangi Tribunal Report recommended that legislation and a supervising body for te reo be put in place, and in 1987 the Māori Language Act 1987 and Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori were established.

Individuals are not identified in the reports, but their voices are heard. The reports document widespread evidence that Māori students were punished for speaking te reo Māori at school and many people noted that they did not teach te reo Māori to their children because, “I didn’t want them to go through the same punishment I went through for speaking Maori.”

Following Benton’s tradition, Te Wāhanga has recently published further research about the health of te reo Māori in homes and communities. Te Ahu o te reo Māori was commissioned by Te Taura Whiri i te reo Māori and explores how whānau in nine communities are working to re-establish or maintain te reo Māori as a normal means of communication in daily life. In his report, Benton noted

that the death of a language occurs following the passing away of “the last person to learn it as a child”. Te Ahu o te reo Māori found that, “In all of the communities involved... there were some whānau... who were frequently using te reo Māori inter- and intra-generationally.” This was not the case in some communities at the time that the Benton survey was carried out, and is an encouraging sign for te reo Māori now.

See the reports on the NZCER website:

<http://www.nzcer.org.nz/survey-language-use-m-ori-households-and-communities-1973-1978-reports-participants>

Contact NZCER Communications manager Dinah Vincent

[Dinah.vincent@nzcer.org.nz](mailto:Dinah.vincent@nzcer.org.nz)

Ph: 04 802 1467

Mob: 021 0273 8188