

# Southern Celts: Exploring attitudes to and the use of Irish and Scottish Gaelic in New Zealand

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## **Abstract**

*This research paper, part of a larger PhD narrative inquiry explores attitudes to, and experiences of, Irish and Scottish Gaelic languages in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It applies Clandinin and Connelly's three frames: time – past, present and future; place; and the intersection of the personal and the social, to the narratives of eight people with Scottish and Irish backgrounds. Using narrative inquiry and ethnography it presents stories that are resonant rather than generalizable, which illustrate that language is a contingent but still constitutive aspect of identity/ies.*

## **Full Abstract**

This research paper, part of a larger PhD narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) explores attitudes to, and experiences of, Irish and Scottish Gaelic languages in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It applies Clandinin and Connelly's three frames: time – past, present and future, place and the intersection of the personal and the social, to the narratives of eight people with Scottish and Irish backgrounds. These people were born in either the homelands of Ireland or Scotland, or New Zealand. The study draws on two sets of underpinning literatures, firstly the discursive construction of culture and identity (Fong & Chuang, 2004; Nieto, 1999;

Norton, 2000); secondly the relationship between language and identity (May, 2001). Using narrative inquiry and autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Muncey, 2010; Reed-Danahay, 1997) it presents stories that are ‘resonant’ rather than ‘generalisable’ (Pinegar & Danes, 2007). We believe these stories illustrate that language is a ‘contingent’ but still ‘constitutive’ aspect of identity/ies (May, 2005). We conclude that place, in this context Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Māori the indigenous people, their language and culture, has significantly influenced some of our interviewees’ attitudes to, and experiences of, Scottish or Irish Gaelic.

**Keywords:** language learning, language maintenance, Irish and Scottish Studies

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the attitudes of ‘Southern Celts’ to the use of Irish and Scottish Gaelic. Part of a practice-led PhD project entitled ‘Southern Celts’, it is a narrative inquiry into how people with an Irish or Scottish cultural background live out their cultural connections in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A small part of the larger ‘Southern Celts’ inquiry, this research addresses one of the questions explored in interviews: ‘Do you know any of the language and do you think it is important?’

There is value in researching current attitudes to the use of these Gaelic languages as Irish and Scottish Gaelic are heritage languages in New Zealand: people from Scotland and Ireland were among the largest groups of during colonial settlement (Te Ara The New Zealand Encyclopaedia, 2012). There are still many people claiming one or both of these Celtic or Gaelic cultural connections. While they are geographically separate nationalities, Irish and Scottish people draw on proximity of homelands and interconnections between their societies and cultures over many generations (Markdale, 1993; Pryor, 2003; Oppenheimer, 2006). Similarly there are resonances in attitudes to language and the cultures in which they are embedded in Aotearoa. With active social and cultural Scottish and Irish networks around New Zealand, as well as the widespread use of Skype, there are opportunities in private and public spheres to speak the languages ([www.ireland.co.nz](http://www.ireland.co.nz); [www.scottish.org.nz](http://www.scottish.org.nz)).

As researchers we have found, through our interviewees’ experiences, that over the past 20 years there have been opportunities to learn the languages as individuals or in groups, privately or through community-learning facilities, and other educational institutions, determined largely by individual commitment to teach or to learn Irish or Scots Gaelic. Opportunities around

New Zealand vary at any time. Given the numbers of Scottish and Irish people who have settled around the world, this study in the Aotearoa/New Zealand context may find echoes in other countries, as it does to research on attitudes to Scots Gaelic in Australia and New Zealand (St John Skilton, 2004) and a study on the use of indigenous language television stations in Ireland and New Zealand to support Irish and Maori languages and cultures (Lysaght, 2010).

Although we (Martin and I) are fellow researchers on this doctoral project, I (Celine) regard myself as a Southern Celt. The study uses a range of ethnographic and representational insights from narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Dauite & Lightfoot, 2004, Ellis & Bochner, 2005; Polkinghorne, 1995, 2007) to form its key methodological lens. Using narrative as both data and method of inquiry (Pinegar & Danes, 2007), this research applies Clandinin and Connolly's three frames of inquiry: time – past, present and future; place, and connection between the personal and the social as the major tool of analysis. Narrative inquirers '... accept and value the way in which narrative inquiry allows tentativeness and alternative views to exist' (Pinegar & Danes, 2007, p. 25). Accompanying this is the understanding that researcher/inquirer and researched will both learn and change in the encounter (p. 9); they both exist in time, in a particular context, and bring with them a worldview (p. 14). Inquirers work with particular stories to understand the experience under inquiry and to present findings that are 'authentic' and 'resonant' rather than 'generalisable' as is the aim of research in broader qualitative frames (p. 25).

Beyond the methodological framework, the study is informed by historical and academic literature on broader representations of these cultures, (Brooking & Coleman, 2003; Fraser, 2000; Hewitson, 1998; McCarthy, 2010) and by postmodern and poststructuralist understandings

of the construction of culture(s) and identity(ies). The following section will introduce the latter, before we explain methodologies behind the inquiry and present findings in the words of our subjects speaking of their experience of Irish or Scottish Gaelic.

### *Underpinning Literatures*

The two major sets of literatures underpinning the narrative enquiry in this paper are firstly, the discursive construction of culture and identity; secondly the relationship between language and identity.

Construction of culture is complex, as postmodern frames emphasis. (Weedon, 2004). A typical illustration of this is Chuang's description of culture and cultural identity with reference to nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, life-style choices, organizations, age, class, group membership, regional identity and spiritual identity (Fong & Chuang, 2004). These characteristics, Fong and Chuang argue are 'dynamic, fluid, dialectical, relational, contextual and multifaceted' (p. 64). A second, and similarly nuanced, perspective comes from educationalist Nieto (1999) who views culture as dynamic, multifaceted, embedded in context, influenced by social, economic and political factors, socially constructed and dialectical (p. 49).

Understandings of identity and social identity are similarly dynamic. In her poststructural analysis of social identity, Norton (2000, 2010) views individual social identity as complex, drawing on Weedon's (1997) theory of subjectivity as multiple, changing over time and a place of struggle. In her exploration, Norton highlights relations of power and their effects on how individuals are able to acquire and use language. She cites Cummins's (1995, 2001) analysis of coercive and collaborative power relations: 'Coercive relations of power....usually involve a definitional process which legitimates the inferior status accorded to the subordinated group,

individual, or country' (1996, p. 14). We apply this to the *language*. The stories of individuals that follow illustrate how differing power dynamics at play in personal and social levels, both coercive and collaborative, have influenced interviewees' experiences and attitudes. Norton (2000) draws on Bourdieu's (1986) economic metaphor of the capital attached to language. Later discussion will focus on the social, cultural and economic capital that some interviewees find in Irish and Scots Gaelic.

This paper is underpinned by May's work in minority language rights (2001, 2005). This work explores the links between language and ethnic and or national identities. May (2001) finds language is not a necessary marker of such identity/ies and states that language is *a contingent marker* of ethnic identity. He also argues the survival of a language is no less valuable because of this. He challenges academic disinterestedness and the orthodox view that rejects language as a key factor in identity politics (p. 316) as 'not doing justice to the very real struggles which are played out around the world to maintain languages'. We see our research as a contribution to the stories of those who strive to keep Irish and Scots Gaelic alive. We aim to achieve this through giving people's attempts to speak the language, in New Zealand, a voice.

May (2001) explores historical connections between these Gaelic languages and Māori the indigenous language of Aotearoa, identifying that some of the same colonial laws used in the suppression of Gaelic languages in Ireland and Scotland were later used to suppress Māori language in the process of colonization in this country. Several interviewees make connections between Māori and Gaelic, which are illustrated in narratives later in this paper.

*The implicitness of the researcher in subjective academic narrative*

In this narrative inquiry we acknowledge that the doctoral researcher/inquirer has an Irish family background and has lived and worked in Ireland. The postmodern frame allows her voice to have weight, telling one story, among the 25 gathered from these groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This empowers her to speak as one member of cultural and ethnic groups, and social classes, as well as a gendered reality. To do this is to claim an alliance with an evolving form of autobiographical ethnography (Chang, 2008, Muncey, 2010) where ‘native’ members of a group become tellers of their own cultures (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2) and to acknowledge that autoethnography is a postmodern form questioning the self–society split, validating the authority of the researcher–writer to speak as the member of their group (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Arnold (2011) acknowledges the situated self as data and calls such narratives as this paper ‘subjective academic narrative’ (p. 54). Conscious of these autoethnographic impulses and influence I used a reflective journal to interrogate my practices consistently. Leavey (2010) recommends this process to acknowledge that, rather than subjectivising it, the researchers’ experience brings to the process of writing added insight to the project and acknowledges empathy. Along with the autobiographical ethnographers, Clandinin and Connolly (2000) say the narrative inquirer meets him/herself in the past, present and the imagined future, in the process of the inquiry and the writing of it. As researcher–writer, I too, sit on this continuum, and my interpretations colour my subjects’ stories.

In addition to the autoethnographic involvement discussed above, a background in applied linguistics, with an interest in the construction of culture and identity has had an implicit influence on both the choice of interviewees and construction of the 10 interview questions, informed by the techniques Roulston (2010) describes for attention to reflexivity. The focus for

this paper is on responses to one of these questions: ‘Do you know any of the language and do you think it is important?’

## **Methodology**

### *Data collection and subjects*

The narratives come from 25 interviewees, ranging in age from 30 to 80 years old. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and returned to subjects to be read for accuracy and to ensure the subjects felt themselves represented authentically. All subjects gave their consent to use their responses in written form. Interviewees comprised 15 women and 10 men who were born in Ireland or Scotland, or in New Zealand with Irish or Scottish family connections. Several have multiple connections, Irish and Scottish, or English; three, a Māori background. They were chosen on the basis of geographical spread, equality of gender representation, an attempt to include voices from different generations, as well as to cover as wide a range as possible of cultural representations. Of the 25, six expressed little interest in the language, saying they had no reason or need to learn any, even if they thought it was important in Ireland or Scotland.

In this paper, we report narratives from eight people, who have learned the language, attempted to, or speak with some feeling for the importance of the language. I also aimed for interviewees with different social and cultural backgrounds from different parts of New Zealand, believing that place has significant influence on experience.

### *Data analysis*

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a technique Ryan and Bernard (2003) call ‘theoretical sensitivity’ (p. 88), a flexible variation on grounded methodological approaches used

with texts where the speaker's trajectory, a sense of the whole story and the whole person, are crucial. Theoretical sensitivity involves identifying common understandings and viewpoints, but recognises the limitations inherent in the fact that data is reflective and self-reported. We used a method of closely reading transcripts, identifying key storylines to understand subjects' reported practices, to enable us to extract data related to the research question.

### *Data organization*

In this paper we have chosen Clandinin and Connolly's frame of place, and in this context, place of birth as the major organising category for reporting findings from interviewees' narratives: firstly people born in the homelands and secondly those born in New Zealand. Within this section, along with presenting the voices of interviewees, we also apply the other two frames of time, and the individual in social context. This allows us to explore the influences that interviewees themselves ascribe as having significant bearing on their attitudes to Gaelic, which may explain, or partially explain, their learning and their use of the language over time. We extend this analysis in the 'Discussion' section by analyzing interviewees' experiences in relation to key aspects of the underpinning literature on the construction of identity and culture.

### **Presentation of findings**

#### *People born in the Irish and Scottish homelands*

The first group of narratives is from people born in the homelands, Scotland and Ireland, from different generations, all four of whom have been in New Zealand for between one and five decades.

*A Scottish man, Highland born and bred, who grew up with older family who spoke Gaelic, a businessman in New Zealand for over two decades*

I think to have an understanding [of the language] is important, especially when it refers to most of your mountains and rivers and place names. We were very lucky in the seventies when I was at school they emphasised that point, so most of my generation have a reasonable understanding. But it depends, focus on language without focus on education is a waste of time, education is more important than language in the broader context...For a country to survive as a country in its own right or as people in its own right then you have to be forward thinking, and Scotland is very forward thinking and has benefited as such. It [economic progress] gives you the ability to do other things, such as appreciate the language and the culture...I think that was recognized, by the old folk and my folk were all Gaelic speakers, but they weren't worried about the Gaelic language, they were more worried about the progress of future generation, sad but true.

*Scottish woman in her 30s, born in the central belt of Scotland, a journalist, in New Zealand over a decade*

When I was at school we weren't allowed to use Scottish words, I don't mean Gaelic but Scottish like 'bairn' for 'baby', we'd have got a row for speaking like that. The only time we were allowed to was when we did the Robert Burns speaking competitions each year. So we had to speak properly. But children are now actively encouraged to speak that way...my parents are now actively using those words because they are both teachers....When I was growing up there were

Gaelic television programmes on, like you get Māori television, government subsidized. Since I've left they've started setting up a few immersion schools in Glasgow but that wasn't around when I was there. If my boys were in Scotland now they'd be more encouraged to use Scottish words like 'a wee bairn' and having a 'griet' for having a cry. My mother will teach them Scottish.

*A Dublin-born woman, who learned Irish at school and emigrated at 13 years old with family over five decades ago, a teacher and writer*

I think the language of a country is key to understanding the country and its culture...I have to say I regret that my experiences of learning Irish were very negative. In Ireland at the time I was going to school the Irish Government had made Irish compulsory. Now I'm not really sure that this was necessarily a good thing to do, even though I applaud the fact that they wanted to keep Irish alive and it was close to extinction....if you went to a private school, if the school paid a levy to the government they were then not obliged to teach Irish. The school I went to wasn't sufficiently affluent or didn't charge sufficiently high fees to get into that bracket. But at the same time it was a Church of Ireland School, which is the Anglican Church...and many of the people who were there were very pro-British including my parents, who had little or no sympathy for the Irish language. So even though it was taught, there was certainly a significant element of rather negative attitudes to learning Irish, not on the part of all the parents and girls....I also have to say I have no facility with language.

*Irish-born woman, a fluent speaker of Irish, a community worker, in New Zealand over two decades*

We tried for a while to keep the language going. We used to meet on a regular basis with some other people to speak Irish and to upskill ourselves in the language. In that group initially were two New Zealanders of Irish extraction who wanted to learn the language, but it was pretty daunting. One of those guys had never ever learnt another language so I'm afraid he just didn't have the skills to do it, but the other chap had learnt Spanish and Māori and he was very good. But then I got full time work and sort of stopped meeting on a regular basis. But when I see those guys we exchange a few words in Irish, or if one of them rings up I always know who it is. It's really hard to keep that a living thing....I have been in a singing group going for twenty years. The other women in the group are not Irish, but I've taught them songs in Irish and I have explained to them the historical significance of the songs and put them into context...I've had several attempts at learning Te Reo.

Applying Clandinin and Connolly's lenses of place and time in these multigenerational contexts reveals different attitudes to the language, and opportunities to acquire and maintain the languages.

The wider social environment impacts on all subjects. This illustrates the third lens, where personal meets social. For the first interviewee, his family environment seems to have influenced his belief that education is a more powerful driver than a focus on language. His use of the word 'sad' when recounting that the older generation of his family, who were Gaelic

speakers, were more focused on ‘progress’ than the language, seems to acknowledge regret that by necessity language could not be a priority. The second interviewee illustrates how the passing of time brings change to a social context. A younger subject, she was discouraged from speaking Scottish at school, but describes the change of attitude over time. This has seen her parents, who are teachers, now teaching and encouraging the use of the language. She aims to reclaim for her young New Zealand-born sons the language skills she did not learn and for their grandmother to teach them. She draws the comparison between Scots Gaelic and Māori, and the government-funded television programmes being used in both countries to support the languages and the cultures. The first Irish-born interviewee illustrates the influence of her social surroundings in the negative attitudes of her parents to Irish Gaelic and of the schools she attended which contributed to her ambivalence about learning the language. The second, who has invested time and energy in maintaining the language, acknowledges the difficulty of keeping the language alive in New Zealand. Three of the four have learned some Māori.

*New Zealand-born interviewees*

The second group of findings is four narratives from New Zealand-born interviewees, two men and two women, from both the North and the South Islands. This geographic spread is deliberate because some parts of New Zealand are associated with these two groups so every attempt has been made to broaden the possible range of narratives.

*A man of Irish background who speaks some Gaelic and Maori and sings them both, a curator*

My great-great-grandmother and my great-grandmother were Irish speakers, I knew my grandfather and he knew her, so it’s not that long ago. It annoyed me when I looked at Irish words I couldn’t make any sense of the letters and the sounds...I

eventually got a very good self-help course that I bought on Amazon and read the first ten chapters...I've learned a few basics of the language though I didn't aspire to speak Irish because there is no-one to speak Irish to. I would rather become more competent in that [Irish] than Maori, but that will have to wait. One day I might go to Ireland and do a summer school....I decided every time I learned a new Māori song I'd try to learn a new Irish song, which is much harder. I got the *waiata* group (group that sings Maori songs) to learn 'Ora Se do Bheatha Bhaile' [a traditional Irish song]...We sang that and interposed it, with a Māori song called 'Ko Tou Rourou,' a [Māori] song about sharing cultural traditions....Now I've got quite a big repertoire of Irish songs and I've taught my children some of them. When they were little they were open to that, now they wouldn't bother so much, but when I die they'll probably sing an Irish song over my body, they know I'd like that.

*A woman of Irish, Scottish and English heritage, trained as a classical musician, who has played the Uilleann pipes*

I started to learn Irish Gaelic at Continuing Education...Once this course had finished, the class carried on at the Society clubrooms. Our teacher...from Belfast was very experienced. I am not by nature a sociable type, but I made many friends in this class, we shared musical and literary, as well as linguistic, interests....I believe that having an understanding, even if not as a fluent speaker, of any language is central to understanding the culture – the rhythms and thought patterns – and for the music in particular. Slow airs played on the *Uilleann* pipes usually derive from songs in Gaelic, so to get the phrasing it is helpful to know and understand the words. The

sound of the spoken language carries through into the form and phrasing of the music....In January 2000, for the Millennium ceremony, I played a slow air surrounded by about 15,000 people, while the specially built Irish *curragh* [small sea going vessel like a canoe] came in to shore behind the Māori *waka* [canoe].

*A man with a Scottish-born parent, a teacher*

I learnt and taught Scottish Gaelic and I found the language an extremely important insight into the highland culture, which differs in many ways from the lowland. Behaviours that would not bother a Kiwi, especially related to hospitality, would cause extreme offence to a Highlander and vice versa. Arrogance and self-importance were disapproved of, but human shortcomings were often overlooked. People with an intellectual handicap were regarded as special. The people lived under fear of the all-powerful Calvinistic Free Church of Scotland, north of South Uist. I was fortunate to have a close friendship with my teacher – a retired military man from Harris and I learnt much about the culture through this relationship. I would almost say that the language is about eighty percent of the culture. It is hard to discuss the language and culture without writing a book....We were influenced by the Māori renaissance in the 1990s.

*A woman, of Scottish, English and Maori cultural backgrounds, a writer*

I think it is extremely important but as far as I know none of the children were given any Gaelic, certainly Nan never used it. But I do think it is important which is why I'm very keen on family members learning Māori as well. It's a shame that the

Gaelic wasn't properly introduced. I understand Orcadian Gaelic is pretty strange, it has a lot of Norse words in it and some of those Norse words Nana used to speak of, like lifting a 'home' of potatoes spelt 'holme' which comes directly from Norwegian. She also talked about a 'kist', which was a chest they originally kept oatmeal in. Out there in the kitchen used to be a tilt-lidded thing...in which there was always a sack of flour and later on converted kerosene tins of sugar and almost certainly oatmeal....Those two words I remember particularly because they were odd.

We will apply Clandinin and Connelly's lenses of time and place, first, time: all four look back to chart their experience, while only one looks to the future, and his death, when he hopes his children will sing an Irish song for him at his funeral. By relearning some of the language of his great-grandparents and teaching his children to sing in Irish, he has created a bridge across the generations, spanning time and place, and for him his ancestral language is fitting to ritualize his own passing. He acknowledges his children became less interested in learning Irish songs as they got older.

For these four people, with varying degrees of understanding and ability to use the languages, from remembered words to some degree of spoken fluency, it is the place, the New Zealand context, which is repeatedly referenced in relation to Māori language and culture. The first interviewee combines Māori and Irish songs, while the second applies her musical skills to the Irish *Uilleann* pipes, assisted by her knowledge and understanding of the rhythm of Irish Gaelic, using her skills in a public celebration which involved a Māori *waka* and a traditional Irish *curragh*. The third was influenced to learn Scots Gaelic by the Māori cultural renaissance

around him, and the fourth acknowledges the value of Scots Gaelic to the family, though the family moved from the Gaelic to Maori, given the shift to New Zealand and marriage to Māori.

## **Discussion**

Having focused the three lenses of time, place and the intersection of the personal and the social on our subjects' narratives we now move to the broader underpinning literatures.

As Ryan and Bernard (2003) caution, these responses are reflective and self-reports, thus while they have value because they clearly illustrate individual experiences of, and attitudes to, these Gaelic languages, they need to be approached with the awareness of possible implications of any self-reports. However recalling Nieto (1999) and Chuang's (2004) characteristics of culture and cultural identity, we believe each of the eight narratives illustrates individual experiences that are dynamic, relational, contextual and multifaceted. In the experiences of those born in the homelands, power dynamics Cummins (1995) described as 'coercive' seem to have been more at play in their opportunities to acquire Gaelic, seen in the younger woman who had 'to speak properly' at school, meaning not using Scottish words, and the older woman whose parents were not supportive of expressions of Irish sovereignty, including speaking the language. She was clear that the language was key to understanding the country and its culture but ambivalent about her own experience. The Scottish-born man articulates his equally complex understanding in that he believes it is necessary to understand the language because it names the mountains and rivers of the homeland. However, in train with that, he considers the language holds little economic or resource capital, bearing in mind Bourdieu's (1986) 'capital'. The experience of the second Irish-born interviewee explains how difficult it is to keep the language living in New Zealand without a community of speakers around her, so illustrating Norton's

(2000, 2010) assertion that maintaining identity over time is problematic. She sings history in Irish, as her way of maintaining the rich social capital her language and culture holds, and teaches others.

For those interviewees born in New Zealand, Cummins (1995) ‘collaborative’ power dynamics are evident as three of the four who invested time in learning the languages speak positively of the experience and value the cultural capital the languages affords them. The experiences of the two who learned Irish Gaelic illustrate the social and cultural capital that the language holds for them in New Zealand: the first who taught himself Irish values it enough to maintain his use through learning Irish songs and singing in Irish. He has also taught his children Irish songs. The second, a musician, finds that the sound of the spoken language carries into the form and the phrasing of the traditional airs she played on the *Uilleann* pipes. Her choice of instrument and music reflects the investment she made in the language and her music allows her to maintain this connection. For the Scots Gaelic speaker the experience of learning the language brought a wealth of cultural understanding of Scottish society. All three have been, and are still, enriched, following Bourdieu’s (1986) metaphor, by their knowledge and use of the Gaelic languages.

### **Limitations**

As outlined before, these narratives are self-reports. Thus there may be more than the stated reasons contributing to attitudes and experiences, an inevitable outcome of this style of research. However, despite the limitations, they are valid for the richness of experience they reveal.

## Conclusion

In this narrative inquiry we have presented the voices of eight Southern Celts who describe their experiences of and attitudes to Scots and Irish Gaelic. We found multi-layered responses and varied experiences, and that the social and cultural capital these languages hold varies according to the individual, influenced by time and circumstances in both personal and wider social environments. Returning to May's (2001) assertion that language is a contingent aspect of identity, he argues, (2005, p. 330) as we do, against contingency being allied with peripheralism or unimportance. 'While language may not be a determining feature of ethnic identity it remains nonetheless a significant one in many instances' (p. 330). We believe our narratives illustrate that, for some of our interviewees, the Gaelic languages are a constitutive factor of their identity.

The most consistent theme we have encountered is engagement with Māori, language or other aspects of culture, and given the context of the research in Aotearoa/New Zealand, this underlies the importance of place and of the indigenous people and language to shaping our interviewees' experiences in relation to either Irish or Scottish Gaelic. It suggests to us that, at a personal level, an understanding of the similarity of experiences of Gaelic peoples and cultures, to that of Māori, as they too, struggle to maintain their language and culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand is a powerful motivation for some to acquire a degree of fluency in both Gaelic and Māori languages.

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