



# Naming Māori Learning Spaces

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## Abstract

Following up on our recent article in this journal, this research note discusses the range of names used in Māori school settings for flexible learning spaces (FLS) and innovative learning environments (ILE). There are various existing Māori names for FLS/ILE, which fall into two types: *individual* names and *category* names. We consider several of these names as a way to explore this concept and provide a background for positing ‘he wāhi ako’ as a generic name for Māori FLS/ILE, which translates into English as ‘Māori learning space(s).’

**Keywords** Flexible learning spaces (FLS) · Innovative learning environments (ILE) · Kaupapa Māori · Māori learning spaces/He wāhi ako

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## Introduction

This research note follows on from our recent scoping article on the topic of Māori FLS/ILE, by which we mean FLS (Flexible Learning Spaces) and ILE (Innovative Learning Environments) in Māori school settings (Stewart et al., 2024). We are using the term ‘Māori school settings’ (‘Māori schools’ for short) to include *all* schools (or units within schools) with a Māori identity, which range from Kura Kaupapa Māori and Wharekura, to rūmaki/immersion and reo rua/bilingual schools and units, to whānau rooms/units, to Māori departments in secondary schools.

Flexible learning spaces and ILE are two of the main terms used in the ‘learning environments’ literature, which has become important as a result of changing norms for school building and design. In Aotearoa New Zealand, where school provision is nationally organised, and the school building stock is old and increasingly unfit for purpose, FLS/ILE have become normalised in the past 15 years as the standard approach for school building projects. This widespread spatial transformation of schools has led to a burgeoning research literature on how these new kinds of learning spaces and environments influence the lives of students and their teachers (Benade, 2022; Trask & Khoo, 2021; Wright & Khoo, 2021). This topic has enlivened interest in theories of space, spatiality and the visual in education, and their impact on curriculum and pedagogy.

Only a few papers have been published on Māori FLS/ILE, most focusing on one individual kura/school context (exceptions are Coleman & Luton, 2021; Mane et al., 2023). This paper follows a Kaupapa Māori approach to dig into the concept of Māori FLS/ILE by discussing various names that are used for FLS/ILE in Māori schools. Most of the names discussed come from these papers.

Names are of unquestioned importance in every context, and multiple new names and terms for school and classroom design have emerged in national policy over recent years. For example, the term MLE (modern learning environment) was introduced into policy in 2011, then ILE (innovative learning environment) in 2015, followed by QLE (quality learning environment) in 2019 (Starkey & Wood, 2021). ILE seems to have the widest brief, hence we use it to mean the whole school site including buildings and outside areas (whereas we use FLS to mean the new classrooms/teaching spaces). While not intended to exactly replace one another, these multiple terms are confusing and “may or may not have different meanings, or definitions, in different contexts” (Hest, 2022, p. 20).

In the world of Māori education, preferred names and terms have been adopted by each school group or community. We aim to theorise the various Māori educational experiences of FLS/ILE, work that requires conceptual clarity about Māori FLS/ILE, possibly with new categories and definitions. To examine existing names is a simple way to help unpack the concepts involved in our research. Below, we discuss various names or terms used for FLS/ILE in Māori school settings. These names fall into two logical types, *individual* names and *category* names. The first type follows the Māori tradition of assigning personal names to significant buildings. The second type are generic labels that can be considered Māori equivalents of terms like FLS or ILE. These two types of names are considered in the following sections.

## Individual Names: Te Whakaingoa Whare

To give an important building its own name (te whakaingoa whare) is a meaningful cultural practice in te ao Māori (the Māori world), which typically involves a blessing and opening ceremony starting before dawn on the designated day. The larger and more prestigious the building, the more weighty the naming process. In Māori traditions, community life centres on the whareniui (meeting house) as the largest building and focal point of a marae. Sometimes the word ‘marae’ is also used to mean the whareniui. Whareniui are tribal works of art and spatial representations of ancestral genealogies (Smith, 2000). Traditional Māori communities are based on kinship groups (whānau, hapū, iwi), so the whareniui is often named for a tupuna (tribal ancestor) and conceptualised as their physical manifestation—an Indigenous Māori physical-symbolic metaphor.

The different parts of the whareniui represent the parts of the body of the tupuna—the backbone being the ridgepole, the arms being the maihi (front roof-beams) and the head being the koruru, a carved figure at the centre of the front gable. In this way, the local knowledge relating to the histories of the families who ‘belong’ to that place and those ancestral genealogies is held and preserved within the building itself: in its physical elements and their spatial relationships, which facilitate practice in accordance with Māori concepts of pōwhiri, tapu-noa, manaaki, etc.

One example is Hinemihi, the Te Arawa whareniui, who sheltered her people during the 1886 Tarawera eruption. The story of Hinemihi is that in 1893 she was bought for £50 as a souvenir by departing Governor General William Hillier Onslow (Wikitera, 2015). Hinemihi was dismantled, the pieces shipped to Surrey, UK, and resurrected there in the grounds of Clandon House, where she remains today, thousands of kilometres from home. Many other whare are also similarly trapped in Eurocentric museums and collections.

In the 1950s, Hoani Waititi was an early pioneer teacher of te reo Māori as a subject in secondary schools, and the driving force behind establishing Hoani Waititi Marae as the first-ever urban marae, located at Parrs Park in Oratia, West Auckland (Te Ara—The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, 2000). Waititi spearheaded this social experiment to help Māori families of the urban generation to re-connect with their culture and identity in the city, far from their tribal landscapes, waterways and ancestral marae. Fittingly for the first urban marae, the name of the whareniui is Ngā Tūmanako, which means ‘hopes and aspirations’ and breaks with the tradition of naming the whareniui after a tribal ancestor, since this whare was deliberately designed to be urban and pan-tribal. Ngā Tūmanako is also the name of the celebrated kapa haka featuring past and present ākonga (students) of Te Wharekura o Hoani Waititi Marae (Tahana, 2023).

Current research led by Jenny Lee-Morgan investigates curriculum and pedagogy in one Māori FLS, located within an urban Auckland primary school (Lee-Morgan & Martin, 2023). Its name is Te Aka Pūkāea and it is the only two-storey building at the school, visually prominent and of high status among the ākonga/students and community. Pūkāea is a long wooden trumpet bound with vine (aka)

for welcoming people and announcing events. Te Aka Pūkāea houses two Māori-medium pathways, rūmaki and reo rua, and the research delves into how these two language groupings work with each other and with the larger school (Lee-Morgan et al., 2022).

## Category Names

Category names are labels for groups of things that are identified by criteria. These category names are Māori equivalents of terms like ILE and FLS in the wider Learning Environments arena. The emphasis here is on the range of terms used; this is a ‘language and ideas’ exercise, not intended as substantive comparison between the types referred to by these names, given their very different origins.

## Marae-ā-kura (school-based marae)

The older category of marae-ā-kura or school-based marae has been advanced in educational literature mainly through research led by Jenny Lee-Morgan, formerly publishing as Jenny Bol Jun Lee (Lee et al., 2012; Lee-Morgan, 2016). Maraе-ā-kura arose in secondary schools in the decades before Kura Kaupapa Māori (KKM) burst onto the local scene. Lee and colleagues interviewed Māori secondary students, who viewed their school marae as a refuge, often the only place in the school where they felt accepted and normal as Māori. While overshadowed in national policy by KKM, which require Māori school leadership, marae-ā-kura remain highly relevant today, since the vast majority of Māori secondary students still attend English-medium schools, even those with backgrounds in Māori-medium primary schooling.

Wally Penetito’s insightful analysis of marae in tertiary education also applies to schools: a school marae only offers a ‘limited version of te ao Māori’ (Penetito, 2010, p. 208); it is important to consider the differences from an iwi marae and implications for use. Nevertheless a school-based marae offers the advantage of being a teaching space with a built-in, holistic Māori identity. To a large extent the notion of school-based marae has been normalised, spreading from secondary to both primary and tertiary, so that we could say we are in a ‘post-marae-ā-kura’ era. This does not mean the educational value of marae-ā-kura has been fully realised (Lee-Morgan, 2016); more could be done to leverage the learning afforded by school marae, using ideas from visual pedagogy, spatiality, performance arts, group work and project-based curriculum.

## Māori Modern Learning Environment (MMLE)

Māori Modern Learning Environment stands for ‘Māori modern learning environment’ and is the term adopted by Lee-Morgan and colleagues in their research (Lee-Morgan et al., 2022) based in one specific Māori FLS/ILE located in an English-medium primary school. As a term, MMLE is very clear in meaning: a Māori form or version of

MLE. As noted prior, however, MLE was the first of a series of similar terms taken up in national policy. Therefore the label ‘MMLE’ might be seen as linked to old terminology, and disfavoured for that reason as a generic name for Māori FLS/ILE.

## **Taiao Ako Auaha**

This name results from a word-for-word translation of the term ‘Innovative Learning Environment’ (Core Education, 2024), in which the word environment is translated as ‘taiao’ (mainly associated with the natural environment) and placed first in the reo Māori name as the noun being modified (adjectives come after nouns in te reo, not before as in English). Learning is translated as ‘ako’ and innovative as ‘auaha’—a kupu primarily used to mean ‘creative’ in education, where the concepts of ‘creative’ and ‘innovative’ are very similar. This name appears in the title ‘Te Poukapa Taiao Ako Auaha’ as a translation of ‘Innovative Learning Environment Matrix.’ This name for Māori learning spaces has policy advantages because it can be claimed as an accurate translation, equivalent in meaning to the original English term. The downside of this claim is that it is an approach that conforms to dominant mainstream principles, not derived from within te ao Māori. As a straight translation of a complex term embedded in mainstream educational practice, this name carries no authentic Māori meaning. It is an example of how focusing on ‘accurate’ translation of policy terms into te reo impedes any aim or claim to include or reflect Mātauranga Māori.

## **Te Puna Mātauranga Kiritoa**

This term comes from a TLRI study on teaching and learning Pāngarau/Mathematics in new FLS/ILE spaces at a KKM in Ngāruawāhia (Herewini & Haawera, 2020). The adjective ‘kiritoa’ (resilient) is modifying ‘puna mātauranga,’ an older name for a Māori place of knowledge, for example, the National Library of New Zealand in 1988 adopted the name Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa ([www.natlib.govt.nz/about-us/our-history](http://www.natlib.govt.nz/about-us/our-history)). Kiritoa in this study refers to the resilience of the teachers and learners in terms of their ability to adjust to the new kinds of school spaces (Herewini et al., 2021). The emphasis on resilience reflected the difficulty of the change for teachers who had taught for many years in single-cell classrooms. This name takes the form of a category label but was coined for the specific kura in the study, so has aspects of both types—category and individual—of names for Māori learning spaces.

## **Māori Learning Spaces—he wāhi ako**

Having considered existing categories through canvassing these various types of names, we propose the general term ‘he wāhi ako,’ the English equivalent of which is ‘Māori learning spaces.’ Māori spaces are inherently flexible, making the word

‘flexible’ redundant in this name. A Māori space is a space where the activities of everyday life are welcomed and provided for, including eating and looking after children. Large gathering spaces are important in te ao Māori—for hui (assembly), karakia (prayers), kapa haka (Māori performing arts), pōwhiri (welcome ceremonies), etc. Marae are the pre-eminent Māori spaces throughout New Zealand, and the most typical feature of a marae is the whareniui (also called wharehui, wharepuni, whare rūnanga). Typically, Māori learning spaces/he wāhi ako will have a large central shared space, with smaller specialist and breakout rooms around the sides. Another feature is the use of multi-purpose spaces, such as covered decks and flexible lobby spaces. In existing buildings, schools can undertake minor building projects to open up lines of sight and connections between teaching spaces.

A learning space is also an extended visual text, and another characteristic of a Māori learning space/he wāhi ako is taking up the notion and implications of visual pedagogy (Goldfarb, 2002; Jandrić & Lacković, 2018; Peters & White, 2016). When the design of a new Māori learning space starts with the cultural narrative, every element of the built environment and learning space can potentially contribute to curriculum and pedagogy. Cross-cultural concepts in ethics, natural science, art and literacy, tikanga, cultural histories, etc. can be planned into building design. Spatiality and the notion of a Māori learning space/he wāhi ako opens up new avenues for advancing curriculum (and pedagogy) in Kaupapa Māori and Māori-medium classrooms—bringing curriculum off the pages of a policy text and onto the walls of teaching and learning spaces in kura/Māori school settings.

Beyond supporting cultural identity, open, flexible, visually-rich Māori learning spaces are designed to activate learning and maximise student agency. On their own, school spaces cannot bring about the benefits mentioned prior, but at the same time, all built spaces including teaching spaces impose physical limits on how they can be inhabited (Benade, 2019). Working in whānau groups of five or more teachers with 50 or more tamariki (children) across wider than normal age bands enhances the benefit of collective and collaborative work. Teachers can play to their strengths, and tuakana-teina, the positive interactions between ākonga of different ages, can be put into practice more effectively (Winitana, 2012). It is a structural arrangement that lends itself to group work and project-based pedagogy.

## Where to from Here for Māori Learning Spaces?

Schooling plays an important role in socializing tamariki and helping them develop their personal sense of identity and ethics. To posit a category of ‘Māori learning spaces/he wāhi ako’ recognises the need to build Māori identity into schools from the ground up. Of course, the Māori identity itself is post-colonial, arising in about 1850 as a pan-tribal response to the influx of Pākehā settlers. Still discernible before and beneath the Māori identity are local iwi/hapū identities. In a Māori school setting it is important to have the support of the whānau/parents and local Māori community from the start of a building project, including relationships with hapū/iwi (kinship groups) who are mana whenua (traditional owners) of the land where the school is situated. This detail recalls that

most of the land occupied by schools in Aotearoa New Zealand today was originally freely gifted by local rangatira (leaders) and mana whenua, in recognition of the benefits of school for their people (Jones & Jenkins, 2011).

The cultural narrative is the appropriate starting point when planning and designing Māori learning spaces (certainly not an add-on late in the process). There are many options and choices, but one approach, illustrated by Richmond School in Napier, is to consider the whole school as one ILE (Nelson & Rehu, 2021). Important school decisions such as organising the children into groups (classes) and the spatial arrangement of teaching spaces (classrooms) all aligned with a whānau/community response to the range of meanings and interpretations invoked by the cultural narrative, based on the school's whakataukī (proverbial saying).

In response to the rapid changes in how schools look and work, some parents have raised valid concerns about the lack of evidence of any benefit of replacing single-cell classrooms with FLS (Benade, 2022). Ideally, FLS do not prevent any classroom activities previously carried out in single-cell classrooms, but *do* allow for many other additional kinds of educational activities. Ideally, an FLS also has smaller, quiet spaces available for use when needed by kaiako (teachers) and ākonga (learners). For teachers used to working in single-cell classrooms, it can be challenging to adjust to larger learning spaces. Māori teachers can be as conservative in their practice as any others; some have erected partitions and/or taught two separate classes in their new FLS. There is a clear need for teacher guidance to help staff in Māori schools plan and teach in FLS.

Flexible learning spaces/ILE are the 'new normal' in school builds in Aotearoa New Zealand, so it is fair to say that school design policy has now entered a post-ILE/FLS phase. This observation echoes one made prior, that schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand is now in a post-marae-ā-kura condition, insofar as marae are now considered normal in primary, secondary and tertiary education.

## Conclusion

To look through a Kaupapa Māori research lens at the concept of Māori learning spaces enables us to reconcile and draw on a range of past literature including marae-ā-kura research and FLS/ILE studies in Māori school contexts. One terminological advantage of a generic name for Māori FLS/ILE is that it protects Māori education discourse from changes in the 'mainstream' of national policy. The larger aim of our research is to support excellent teaching and learning for Māori students today and in the future. A generic name and category of Māori learning spaces/he wāhi ako provides a focus for future work. We aim to produce bilingual resources and workshops to help teachers and whānau in kura Māori to capitalise on their learning spaces/wāhi ako, thereby increasing mauri ora (overall wellbeing) and helping to achieve Māori aspirations for their tamariki at school.

## Glossary of Māori Words

As used in this article.

MĀORI	ENGLISH
Aotearoa	New Zealand
ako	To learn
ākonga	Student(s)
auaha	Creative, innovative
hapū	Smaller kinship group
he	Indefinite article ('a' or 'some')
hui	Gathering, meeting
iwi	Larger kinship group
kapa haka	Māori performing arts group
karakia	Incantations, prayers
kaupapa	Topic, philosophy
kiritoa	Resilient
kura	Māori school or unit
kura kaupapa Māori (KKM)	Māori-led, Māori immersion school
mana whenua	Traditional owners
manaaki	To extend hospitality and care to visitors
Māori	Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa
marae	Māori community centre; whareniui
mauri ora	Social well-being
ngā atua	Indigenous deities / primal forces or 'gods'
noa	Unrestricted, free from tapu
poukapa	Matrix
pōwhiri	Rituals of encounter and formal welcome
puna mātauranga	Place of knowledge or learning
reo rua	Bilingual
rūmaki	Total immersion (Māori language class)
taiao	Environment
tamariki	Children
tapu	Restricted, in the presence of ngā atua
te	Definite singular particle, the
te ao Māori	The Māori world
te reo (Māori)	The (Māori) language
tuakana-teina	Older & younger children working together
tupuna	Ancestor, grandparent
wāhi	Space(s), place(s)
whakaingoa	To name something
whakataukī	Proverbial saying
whānau	(Extended) family, school community
whareniui (wharehui, wharepuni, whare rūnanga)	Meeting house, traditionally tribal

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** No issues to report.

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