Who are we?

Malo ē lelei, Talofa lava, and Kia orana. We are Rural Scholars Early Learning Centre from Waimate. Rural Scholars is located on 40 acres of farmland, providing tamariki the opportunity to explore and develop alongside nature and animals. Our learning environment fosters curiosity and respect through their learning and development being nurtured in the peaceful natural world of the farm. We have passionate kaiako who are either fully qualified or in training, specialised in all areas of learning. Our unique philosophy fosters respect for all and creates opportunities for tamariki to connect with the natural world and with animals. Our core values encapsulate respect, empathy and responsibility which are fostered through our care and interactions with our animals and Papatūānuku. We speak Samoan, Tongan, Te Reo Māori, English and communicate through sign language. Our faiako are dedicated to providing a high quality of care and education aiming to ensure each and every child experiences wonder, excitement and develops a passion for learning and knowledge.

Background

In 2014 we began our Pasifika journey, endeavouring to enhance our knowledge, language and culture throughout our teaching practices and programme. At this time, and to this day, our Pasifika roll consisted of one child, but we recognised its importance within our Early Childhood Curriculum, and evolving society with more Pasifika families beginning to call Waimate home. We believed it was important to support our tamaiti and ‘aiga to learn and engage with Pasifika cultures to support the growth of open minded and accepting citizens towards others.

As our Pasifika journey has evolved we have challenged ourselves to continue striving to engage our tamaiti, ‘aiga and community to be enriched by the Pasifika cultures. To further extend on this we had the initiative of designing a Pasifika inspired performance space. We recognised the importance of music, dance and talanoa (discussions) within the Pasifika cultures to express and communicate, and noticed it has been the most meaningful and engaged way for our tamaiti to learn. We felt this vision would create the opportunity for us to share our Pasifika journey with other learning communities, invite and welcome Pasifika families to share their culture and knowledge, and finally create the platform for our own Poly Fest to be developed.
Our area of focus?

In 2017 we successfully applied for CORE Education’s Pasifika Grant supporting us to begin turning our dream Pasifika performance space into a reality. We had recognised a need for this within our learning environment and community to actively build and extend upon our Pasifika tamariki sense of identity and belonging. We acknowledge that our community’s Pasifika population is slowly beginning to emerge amongst a predominately Palangi society, and we feel it is important to nurture their well-being in a culturally meaningful way.

CORE’s online mentoring programme with Ann Hatherly fostered our progression of the design through in-depth questioning, and encouraging consideration to many aspects of the physical design. Our workshops with Ann provided us with tools and ideas to continue planning the design collaboratively with our Pasifika community. Through these workshops we were able to finalise a design and broaden our vision for our performance space to benefit all learners of all ages from within our community.

Ultimately we wanted to create a space that made Pasifika famili feel welcome, appreciated and respected within our learning environment and community. We felt this would encourage them to participate and contribute their cultural knowledge in a safe environment where they had a sense of pride, while educating and involving our Palangi community to understand and be respectful towards Pasifika culture.

What did we do

As we had an initial vision when applying for this grant, our next step was ensuring the process reflected the Pasifika Samoan core values of alofa (love), tautua (service) and fa’aaloalo (respect). We recognised that these values may be interpreted differently from a Pasifika perspective for our Palangi teaching team so set about working collaboratively with various people, families and organisations spanning across a diversity of Pasifika cultures and ages. We were able to present them with our thinking and ask for them to suggest and further develop our plan to create a culturally authentic representation with the stages purpose and safety guidelines being met. Some of our considerations included:

- **The physical design, patterns and artefacts** – were they authentic representations of each culture.
- **The size in relation to the space being used for cultural learning and performances** – we needed to consider the height of the potential performers plus the jumping motion within some of their dances.
- **The space needed to be inclusive for all including having wheelchair access.**
- **Whether the space was going to have enough natural light.**

Over a period of time we had numerous collaborative meetings with our local Pasifika community. From these we went forth and refined our design further, then regrouped with those supporting us until we felt confident with the plan. We contacted our local builders who assisted us on our journey, one of which was a Tongan and had supported the development of the design. We felt this further captured the authenticity of the project, having Pasifika people present and an integral part to the process of our fale. Our tamaiti visited daily the building process, and have been carefully preparing the landscape in the playground for where it will be positioned. This has developed the tamaiti sense of pride and belonging amongst the project.
What we are doing now?
Currently the fale is continuing to be built and being prepared to be placed within the learning environment. To date it has been a very extensive job including the designing and physical building, but we are slowly making our way towards completion.

Our faiako are utilising Pasifika language weeks as opportunities to extend our fānau learning through language and cultural knowledge. The songs and knowledge gained will be proudly displayed within our fale once it is finished, holding an opening ceremony which will welcome and include all those who have been a part of the process, and our local community.

Where to next?
Once the physical design is complete, we will be carefully selecting and seeking out the final cultural artefacts highlighted by our families to showcase in the cabinets. We are also discussing with various people within our community the possibility of performing traditional dances or songs at our opening ceremony. We have some young men from Tonga, Fiji and Samoa who are looking at collating their cultures into one performance for us, along with families of children at the centre who are willing to share their tau’olunga. Our opening ceremony will be further discussed with the Pasifika community before hand to ensure we capture all the true beauty and Pasifika flare within the special occasion.

Conclusion
This experience has been a valuable teaching tool for our leaders within this project, our faia’oga and tamaiti alike. We have all had opportunities embedded within Pasifika culture and language to learn from, extending our knowledge and confidence in going forth. We have also formed precious and reciprocal relationships that have already played supportive roles within our learning programme aiding our Pasifika journey and for in the future. We are excited about our opening ceremony, and the future learning that will take place on our fale stage. We understand this is a stepping stone in encouraging Pasifika cultural learning within our community and it will create open ended opportunities for the future.