And I still say….To look, to listen and to feel is to learn

(Quote from Mr Ned McCord, Executive Director of the Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School and Director of the Bunuba Cattle Company)

Tanya Davies

Welcome to country

The thirty Year 10 students sat in table groups, surrounded by 1.4 million acres of endless blue sky, beautiful gorges, inviting water holes and rugged pastoral land. They were creating "About Me" posters, as a means to introduce themselves to each other and to staff. I made my way over to Natalie. She had written her name in beautiful big curly writing. But before I could comment, she covered her work, and with fierce determination said, "I don't like it when teachers look at my work. Stop looking at my work." Ten minutes earlier I had seen another staff member working with her; and I wondered what made me a "teacher" in her eyes, while the other staff member clearly fitted into a different category? Yet less than two days later, I was talking with Natalie about a Colour Symbol Image[1] she had created with one of her friends on her home town of Derby. What had changed in those two days?

Since March 2011 I have been lucky to play a role in the "Yiramalay community". My school, in partnership with an Indigenous community in outback Western Australia, has built a school called "The Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School[2]". The concept of the Studio School came about after conversations over several years; and after a strong relationship and meaningful understanding had been developed between my school community and the Indigenous people who live in

[1] Find out more about the Colour Symbol Image Thinking Routine at http://pzweb.harvard.edu/vt/VisibleThinking_html_files/03_ThinkingRoutines/03d_UnderstandingRoutines/ColourSymbolImage/ColourSymbolImage_Routine.html

[2] The Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School is located about 1¼ hours drive from the nearest town, Fitzroy Crossing, and can only be accessed during the dry season, via a dirt road. The remote location of the school means there is no mobile phone reception, all electricity is produced by a generator on site, and food has to be trucked in once a week from Derby (about 2½ hours drive away).

the Fitzroy Valley. The school is built on land owned by the Bunuba people, and is run by a steering committee, whose membership is made up equally of members of the Fitzroy Valley community and my school's board. The Studio School is based in the Kimberley for six months of the year, and in Melbourne the other six months of the year. Indigenous students join the school in the Kimberley from Term 2 of Year 10, and hopefully graduate with a Year 12 equivalency just under three years later. For the Indigenous Year 10 students, their journey begins with a three week Induction Program.

My role has been to take groups of Year 10 students from my school up to the Studio School for three weeks at a time, to complete the Induction Program with the new Indigenous students. The purpose of the program is to give Melbourne students a chance to learn from the Indigenous students, share some of their knowledge and skills, experience some of the industries in the Kimberley and to reflect on their own learning and lives. For the Indigenous students it is a chance to share their knowledge, learn from the Melbourne students, get a feel for the "National Diploma" (the Year 11 and 12 Diploma Certificate) and experience some of the industries in the Kimberley. After the Induction Program, the Melbourne students return to their lives in Melbourne, with a new perspective on themselves, their lives and Indigenous Australians (I believe the impact on the Melbourne students is significant, but how this program impacts the lives of these Melbourne students is another paper in itself; one that I might hopefully write in the future!). On completion of the Induction Program, the Indigenous students are offered a place in a "Pre-National Diploma Program", which aims to prepare them to undertake the National Diploma at the beginning of the following year.

The Studio School opened in August 2010, so it is fair to say we are at the beginning of the journey. My experience in the program so far has been immensely rewarding, frustrating, confronting, and joyous, as well as being the best professional development I've ever done! In the time I've spent with the Indigenous students, I've come to see that they are not really that different from my students in Melbourne. How they manifest their feelings can be quite different from what I am used to, but once I began to make time to listen to, observe and connect with their lives, I also began to understand how much they have to teach me. Their reactions and behaviours are like magnified versions of reactions and behaviours that I have received in classrooms in Melbourne for the last 15 years. And while there are definitely some

cultural differences, all in all, they are really still just like any other teenagers; building community and trust is of vital importance before true learning and change can happen.

In late April 2012, I headed back to Yiramalay for my third Induction Program. For me there was a real sense of coming home. For the 20 Melbourne students and three Melbourne staff I took with me, there was a sense of expectation, excitement, curiosity and a fear of the unknown. We spent a night in Broome discussing the importance of community, our dependence on each other in very unfamiliar situations, and also the importance of each one of us being willing to step outside our comfort zones and embracing everything that would come our way in the following 20 days. We then loaded up two troopies and made the four and half hour drive east to the Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School. Meanwhile staff who are based up at Yiramalay (as part of the residential program) for six months of the year, had begun the "round up". The staff drive around the local communities and pick up the Indigenous students who have been part of the school in previous terms, as well as those who are about to join the program for the first time. While the majority of students are eager to be at the school, without this round up, it is unlikely that Indigenous students would make their own way to the remote Studio School. So when I finally arrive in time for a late lunch with my 23 nervous Melbournians, the Indigenous students are feeling somewhat settled, although many are in a place very far from home metaphorically, if not geographically.

Our first afternoon, as an Induction Group (made up of 20 Melbourne students, 10 Indigenous students and 4 Melbourne staff), involved tours of the school and a "Welcome to Country" at the nearby Yiramalay Spring by Indigenous Elders. The Welcome to Country is important for many reasons. It teaches us the importance of being respectful to the land, and of being respectful to the people who have made their lives on the land for thousands of years. Most of all, it is our first significant ceremony as a community; it gives us a sense of being one. The Welcome to Country is the students' and staffs' first chance to just be; to listen to the words of the Indigenous elders, to really start to look at the land around them and to feel that they are part something pretty special. The elders welcome us with their words. We then quietly form a couple of lines, men and boys first, then women and girls, and the Indigenous elders and student leaders then wipe water from the Yiramalay Spring over each of our hands and our foreheads. Finally we

are offered a rock from the ground, to wipe under our armpits, to make sure it has our smell. Finally, we are invited to stand by the edge of the water, to introduce ourselves to the spring and then throw our rock into the water. The spring now knows our smell and our presence. The Welcome to Country leaves everyone with a sense that they are welcome and will be safe in this place.

The power of perspective (really seeing)

In our morning session the next day, we began our "About Me" posters; and I had my interaction with Natalie. I am quickly transported back to some of my earlier experiences at Yiramalay. The Indigenous students are very nervous about being judged, being wrong, standing out or not understanding; much more so than my experience with Melbourne students. I wonder why this is the case. Does it reflect a belief we have developed in our Melbourne students that it is good to have a go? Or is it more reflective of the Indigenous students struggling in a school system that culturally does not sit well with them, and therefore sees them often criticised, unable to engage, or strongly disciplined? Natalie's comments also remind me of the importance of relationship. She has known me less than 24 hours, so who am I to her? Perhaps what she is really saying is "I don't know you." Or maybe "I don't trust you"?

The next day we began discussions about where we all come from. On a map of Melbourne, the Melbourne students and staff marked out where we all live. On a map of the Kimberley, the Indigenous students and staff marked out where they come from. Then, in groups, students discussed the similarities and differences of the two lands. Initially, the conversation focussed on the differences; these differences seemed more obvious to the students, perhaps because the differences focus much more on outward appearances. The Indigenous students were still very shy, and it was only with the aid of a staff member in each group, that bit by bit we were able to hear more of Indigenous student voice. Pleasingly, the lists started to even out, and the students began to see how much they have in common; family, friendships, sport, music, pets, etc. The morning session concluded with a Colour Symbol Image (CSI) task. I chose to do a CSI as I thought it would be good way for both groups to communicate, using the idea of symbols to get to the heart of what each group was really thinking about. When I introduced the task, the Melbourne students groaned (perhaps because they felt like I'd brought their Melbourne classroom learning to

the outback? Or maybe because they have "done CSIs" so many times previously?), and the Indigenous students had no idea what I was talking about. But together the groups did each create a CSI of Melbourne, and a CSI of one of the local communities. Perhaps because the task asked the students to consider a place, the students in general opted for predictable colours and symbols. As my intended purpose of the CSI was more as a means to encourage communication by providing a structure to help the students organise their ideas, rather than to access deeper thinking, I was not overly concerned. The fact that each group produced two CSIs was a victory in itself. The Melbourne CSIs were a little rushed, messy and lacked real thinking; the Melbourne football club colours and symbol were popular choices. However, the CSIs of the local communities were drawn much more neatly, and began to reveal some interesting perspectives.

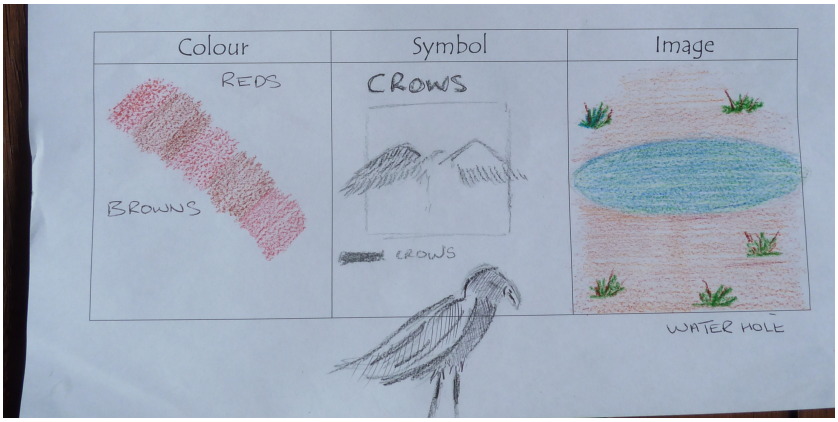


Figure 1 Wangkajungka CSI here

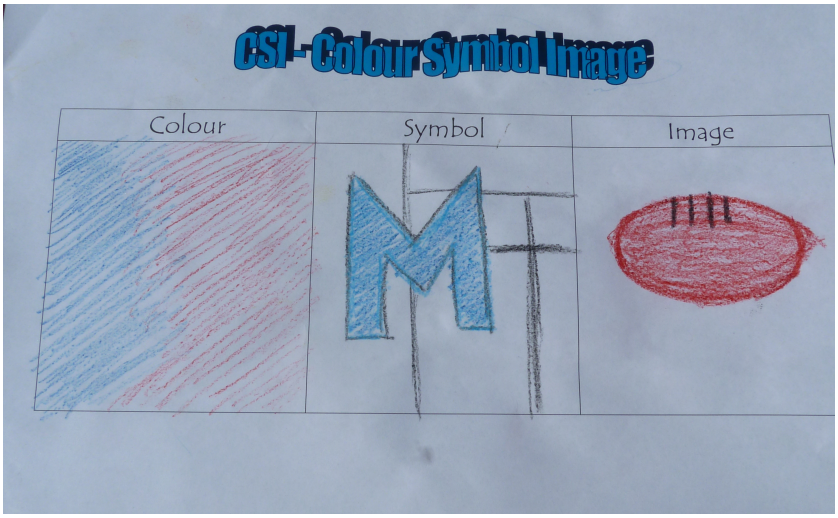
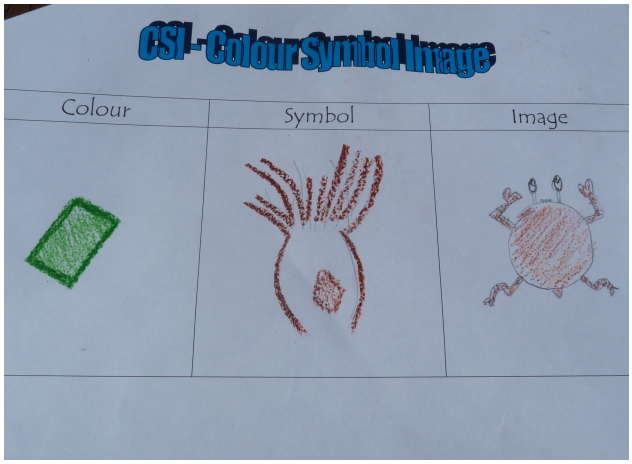


Figure 2 Melbourne final CSI

Unfortunately, despite planning this task as part of the program, as is often the case at Yiramalay (and with teaching in general), flexibility was needed. I had originally hoped to have the older Indigenous students complete a CSI the day before, and then to use them as leaders for the activity with all the Induction students. For various reasons, this didn't happen. I had also hoped to find time to share the CSIs and the thinking behind the student choices, but again, the level of concentration by the students had been stretched, and I decided to move to lunch, before we had a chance to discuss the CSIs. I did, however, display the student work, and they became the focus of later conversations among staff and students. It is interesting to consider how much we as teachers draw on what we know, without realising it. How my students in Melbourne learn is very different to how the Indigenous students learn from their Elders. It is hard for me as a teacher to let go of what I know, the tools and strategies I have always used, and begin to change my teaching to more effectively connect with the Indigenous students.

I was particularly interested in the CSI that Natalie and her friend, Samantha, created on their home town of Derby. While the three other groups who completed a CSI on a local community chose "red" as their colour, Natalie and Samantha chose "green". I have been to Derby, and I was really surprised by their choice. So the day after they had completed the CSI I approached Natalie. This time she was happy

to talk to me, though quite briefly, about her work. Between her earlier dismissal of me as a "teacher" and the CSI discussion, we had spent time together; cleaning the bathroom in a student house, convincing her it was time to go to bed, and taking part in some fun group activities. One of the real advantages of a community like Yiramalay is the time and space we have to build the relationships with students. This time together had proved invaluable, as through these activities I must have demonstrated myself to be someone worth trusting, rather than a teacher likely to judge and criticize her. Natalie said that is was obvious that she chose green for Derby because Derby is green! She reminded me of the big green park in the middle of Derby – not really a common sight around the Kimberley. And she also pointed out the number of trees in Derby. Her choice of green for Derby was less about Derby being green, and more about it being greener than everything around it. With my Melbourne lens on, Derby was red; this experience was a quick important reminder of how differently we see things.



Insert Figure 3 Derby CSI here

These two simple interactions with Natalie reminded me of couple of important things to remember when working with Indigenous students. Firstly, Natalie reminded me that we city folk see things so differently to Indigenous people. Not only do we bring our own perspectives and experiences, but our eyes literally focus on different things. We spend quite a lot of time driving during our time up at Yiramalay, and I usually have somewhere between 8 and 10 students in the Troopie. The Indigenous students spot wild life that I generally can't see, even when they point it out to me. Their eyes read the land differently, they

recognise and remember things that I really struggle to. One of our Melbourne teachers had a very close up photo of a rock pool at Cable Beach on her camera, and as Debra, one of the Indigenous students, was flicking through her photos, she said straight away, "that's at Cable Beach". From our perspective, there was no reason that Debra should have been able to recognise that rock pool, but when asked how she did recognise it, she said she knew what the rock pools at Cable Beach looked like.

As I spend time at Yiramalay, how I see things starts to change. By the end of my three weeks, I recognise the different types of dirt that I drive on and I can sometimes spot the goanna before it disappears off the edge of the road. Natalie reminds me that so often I see things from my own perspective. How often do I walk into a classroom and see order, while students see boredom? She has me thinking about when I look at a whiteboard full of thinking and notes, and wondering if that is what my students see as well? Or do they see a mess of words that are overwhelming?

I wonder if using thinking routines, such as CSIs, are a good way to help enable these observant, high emotionally intelligent Indigenous students to communicate their thoughts and feelings with others. The Indigenous students are quite reluctant to write or share in a big group, but they love to draw and are generally willing to share one on one, when they feel confident.

The power of translating (really listening)

The second aspect that Natalie has me considering is that while the Indigenous students might say one thing, it can mean so many different things. Natalie's defiant, "don't look at my work", could have held all kind of meanings. A common phrase we hear from the Indigenous students is "I'm bored". Over time the staff have come to understand that that phrase can really mean so many different things:

- I don't understand
- I'm scared
- I'm tired
- I don't like this
- I don't want to

- (and even) I'm bored.

Similarly, when the Indigenous students come down to Melbourne, we often hear them say, "I want to go home". Again, we have learnt to hear this in many different ways:

- I miss my family
- I find this overwhelming
- I'm scared
- I don't understand
- I need a hug
- I'm sick of living here with other people
- I miss the food I would usually eat at home
- I need to connect with my country again

On our way home, after a long day out with the whole Induction group, we stopped at the dirt road turn off that leads to Yiramalay. The staff drivers jumped out of the troopies, to lock the wheels ready for four-wheel drive, and before I knew it, one of the Indigenous boys, Harry, jumped out of the car too. Wheels locked, ready to go, I asked Harry to get back in the car. He responded with "I'm going to wait for Peter's troopie", with quite a gruff voice. I said he couldn't, he said he would wait, and so the conversation continued for several minutes. Other staff got involved, trying to help, but probably just making the situation worse. Harry started to feel trapped and cornered. What I couldn't understand was why he wanted to get out of my car and wait in the middle of no where for another troopie that was possibly 30 minutes away. I hadn't heard a fight, conversation or anything that gave me any clues as to what was going on. All I knew was that Harry wanted out of my troopie and into Peter's (that was a long way away, and probably already full of other Indigenous kids). I felt very caught between ensuring the safety of this ichild (who was quite happy for me to leave him) and the group (3 troopies trying to make it back to school before dark). Finally, another staff member was able to negotiate with Harry, giving him a front seat in his troopie, while another student jumped in my troopie.

It was only later that night that I was able to translate what Harry was really saying. He had a big boil on his leg, and sitting in the back seat of a troopie, with 7 other students, was crowded and particularly uncomfortable for him. However, instead of explaining this to us, for whatever reason, he just told us he wanted to swap vehicles. Maybe it was pride or shame that prevented him communicating with us. Maybe it was the way the staff approached Harry because we assumed he was just being difficult and selfish or had an ulterior motive. In the calm of being back at school, and having time to talk, I was able to talk to Harry about his leg, and share with him the importance of him communicating with us. However, maybe the fault lies as much with us. We need to remember to always really listen; while the words say one thing, what are the body language, the circumstances and emotion really say?

Having to really try and hear what the Indigenous students are saying, also reminds me of the importance of trying to listen to the students in my classroom back in Melbourne. While many of my Melbourne students feel more comfortable about being open about how they are feeling, there are certainly times for all of them, when they don't feel comfortable. In the rush of the everyday classroom, it is so easy to not really hear what a student is trying to tell you.

The power of relationships (really feeling)

My experience with Natalie has highlighted for me again the importance of relationships. Yiramalay has been built on an enormous amount of trust and respect. And the school only continues to function as it does with this trust and respect in place. Students are given a lot of freedom and choice while they are at Yiramalay. While there is definitely a big focus on trying to create routine and procedures, there are also plenty of opportunities for the students to make decisions and choices and for them to help decide how they want the Yiramalay community to be. They are the leaders of the community, as much as the staff are.

Engagement is a key starting point for any learning. As the teaching and residential staff at Yiramalay we are often monitoring how engaged the students are (individually and as a group). If staff can engage students, this is where the relationships really begin. Students develop a sense of belonging, connection, acceptance and ultimately trust in the teacher (or staff) as more opportunities for creating shared experiences are opened up. Ensuring student

engagement is a great balancing act. How much should we push them? How much should we let the students lead? The importance of really seeing and really listening cannot be underestimated when it comes to creating the opportunities for engagement.

In reality, the Melbourne staff are a very long way from home, and we don't know nearly as much as the Indigenous kids about some things. Driving is a prime example of this. Melbourne staff drive the students around in troopies, on roads that we don't know when we first arrive, and in conditions that are very unfamiliar to us. We drive many students who have grown up in the area, so they know the roads intimately. The students often ask to drive; and as much as I'd like to let them, and despite the fact that they could possibly drive some parts of the road better than me, of course we don't let them. However, staff do sometimes look to the Indigenous students for advice, and students will also often give advice without us even asking. They tell us which part of the road to drive on when there are rocks or soft sand, they remind us to slow down when we don't see the "crossing ahead" sign (it took me a few weeks to even notice the signs; I didn't understand how the students always knew when to slow down!), and they give us instructions about how to get the troopie out when we get bogged (This has only happened to me once, but it happened when I was in the lead of a convoy of 5 troopies, a big bus and a 4WD car, that included the school Principal. I was very glad that an Indigenous student James was in the car behind me. His car passed me, and then he walked back and talked me through getting out. We were both very calm and I listened to him intently, and within the short space of a couple of minutes I was out.). There is such a trust in students telling us what we need to be safe. For a teacher, it is a very interesting situation to be in. I actually really like the sense of team that is created. We work together to ensure we have a safe journey.

How the students give directions when they are in the car with us also has me thinking about communication. While we city folk are so verbal (our GPS telling us where to turn, etc), lots of the directions from the students are simple, silent finger points. Actually points is probably too strong a word. They just do this little flick. It does take me a while to read their directions correctly; was that left or right, is it now or soon, was that a direction flick or a different kind of flick? Again, the situation has been created where the student has power; they know that it will be better for all if they help the staff member. But it isn't showy, it isn't about the Indigenous student making fun of the Melbourne staff

member, it is simple an elegant indication that this way is better. And the trust and respect continues to be grow.

I believe that part of the real strength of the Yiramalay school is the sense of all people in the community being on the journey together. No one has all the answers. There is no other school the same as Yiramalay, so everyone is learning as we are going. Everyone then has a say in where we are going and how we get there. While the staff, Executive Director and school Principal all have some plans, much of the journey is directed by the students, and I believe they respond well to this opportunity. During my Induction program in April, one of the Indigenous students, Michael, was complaining. We were doing an introduction to Cattle Station week, and Michael was saying it was boring, and he already knew all this. So instead of just putting my foot down, I decided to try and really listen to what he was saying and give him some options. I said that I would love him to stay part of the group because a big part of the Induction program is about building those relationships. And that maybe he could step up as a group leader for the week, because he did know so much about the cattle station and working with cattle. He told me he had almost completed a TAFE Certificate II in looking after cattle, so I gave him the option of not being part of the Induction group, but working with some of the older Indigenous students who were working with Kimberley TAFE and cattle. I asked if he would like me to follow up that option. He said yes. I said ok and walked away. About 5 minutes later Michael found me and said he had changed his mind; he thought it would be better if he stayed with the Induction group and showed what a good leader he could be. And so in the space of 10 minutes, somewhere I had turned a grumpy, frustrated teenage boy, into an engaged, proud and eager leader. The importance of really listening, of trusting, of developing relationship and of giving students options had all been confirmed.

I have also learnt a lot about what trust looks like while up at Yiramalay. It is not always about words or even actions; often the students show you they trust you by how they are physically. At the end of my first Induction program in 2011, we had a graduation ceremony, where each Induction student (both the Melbourne and Indigenous students) was presented with a certificate in front of a group of about 50 Indigenous community members, including family. The Melbourne students came out the front quite happily, proud as ever. The Indigenous students were not as keen. They were embarrassed to stand out, even for a good reason, but one by one we got each student up

the front, to great applause from their families and friends. As each student stood there, we presented their certificate and spoke to their achievements over the three weeks. To have a room of around 100 people looking at you while you are being spoken about is a big thing, and most of the Indigenous students came up, had their head down, and then just leant into me. It was like they needed to feel (physically) secure. It was such a nice feeling and sign of trust. They stood so close to me, and literally let me support them. In our current school setting in Melbourne, where physical touch is now so often frowned upon, it was nice to be in a situation where the physical was so positive and natural.

As my group left at the end of the April Induction program, there were tears and lots of hugs (both staff and students find the parting at the end very difficult). Over the three weeks, I had had very little to do with one of the Indigenous Year 12 students, Toni. She is a strong girl, who has been through a lot, but is growing and showing her potential for leadership every day. While Toni is highly emotionally intelligent, she is very slow to trust. I think of our relationship as one of chipping away; bit by bit we get to know each other, ever so slowly the trust and respect is developing. So the fact that we hadn't had a lot to do with each other in the 3 weeks wasn't surprising. What was surprising was the full on hug I got from her during our last half hour there. Out of nowhere, she ran up behind me and gave me the biggest hug. For me it was a sign that she was sad I was going, that she trusted me and would miss me. No tears, no words, just a big, heartfelt hug.

To look, to listen and to feel is to learn

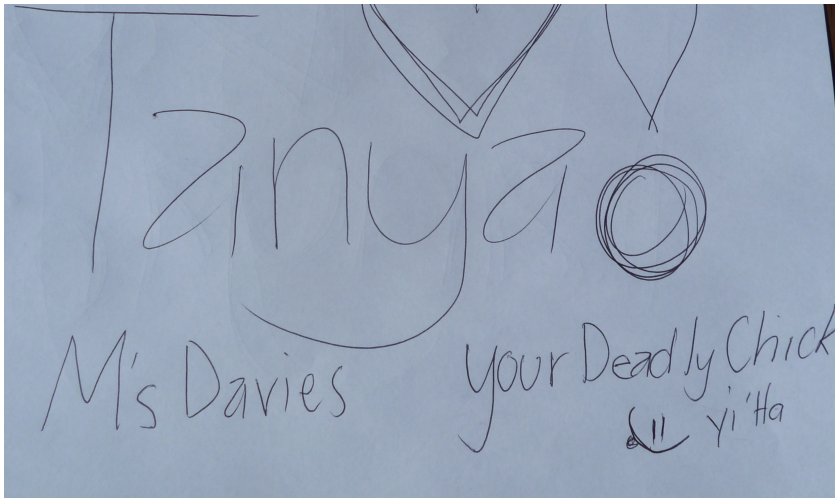
As I began writing this story, I had in mind a line from Maya Angelou's "The Human Family"; We are more alike, my friends, than unalike. So much of what I've learnt at Yiramalay, has me thinking about my teaching and students back in Melbourne. There is something about being at Yiramalay that makes it easier to find space and time to look, listen and feel. However, that doesn't mean there aren't lessons to be learnt from the amazing journey of Yiramalay for teaching in Melbourne. I think that because the staff are so far out of their comfort zone at Yiramalay, they have no choice but to trust and hand some of the power to the students. This strategy has great power back in the classroom in Melbourne. Someone once said to me that Yiramalay works so well because the change of environment changes the agenda. This has me thinking about changing the environment in my Melbourne classroom. How do you build that trust (both ways)? How

do I hand the power back over? How to I create space to look, listen and feel?

During our time at Yiramalay this year, we created a staff agreement. In the agreement, we included a line about creating time to look, to listen and to feel. While this line was mainly in reference to our staff team, it could easily be extended to a classroom agreement, which included teacher and students. If we value something, we give time to it; and creating a space of trust and empowerment is essential in every effective classroom.

I am learning that some students are not able to come to the table unless they feel empowered themselves. We need to create opportunities for the students to lead, to share, to teach and to model. Yiramalay has provided some very powerful examples and insights into how this is possible. I believe we are creating students who are beginning to believe in themselves, who can lead, and who have much to teach us.

I returned to Yiramalay early Term 3 this year for six weeks. I took up the opportunity to teach some of the Indigenous students in the program. During that time, our sixth Induction group from Melbourne arrived. Early in their program we ran an activity where the students (both Melbourne and Indigenous) worked in teams to match a photo of famous Indigenous role models with a description of each person. Most students were really engaged; the Indigenous students were proud to show who they knew and share about some of their role models. However, Natalie sat out to the side. She was just watching what was going on. I sat down near her, and asked which team she was in and if she wanted to join in. She silently shook her head, and then picked up a piece of paper and pen and began drawing. After 10 min or so, she slid the paper over to me (the image is below). Somehow, despite only knowing Natalie for 3 weeks in April, the trust and respect that had developed in that time was still there in August. My "teacher" hat had somehow been permanently replaced with something else; I am someone to be relied on, to not judge, and to simply be with.



Insert Figure 4 Natalie's note here