

## *I See Something Better Soon: How a Remote Community Was Transformed through Empowerment*

by Jim Heslop

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Review by Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis (with Inge Kral)

The title *I See Something Better Soon: How a Remote Community Was Transformed through Empowerment*, suggests that this book is about the transformation of a remote community through empowerment. In actual fact it is an account of research that took place in the Warakurna School Aboriginal community in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands region of Western Australia from 1992–94.

By coincidence we, Lizzie Ellis and Inge Kral, were in Warakurna Community in July 2016 when we read Jim Heslop's book. It is now more than 20 years since the research took place so we read the book with the benefit of hindsight: Ellis as a community member and educator, who was born nearby, and Kral as an educator and researcher who has worked with Ngaanyatjarra people on and off since 1997. This review is written from our insider/outsider perspective.

Jim Heslop was the Principal of Warakurna School and worked with Bernard Newberry, the Education Department Aboriginal Liaison Officer (and later long-term Chairman of the Ngaanyatjarra Council) to set up a Parent Committee at Warakurna School and a reference group to oversee his research. The core issue addressed in Heslop's research was the process of shifting decision-making power from non-Aboriginal to Aboriginal hands in the school domain, and by implication across other areas in the community. Data was gathered from his journal entries, interviews as well as accounts from other non-Aboriginal staff on incidents and interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the community.

From Ellis's insider perspective this book is a useful history of people and events that otherwise would not exist. It recounts events associated not only with education, but Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal interaction in other domains at Warakurna and in nearby communities. Ellis even found a story about her own father – an incident that involved her father walking out of the community and whitefellas not going to help. Heslop also gives a history of the early days of government schooling in the Lands. He provides insights into the hardships of those times and the nature of the interdependent relationship between *yarnangu* (Ngaanyatjarra people) and school staff at that time. This gives the reader an insight into how the Education Department was doing its own thing and leaving out Aboriginal people. This set up a pattern of behaviours that has lingered to this day.

Ellis appreciated Heslop's discussion about inequality in power relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups, allowing her to think about the historical context and how Aboriginal people have always been powerless and most are often oblivious of this and the racist behaviour of outsiders: 'When most whitefellas come they tend to be bossy and disrespectful to local people. They don't recognise that they are in someone else's country and don't respect their home and their practices and wishes.' This brings us to the core of Heslop's research endeavour: catalysing the process of empowerment. As Ellis describes it, 'when *yarnangu* are ignorant of these power relations they stay ignorant'. Heslop outlines an ideal model of a school community, a model where there is strong input from community members, integration of Ngaanyatjarra language and culture in the curriculum and an empowered role for Aboriginal staff in the school.

Heslop describes various responses to the prospect of change brought about by the establishment of the Parents Council at Warakurna School. *Yarnangu* were keen to be involved in school governance, but some felt overwhelmed rather than empowered as they had no previous experience and often no training. The Parents Committee exemplified a shifting balance of power: when given an opportunity to be vocal, *yarnangu* made an effort to participate. However, according to Heslop, the Parents Committee was seen as stirring up trouble by other non-Aboriginal staff and there was opposition to the Parents Committee.

Ultimately, the research period ended and the changes brought about by the Parents Committee were not long-lasting or structural. Heslop had initiated a new model, but he also let people down despite all his good intentions because he too stayed only a short time. Nevertheless, as Ellis points out, the research process was like waking up a sleeping giant. It provided a turning point for formal education in this region that cumulatively led to a review of education in Lands in 2000 and a short-lived Memorandum of Agreement with the Western Australian government around the establishment of the semi-autonomous Ngaanyatjarra

Education Area. Unfortunately, Heslop's book, although published in 2016, focuses primarily on what is now outdated research. Subsequent initiatives in the Lands schools are not discussed nor is there any situating of the research method and outcomes in a broader sociohistorical or political context. From this vantage point Heslop's research can be considered yet another positive initiative in Indigenous education that has not led to deep structural change.

It is unclear who the audience for the book might be. Educators will find it of interest; however, it is unlikely that any *yarnangu*, other than Ellis, will read it. For example, Heslop's lengthy literature review of past education reports and recommendations may be useful for some, but it is too much for local Ngaanyatjarra readers. Nevertheless, for a reader like Ellis, now a university researcher herself, it reveals the value of research and has given her ideas on how academic support can be instrumental in supporting *yarnangu*, showing them the big picture and planning the incremental steps that can lead to change. We finish on a final positive note with Ellis's observation that something like this should be happening in every Aboriginal community, getting universities involved in effecting change and long-term planning with communities from the micro level to the macro level. In this way Heslop's book provides a model of Indigenous education research practice of value to educators and a useful historical account of Indigenous education in remote Australia.

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