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**‘Bilingual time’ at Willowra: The beginnings of a community-initiated program, 1976-1977.**

**Petronella Vaarzon-Morel and Jim Wafer<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

Formal schooling began at the Warlpiri-speaking community of Willowra, in north-western Central Australia, in 1968. When the present authors arrived at the school in 1976, to take up positions as the new teachers, many adults spoke Anmatyerr in addition to Warlpiri, and also “station English”, which they had learnt while working in the pastoral industry. Few younger children spoke English, but were expected to learn to read and write it at the school, which was still something of a foreign country for them and their families. The educational material provided was largely irrelevant to them, and little printed matter existed outside of the school, with only a few Warlpiri adults able to read it. People’s understandings of the meaning of school derived from visible, pedagogic practices characteristic of mainstream schools; for example, children were required to wear uniforms, sit at desks and learn to write using pencils. Yet, despite the alien nature of school, the community came to embrace it, transforming its relevance and role in their lives through the introduction of a Warlpiri-English bilingual program. In this chapter we review “bilingual time” (as it is remembered at Willowra) in the years we spent there in 1976-1977, when the bilingual program was introduced. We set our narrative in the context of policy conflicts that eventually led to the dismantling of the program in the early 2000s, and consider the advantages of the short-lived policy environment in which we operated, which was school-based and community-oriented.

**Introduction**

For a short period in the mid 1970s a conjunction of exceptional circumstances allowed the community of Wirliyajarrayi (at that time known as ‘Willowra’), in Australia’s Northern Territory (‘NT’), to assume control of its own affairs to a degree that was rare if not unique in Aboriginal communities of that era. The level of

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Inga Kral, Samantha Disbray and Nancy Devlin for encouraging us to contribute to this volume. We are also grateful to Samantha for providing us with some key archival documents. When we refer to ourselves as individuals in the following text, we use the abbreviations “PVM” and “JW”.

local autonomy in decision-making was demonstrated through initiatives such as a direct request for the introduction of bilingual education.

Early in 1977 a small group of senior Aboriginal men from Willowra walked across the landing strip at nearby Anningie Station to meet the Commonwealth Minister for Education, who was on his way to open a school at Ti Tree. The men had been tipped off that his plane would land at Anningie, so they requested a meeting to press the case for a bilingual program at Willowra.

They had made the case in writing the previous year, when they sent a letter, dated 28<sup>th</sup> April 1976, to the Northern Territory Division of the Commonwealth Department of Education. It began thus: ‘We, the undersigned members of the Willowra Aboriginal community, request the Education Department to make a study into the feasibility of a bilingual program at Willowra school.’ It was signed by Long Mick, Jimmy Jungarai, Johnny Martin and George Jukadai for the Willowra Council, and by community spokesman Stumpy Martin (Northern Territory Archives, Education Department, 74/19, folio 3; also quoted in McGill 1993: 121).

The bilingual program at Willowra was given approval and began operating officially during the first term of 1977. But to understand the exceptional nature of the community’s request, and of the circumstances that made it possible, some background will help. Our narrative begins with an account of Willowra, the place, and of the community that began to develop there, on traditional land, around the middle of the last century. It continues with an overview of the policy landscape of the mid 1970s, when we were teachers at Willowra School (1976-1977), and of the lines of tension that affected bilingual education. We focus in particular on the conflict between an educational philosophy that is school-based and community-oriented and one that is centralised and oriented towards academic achievement. Our record of the inception of the bilingual program is then set within this context. We conclude with some observations about the advantages of educational programs that ‘support and are organized by their targets for their own needs’ (Bialostock and Whitman 2006: 381).

### **Willowra: the place and the community**

Willowra is located approximately 350 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs near Wirliyajarrayi, a site on the Lander River (Yarlalinji), in the southern Tanami Desert. The school was established in 1968 on what was then a cattle station covering 4,885 square kilometres of traditional Warlpiri and Anmatyerr land. At that time the Anglo-Australian owners of the lease, the Parkinson family, had lived at Willowra for twenty years. ‘Parkinson time’ is remembered today as a period of safety for local people, in contrast to the 1920s when Europeans first invaded the region, relegating the inhabitants to a form of bare subsistence. This earlier period

was marked by violent conflict between Warlpiri and settlers over water, cattle (which were degrading the country) and women, culminating in 1928 in the killing of large numbers of Warlpiri and neighbouring peoples in a series of events now known as the Coniston Massacre. Settler harassment of peoples of the region continued into the 1940s, to which elders responded by impressing upon their young the importance of adhering to Aboriginal Law and avoiding outsiders (Meggitt 1962; see also Vaarzon-Morel 1995).

In contrast to the first settlers, the Parkinsons established respectful working relationships with local people, enlisting their help to develop the station in return for rations. In acknowledgement of their immense contribution, when Edgar Parkinson decided to sell the station in the 1960s he tried to find a way that they could purchase the lease. Under the policy of the time, however, Aboriginal people could not own the property. Determined that his people not lose their country nor be moved to a Government settlement, Stumpy Martin Jampijinpa, a Warlpiri man who over the years had worked closely with Parkinson, began what was a long campaign to have the pastoral lease transferred to Willowra community. Jampijinpa's journey took him from Willowra to Alice Springs, where he lobbied Department of Welfare and other bureaucrats and joined Aboriginal activists from eastern Australia, who were enrolling Aboriginal people on pastoral stations to vote and campaigning for their right to have access to schooling.<sup>2</sup> He also travelled widely interstate, lobbying ministers and joining various Aboriginal rights councils to further the Willowra cause (Vaarzon-Morel 2012). Significantly, Jampijinpa was multilingual, speaking three Aboriginal languages and English, but he was not alphabetically literate, having never received formal schooling.

Finally, in 1973, following the introduction of the self-determination policy, Willowra pastoral lease was purchased by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs on behalf of the local Indigenous people (Coombs 1993). Five years later a land claim to Willowra was lodged under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976. The claim was successful, and in 1983 the traditional owners were granted inalienable freehold title to their country.

It is within this specific historical context that Willowra people's determination to retain cultural autonomy must be interpreted. Their experiences of settler colonialism were in many ways different to those of other Warlpiri who had grown up on government settlements such as Yuendumu (see Baarda in this volume), Lajamanu

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<sup>2</sup> Permission for the establishment of schools on pastoral leases had to be negotiated with the lessees and was not always forthcoming. Many pastoralists shared the view of a neighbouring station manager, who told us apropos of his Aboriginal stockmen that 'the only good station black is an uneducated one'.

(formerly Hooker Creek) and Alekareng (formerly Ali-Curung, and before that, Warrabri). As a result of programs implemented under the assimilation policy, settlement people's daily lives were regulated to a degree not experienced by Willowra Warlpiri. While Willowra people interacted with Europeans in the sphere of work, for the most part everyday sociality continued to be constituted and framed by tradition-oriented cultural practices. Such practices included the regular performance of religious ceremonies including initiation, the observance of strict avoidance practices between certain kin, and arranged marriages between clans associated with different countries.

Although community stability was valued highly and people were less mobile than today, on occasion people travelled to the settlements to visit kin, to perform ceremonies and for funerals. Relatives from other places who visited Willowra would often remark upon Willowra people's strict adherence to the Law and the strength of their language (referred to as 'high' Warlpiri, cf. note 5, below). The Lander dialect of Warlpiri was regarded as integral to local identity and cultural autonomy.

Yet, at the same time as people adhered to tradition-oriented practices, they were quick to adapt to, and incorporate, new objects and technologies, and praxes that facilitated their survival as a community in rapidly changing socio-economic and political circumstances. It is within this wider historical context that the importance of the bilingual education program for Willowra people during the mid 1970s can best be understood.

### **The historical context**

Among the very early acts of the federal Labor government after its election in December 1972 were the following: disbanding of the Northern Territory Administration and its Welfare Branch, signalling an end to the earlier policy of assimilation; the purchase of Willowra Station for the local Aboriginal people (Coombs 1993); and the introduction of education policies that included school-based curriculum and decision making as well as bilingual education (McGill 1993: 27, 76, 28, 30).

These changes were not necessarily or universally welcomed by the non-Aboriginal population of the Territory, including those members of the education establishment who opted to transfer to the newly formed Northern Territory Branch of the Commonwealth Department of Education. In some quarters the policy innovations were seen as the utopian delusions of out-of-touch politicians and bureaucrats in Canberra, being implemented by the naïve tertiary-educated radicals from the cities who were infiltrating the Territory in increasing numbers.

The invasion of the ‘southern stirrers’, as they were known, was symptomatic of much wider social changes that were occurring in the period from the late 1950s to the mid 1970s, both in Australia and internationally. This time-span has become known to history as ‘the sixties’ and, as Jennifer Clark demonstrates, issues of race were of crucial significance to it, in Australia as elsewhere: ‘the Australian experience of the sixties must be seen as the local expression of a trans-national phenomenon that was strongly characterised by a changing racial discourse’ (2008: 12).

This is not the place to review Clark’s fine analysis; but the quote she offers from David Chalmers as ‘a useful starting point for examining the Australian context of this trans-national phenomenon [of the sixties]’ is worth reproducing here:

there was both a replacement of local standards and ways of doing things with more open, national ones; and a search for grass-roots participation and community, a dialectical interaction of changing consciousness and institutions, and the explosion of classic social questions into politics and into the streets (Chalmers 1991: xvii-xviii).

Clark comments that, by 1964,

the underlying features that marked the 1960s in Chalmers’ mind were already evident in Australia as much as elsewhere. Parochial practices were attacked as out of step with national and international standards. A sense of community among Aboriginal people outside of kinship groups was growing exponentially with national organisation and grassroots participation in political action.<sup>3</sup> More tolerant views on race and culture gained support and stood diametrically opposed to the authoritative and historically limiting positions of local, state and federal government, the church, the universities, the family and other powerful institutions in Australian society (2008: 13-14).

The tension between these forces was still a characteristic of the times when, in early January of 1976, we arrived at Willowra as the new teachers for the two-teacher school. At that moment our optimism was high, and matched by a similar optimism on the part of the Willowra community. The school-based policies of the time encouraged us to find out from local people what they wanted from education and to respond to that. Willowra people consistently told us that they wanted the skills that would enable them to conduct the affairs of the community themselves; these skills included bilingual literacy. We did our best to accommodate these aspirations.

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<sup>3</sup> As Martin Jampijinpa’s journey (referred to above) indicates, his involvement in this growing activist network had significant implications for Willowra.

Fortunately, the community was able to take advantage of a brief window of opportunity that was not to last much beyond our time at the school (1976-1977<sup>4</sup>). In 1979, after the Northern Territory attained self-government (1978), the Commonwealth handed over responsibility for education to the new NT government, which replaced the school-based policy with a re-centralised curriculum and supervisory structure (McGill 1993: 33). Since then, this government has also progressively reduced its support for bilingual education, which, at the time of writing (2015) has been largely dismantled in the public education system of the Territory.

The fact that the establishment of the bilingual program at Willowra in 1977 was community driven makes it unique in the early history of bilingual education. It differed in this way from the programs at the five NT schools where bilingual education had been introduced in 1973. Baarda's comment (1994: 204) on the establishment of the Warlpiri program at Yuendumu undoubtedly applies to the other four schools as well: it 'was a political decision that resulted from pressure from Canberra and a new Labor government anxious to implement reforms as quickly as possible'. Similarly Gale (1994: 192-193) observes that 'the establishment of bilingual programs in successive schools in the NT throughout the 1970s was largely a "top down" implementation, rather than a grassroots development initiated by Aboriginal people themselves'.

### **What was at stake?**

To date, the only extended history of Willowra School is a Master of Education thesis by Graham McGill, who became Principal Education Adviser for Bilingual Education during our time at Willowra, in June of 1977 (Harris and Devlin 1999: 39). The thesis is a good source of data for the period it covers, that is, up to the date of its submission in 1993. It also brings into sharp focus the issues that were at stake.

McGill analyses attendance and academic achievement data from Willowra School to conclude that responsibility for the low standards of achievement could be attributed to two policies: school-based curriculum and decision making; and bilingual education (1993: 120), since both of these led to neglect of the 'school program' (essentially, English literacy and numeracy for primary-aged children).

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<sup>4</sup> We continued to work with and for Willowra people well after that time. We were co-authors of the documentation submitted under the Northern Territory Land Rights (1976) Act for four land claims that involved Willowra people: Willowra (1980); Kaytej-Warlpiri (1981); Mount Barkly (1983); and Yurrkuru (Brookes Soak) (1991). As an anthropologist, PVM has continued her work with Willowra people to the present day.

The problem with his argument is not so much that he has got the facts wrong (although we would have grounds to object that the school program was not neglected during our time at Willowra), but rather that making academic achievement the criterion of success for an Aboriginal school is deeply questionable and deserves serious critical scrutiny.

The alternative position is well laid out by Bialostock and Whitman (2006: 381):

(M)any current literacy interventions intended for indigenous peoples are largely reconceptualizations of earlier colonial projects that were tacitly designed to undermine indigenous cultures and epistemologies. These literacy interventions both depend on and reinforce notions of personal autonomy, independence, and self-fulfillment that conform to the needs of late-modern capitalism but which may not be what the target populations perceive to be in their best interests. Such programs have been instantiated in liberatory discourses of individuality, freedom, agency, and human rights. As a result, even those programs that target maintenance of first-language indigenous literacies, developing ‘from the ground up’ approaches (Hornberger 1996), must contend with and take into account a context that tacitly works to eradicate indigenous epistemologies, practices, and languages. . .

(W)e offer readers a portrait of the current moment in global capitalism, a new kind of colonial project, where concepts such as empowerment, academic achievement, and excellence through literacy serve to subsume indigenous peoples and epistemologies to service-based capitalism. . . (W)e lay out a different kind of model – programs that support and are organized by their targets for their own needs.

What seems to us surprising about this excellent summary is that, in 2006, the year of its publication and thirty years after our arrival at Willowra, the idea of ‘programs that support and are organized by their targets for their own needs’ could be regarded as *news*. In 1976, it seemed self-evident to us that we were there precisely for the purpose of fostering such programs; moreover, that the policy regime of the time not only authorised us but *encouraged* us to do so. In 1977 JW wrote that the ‘Aboriginal people of Willowra want education essentially in order to learn the skills necessary to protect their traditions’ (Wafer 1977: 527). Accordingly, we attempted to develop a school program that would make this possible.

### 1976-1977



In 1976 the school was still something of a foreign country for the children and their families. Not only was the educational material provided there irrelevant to them, little printed matter existed outside of the school, with only a few Warlpiri adults able to read it. Many people's understandings of schooling derived from visible, pedagogic practices characteristic of mainstream institutions; for example, children were required to wear uniforms, sit at desks and learn to write using pencils. Yet, despite the alien nature of school, the community came to embrace it, transforming its relevance and role in their lives through the introduction of a Warlpiri/English bilingual program.

The grounds and infrastructure of the school today are greatly expanded from what we found when we first came to Willowra in 1976. The built environment of the general community has also grown, and the significance of the school in the community has changed. During our time at the school the infrastructure consisted of a demountable classroom and three silver caravans (nicknamed 'silver bullets') comprising a classroom, an ablution block and the teacher's residence. Located near the site of the station homestead, the buildings framed a lawn on which the children played in the shade of Dreaming trees associated with Wirliyarrayi, the sacred site complex that gave the school its name when the bilingual program was implemented.

The population of the community was approximately 200, of which 50 to 55 children were enrolled at the school. They lived in family groups a kilometre or more to the west of the school, along the dry bed of the Lander River. Apart from five open-roofed 'houses', people's dwellings consisted of semi-permanent shelters constructed of iron and branches, which were oriented in relation to their traditional country. They had no running water or electricity and, since water was generally dug from the sandy river, the school was the only place most children could shower and wash clothes. Few adults had cars, and there were no street lights, no television, and little technology apart from the radio telephone that served the whole community (see Vaarzon-Morel 2014). Many people's first experiences of moving pictures were through screenings of feature films on Friday nights at the school, which the entire community attended. The school thus provided people with facilities and experiences not otherwise available, and its material effects on the community were significant. Although we were supposed to cater for primary school age children from age 5 in kindergarten to 12 in grade 6, in fact we taught children from 3 up to 17 years of age.

The Warlpiri staff included a gardener, a cleaner and a teaching assistant. Congruent with Warlpiri cultural values and protocol, the gardener, Jungarrayi, was a senior *kirda* or 'owner' of Wirliyarrayi and belonged to the local land owning clan. The cleaner, Nangala, was his wife. The teaching assistant, Sue Napangardi, was the wife of Martin Jampijnpa who, as mentioned earlier, helped secure the Willowra pastoral lease for Willowra community. Jampijnpa was also *kurdungurlu*

for Jungarrayi and for Wirliyarrayi. This is a customary managerial relationship that entails reciprocity and complementary relations.

For her part, Sue Napangardi, the teaching assistant, had learned alphabetic literacy at Warrabri settlement where, like others of her generation (including Grant Jangala, who also became a teaching assistant at Willowra), she was caned for speaking Warlpiri in the classroom. Not surprisingly, her attitudes toward Western schooling and English literacy were complex. Outside of the classroom, Napangardi put her literacy skills to use in practical ways, assisting her husband Jampijinpa (who spoke English fluently but could not read and write) by reading letters and helping arrange meetings for him in cities such as Canberra. What is important to note here is that Jampijinpa's lack of literacy was not viewed as an impediment to his productive engagement with the wider world and modernity (cf. Bialostock and Whitman 2006). Nevertheless, he strongly supported the school, regarding alphabetic literacy as complementary to the traditional communication modalities of Warlpiri culture, which include oral forms, sign language, and the iconographic system used to inscribe cosmological information on surfaces such as bodies, objects and the ritual arena (see Munn 1973).

Jampijinpa's brother-in-law and *kirda*, Sammy Johnson Japangardi, was a close friend and key informant of the late Ken Hale, Professor of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who devised the initial teaching material for the bilingual program at Yuendumu in 1974 (see Baarda 1994).<sup>5</sup> These people played a central role in facilitating our developing relations with the community and helping us consult parents and family members about their perceptions of Western schooling.

What became clear to us was how poorly the school had served the community to date, partly because of a lack of resourcing and support from the Education Department, and partly as a result of parents' limited involvement. In the main, the young children had little English and were uninterested in the English-only reading material available at the school. This consisted principally of the Bush Books series, with vintage sentences such as 'Here is Dick', 'Here is Dora', 'Here is pup', 'Dick is looking at pup'.

So we set about finding out what community members expected of the colonising power's system for educating the young, which meant trying to understand what they thought about the use of both Warlpiri and English in and outside school,

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<sup>5</sup> Recently Sue Napangardi told PVM that Sammy Johnson was Ken Hale's 'adopted son' through their work together on *kurdi* initiation rites and other ceremonies such as *ngajakula* and *jardiwampa*. Sue first met Ken Hale when he acted as interpreter on the Willowra land claim. She recalled, 'I could hear his voice before I saw him, and I thought, 'Who is this person talking high Warlpiri?'

their language ideology, and what content they wanted in the curriculum. This was made easier for us by the fact that people invited us on hunting trips and to ceremonial gatherings, where we gradually became familiar with local beliefs, language and cultural practices.

In response to our inquiries, adults stated that they wanted the children to learn English communication skills, but also to continue to speak strong Willowra Warlpiri. When Willowra was visited by children who had been schooled at Warrabri and spoke little Warlpiri, Willowra parents expressed concern that this might happen in their own community. When JW discussed the idea of bilingual education with them, they were most interested, especially those who had viewed it in action at Yuendumu. While they wanted the children to acquire literacy and numeracy in order to work in the office, clinic and school and, in that way, to strengthen Aboriginal control of the community, they were excited by the idea of children mastering literacy in their own language as well as English. Importantly, they wanted more involvement in the school and greater recognition of Warlpiri culture through the teaching of language, stories and dances. People valued their cultural autonomy and regarded a bilingual program as one pathway to maintaining it.

For our part, we arrived already believing that children are more likely to become literate in their first language than in a foreign language they barely speak, and also that language maintenance is a crucial part of cultural maintenance. JW had a background in languages and a long standing interest in bilingual education, and we were given additional motivation earlier in the year when the teacher-linguist at Yuendumu, Wendy Baarda, shared with us the teaching materials and curriculum used in the Yuendumu bilingual program. By that stage the Yuendumu program had been operating for almost two years and had produced a number of Warlpiri books, including primers (see Baarda, 1994: 207) that could be used at Willowra.

In what turned out to be a first step toward a bilingual program, JW used these materials to teach Sue Napangardi literacy in the vernacular. We also invited parents to the school, encouraging them to become involved through telling stories in Warlpiri to the children. Sue is a highly gifted individual who rapidly mastered written Warlpiri and began writing poems and stories. Reflecting on this time, she recently told PVM, ‘I wanted to learn strong Warlpiri. Although I’d lived at Willowra as a young girl, I went to live at Warrabri where I spoke Eastern Warlpiri—Wakiti Warlpiri. It was a happy experience [at Willowra School], being able to talk to the children in Warlpiri in the classroom and hearing *jukurrpa* stories from the ladies, and which word meant different things. That’s where the real stuff [deep knowledge] was. Up to that time the kids had to learn English in the school, but no one understood English properly.’ Sue also recalled that ‘the first time I wrote a story in Warlpiri—I also drew the pictures—it was a story told by Topsy

Nangala about *pupungarrka*, a boy-man monster. He was a big boy but with whiskers and he was trying to climb Karrynjarra [a mountain peak on neighbouring Anningie cattle station], but couldn't make it and kept on rolling back down.'<sup>6</sup>

Enthusiasm for the use of Warlpiri in the school rapidly grew, and at the end of June 1976 JW wrote a letter to the Education Department on behalf of Willowra Community Council<sup>7</sup> requesting that a bilingual program be implemented at Willowra. The letter pointed out that Willowra fulfilled most of the criteria deemed essential for the introduction of the program, including that 'the community supports the principle of bilingual education, and agrees to the use of Warlpiri language as a medium of instruction' (Willowra Council 1976). Furthermore, it pointed out that the school had two Aboriginal teachers<sup>8</sup> literate in both English and Warlpiri who could teach in the program, and that the linguists from Yuendumu and Hooker Creek<sup>9</sup> supported it. As Sue Napangardi remembers it, people wanted the bilingual program to start so as to 'to keep their culture going on, so that the kids would not forget about their culture and their language'<sup>10</sup>.

In response, David Raff, then Education Advisor (Bilingual) in the Alice Springs office, advised the community and school that he would undertake a feasibility study in July 'relating to the introduction of a bilingual education at Willowra' (Raff 1976a). In the interim, Dr Mary Laughren, the linguist attached to the bilingual program at Yuendumu, was engaged to visit Willowra to prepare an initial report advising on two matters: whether the material used in the Yuendumu and Hooker Creek programs would be suitable for Willowra; and if, indeed, the program had grass-roots support. In the event, Laughren (1976) confirmed the community's serious desire for bilingual education and attested that it had every chance of success.<sup>11</sup> Raff, for his part, later reported, after visiting Willowra, that

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<sup>6</sup> Sue Napangardi Martin to PVM, Alekarengge 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2015. The story is recorded in the reader *Karrynjarra* (Nungarrayi and Napangardi 1977), but was actually told by Nancy Nungarrayi.

<sup>7</sup> All the signatories (listed in our introduction) are now deceased, but their descendants continued to have a lengthy relationship with the school. George Jukadai's daughter Aileen Long trained as a teacher and worked for a long time at Willowra School, and Jimmy Jungarrayi's daughter Maisie still teaches there.

<sup>8</sup> Sue Napangardi and Grant Jangala.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Laughren and Lothar Jagst.

<sup>10</sup> Sue Napangardi Martin to PVM, Alekarengge 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Laughren also noted that Willowra 'has a strong community spirit. It is more traditional and has stricter "laws" than places such as Yuendumu. The European influence is much less in Willowra than in settlements or missions.' On the matter of the local language, she commented that 'Willowra Warlpiri is considered a model of "pure" Warlpiri or "old fashioned" Warlpiri'; also that it had less interference from English than Yuendumu Warlpiri (Laughren 1976: 1-2).

'I have rarely seen such a high degree of interest and enthusiasm expressed [by a community] in relation to an educational innovation' (Raff 1976b).

On 12<sup>th</sup> August 1976 a letter from Dr Eedle, Director of the Northern Territory Division of the Commonwealth Department of Education, was addressed to Willowra community spokesman Stumpy Martin, advising that approval was given for a bilingual program to start in 1977. Yet the implementation of the program was not straightforward. It was placed in jeopardy when, later in 1976, the Department decided not to expand bilingual education in central Australia. It was also rumoured that some Willowra children might be bussed to Ti Tree (on the Stuart Highway, approximately 125 kilometres to the south-east of Willowra) to attend the newly built school.<sup>12</sup>

It was in response to such uncertainty that Willowra people dashed to the Anningie airstrip (see our introduction, above) to lobby the Commonwealth Minister for Education about the bilingual program. They were successful in their venture, and the program was implemented at Willowra in early 1977.

The school was under-staffed and under-resourced, so we and our Aboriginal colleagues gathered after school each day, outside the prescribed hours, to work on a Warlpiri literacy program and the associated lesson plans and teaching techniques. By the end of the year the literacy worker had produced a number of high quality readers, the teaching assistants had developed their own teaching materials, and the primary-age students were learning to read and write in Warlpiri. In the major bilingual program at Yuendumu, Warlpiri literacy was taught only to Grade 3. But at Willowra, our post-primary students showed such facility in mastering it that we incorporated them into the school program as potential future teachers. Importantly, the community felt welcome at the school, and many elders regularly participated in school activities, telling traditional stories and teaching students Warlpiri culture.

Over the years, many of those who became literate in Warlpiri in that period have occupied important roles in the local community, working in the fields of health and office administration, as well as in the new adult cultural centre and at the store. At least one of our Warlpiri colleagues from the 1970s continues to teach at the school, where she carries on her task of re-educating the changing parade of non-Indigenous teachers who arrive at Willowra. Some now work outside the community, including a former Warlpiri literacy worker who is now undertaking a

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<sup>12</sup> We could not locate archival documents relating to this development. However, Uibo notes that there was so much unused space at the Ti Tree facility that the Government was looking for "tenants" to justify the building' (1993: 27). One of the suggestions was that Aboriginal teacher education be relocated there from Batchelor.

law degree in Sydney. Significantly, they continue to regard bilingual education as important, and most want it to be implemented again.

We resigned from NT Education at the end of 1977, after the Department failed to implement a half day program at the school.<sup>13</sup> In the following years the infrastructure of the school expanded substantially, which made possible the appointment of additional staff, including a teacher linguist, and the consolidation of the bilingual program. For a period, the school continued to be regarded as the centre of the community, although this is no longer the case. The low levels of educational achievement among Willowra youth in recent years were paralleled by low levels of engagement of the community with the school. The causes of this alienation are no doubt many and complex, and perhaps include the vagaries of educational appointments. From time to time, non-Aboriginal teachers were appointed to Willowra who had little interest in Warlpiri language or culture and scant involvement with the community outside the school. But if any single factor could be regarded as major, it would probably be the dismantling of the bilingual program in the early 2000s.

## Conclusion

For our conclusion, we refer again to Bialostock and Whitman (2006: 390):

We would argue that all too often the colonial process continues under a different colonizing principle, that of the global citizen, and our ethnographic [and educational] interventions must take this into account.

To make the point, they analyse a list of educational goals formulated by the superintendent of a bilingual reservation school in Washington state and conclude (2006: 386) that the list:

points toward the production of citizens who will have certain identity markers: students shall become highly individuated learners, they shall master the latest technology, they shall successfully complete a highly academic curriculum and successfully attend college, and they shall join a global citizenry. These goals define school success, but also echo larger societal beliefs about what it means to be successful members of a global society [in which, as they say elsewhere, '(i)ndividuals become entrepreneurs of themselves' (2006: 384)].

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<sup>13</sup> JW had written to the Department in October of that year, requesting a half day program (as recommended by O'Grady and Hale in their 1974 report on bilingual programs in the NT), for the purpose of systematising the initial literacy program, training staff and further developing the Warlpiri curriculum.

This understanding of what ‘student achievement’ means is no doubt shared by most teachers in Australia, including many who work in Aboriginal schools, and is a clear outgrowth of earlier understandings that we see reflected in McGill’s thesis. But Bialostock and Whitman’s account (2006: 387-388) of how this works out in practice on the Spokane reservation is telling:

It is clear that many Spokanes want jobs in the mainstream economy. Most Spokane Indians live off the reservation because of the very limited economic opportunities they have on it. But it is also true that the school-based literacy programs, nested as they are in a web of neoliberal mechanisms of individuation, testing, evaluation, and rhetoric, create pathways that systematically deny most students access to those wages. Spokanes - and indigenous peoples generally - may articulate their understandings of autonomy, self-fulfillment, and independence in ways that do not fit well with neoliberal visions of those qualities as envisioned by the state. . .

Much of what they say about the Spokanes here applies also to the Warlpiri, although, in our time at Willowra, those who wanted jobs elsewhere, in the mainstream economy, could not be quantified as ‘many’. In retrospect, what is clear is that Willowra Warlpiri were not rejecting modernity to remain isolated in a nostalgic past, but rather were attempting their own particular ‘indigenization of modernity’ (Sahlins 1999), through strategies such as the purchase of Willowra station and the introduction of the bilingual program.

There are no easy lessons to be drawn from our time at Willowra. The fact that we were able to help the community realise a small part of its *own* vision of ‘autonomy, self-fulfillment, and independence’ was, as we have tried to show, due to the conjunction of so many chance factors that it can hardly stand as any kind of model.

Yet, the concept of ‘programs that support and are organized by their targets for their own needs’ appears to have so little support among educators in Australia today that it is at least worth pointing to Willowra as a case where, even if only temporarily and imperfectly, it worked.

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