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## Indigenous Evaluation – Productivity Commission

Literacy for Life Foundation Submission August 2019

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## Introduction

The Literacy for Life Foundation welcomes the Productivity Commission's project to develop an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy. The Foundation expresses full support for the proposal, outlined in the discussion paper, to make the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples the overarching framework for this discussion.

Literacy for Life Foundation believes "the need to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander input into policy processes as a core objective" should be seen as supporting, not contradicting, the other suggested objectives of "building the evidence base about 'what works' or ensuring value for money in providing services." (PC 2019, p.2) We further maintain that the possibility to do this has been demonstrated in the evaluation model The Foundation has developed since 2012 with academic partners, the Lowitja Institute, the University of New England (UNE) and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and with the support of Commonwealth & State Government funders and private sector donors. We urge the Productivity Commission to take note of this model as an exemplar of successful community-based participatory evaluation.

Literacy for Life Foundation proposes three further actions which need to be taken as part of building a better evaluation culture. First, greater recognition needs to be given to the issue of low English language literacy among adults as a barrier both to achieving program outcomes and to involving local communities in program evaluation. Second, the Commonwealth must collect much better data on adult literacy levels in Aboriginal communities, so there is a baseline from which to measure improvements and a way to establish more clearly the relationship between adult English literacy levels and the success or otherwise of programs. Third, Commonwealth, State and Local government agencies and authorities which routinely collect data on the Indigenous population in their various areas of responsibility need to make it much simpler and easier for Aboriginal-controlled organisations to utilise data linkage techniques to build a more robust evidence base for establishing the success or otherwise of programs.

## What we do

Literacy for Life Foundation is an Aboriginal organisation that aims to raise the level of literacy among adults in the communities with which it works, using a three phase 'whole-of-community' model. This model was originally developed for countries in the Global South where low rates of adult literacy are similar to those in Aboriginal communities. In Phase One, a community development process is utilised to build local leadership and commitment and continues for the duration of the campaign. The aim of this phase is to actively involve the community as a whole in the process of building a social culture which values literacy and learning. Approximately three months after Phase One begins, the six-month literacy course starts within Phase Two, which includes 64 basic reading and writing lessons using a simple audiovisual method which originates from Cuba and is known as *Yes, I Can!* Phase Two runs for up to three months and lessons are delivered by local facilitators trained for this work. Once people complete the lessons, they continue with Phase Three over a further three months. This consists of 'post-literacy' activities to consolidate their confidence and literacy skills gained in Phase Two, enabling them to access pathways into further useful community work, further learning, including vocational training, as well as employment.

Since 2012, this model has been deployed in nine communities, eight in NSW and one in Central Australia. At the time of writing, the Literacy for Life Foundation database included household survey data gathered from over 1,300 adults. Of these, 385 had taken part as students in the campaign, in class groups averaging 15 per group. By the end of 2019, approximately 260 adults will have graduated from the campaign, the majority with significantly improved literacy. The campaign has also employed and trained over 50 local Aboriginal staff to work in the campaign, as organisers, facilitators and survey workers.

### **Literacy for Life Foundation's Evaluation Model**

The original literacy campaign pilot was funded by a Commonwealth agency<sup>1</sup> as a participatory action research (PAR) project managed by the University of New England and led by a national Aboriginal Steering Committee working in partnership with the Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC). As such, it included a rigorous evaluation, based on PAR principles, one in which the local community and organisations were directly involved, from the initial collection of baseline data via a household survey through to the analysis of the results of each phase of the campaign. This rigour was confirmed when a paper outlining the findings of the evaluation was accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed international journal, *Literacy & Numeracy Studies*. Each year since, then, the evaluation partner has produced an evaluation report, based on a research methodology described in Appendix 1 and each year, further papers based on these evaluations have been published in peer-reviewed journals. The cost has been borne partly by the funding agencies and donors, but also through a pro-bono contribution by the University of New England, and now by UNSW, of the time of its researchers.

In 2016, the Australian Research Council provided three years funding to begin a longitudinal study of the impact of the campaign. The study is utilising data already being collected by Literacy for Life Foundation and held in its database, additional follow-up survey data collected with local Aboriginal research assistants and a data linkage process for a sample of graduates and a 'control group' of people who reported low literacy initially, but did not complete the campaign. Results are now beginning to be published in papers, listed in Appendix 3.

The point is this: local communities are able and willing to participate in rigorous evaluation studies, and university partners can be recruited to help facilitate this process. The key to it all, however, is that Aboriginal organisations, such as Literacy for Life Foundation and the Lowitja Institute, have to be resourced to provide the overall coordination and leadership of the process. Some of this funding can and should be incorporated into program budgets; but some can also be secured from private and corporate sponsors, and from the array of research funding bodies to which academic researchers have access.

**Recommendation 1:** Literacy for Life Foundation recommends that the Productivity Commission takes note of the evaluation model and framework which the organisation has developed with its research partners (the Lowitja Institute, UNE and UNSW) to evaluate its national Aboriginal adult literacy campaign, as an exemplar of local participatory evaluation process. We suggest the model meets four essential requirements, namely Aboriginal leadership, local community participation and capacity development, academic rigor and delivering high return on investment.

### **Low English language literacy among Indigenous adults<sup>2</sup>.**

As a result of the work it has been doing since 2012, and the research undertaken prior to that by the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health/Lowitja Institute, Literacy for Life Foundation has identified the absence of detailed local level data on Aboriginal adult English literacy rates as a factor that has major implications for the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation project, for two reasons. First, while it is not mentioned in Close the Gap targets, the English literacy proficiency of Indigenous adults is a key factor in the achievement of virtually every one of these targets, as it is for the outcomes of every program aimed at reducing disadvantage and building the capacity of people and communities to live well.

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth Education's Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program, now re-named Skills for Education & Employment (SEE) and administered through the Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business

<sup>2</sup> This section is based on a paper from the ARC research team (Lin et al), currently under review by the Australian Educational Researcher.

This is increasingly recognised in concepts such as ‘health literacy’, ‘financial literacy’, ‘legal literacy’, and ‘governance literacy’. But, as the last of these should alert us, it goes to the question of the limits of community-control and self-determination, since the ubiquitous use of highly-literate language and text within government, and the almost total lack of government officials and legislators with any proficiency in one or more Indigenous languages undermines the possibility of the majority of Indigenous ‘voices’ ever even being heard, let alone listened to. Second, and following on from this, the high level of text-based English literacy involved at every stage of most evaluation processes means that a lack of English proficiency presents a major barrier to undertaking genuinely participatory evaluation at a local level.

The extent of this problem, however, remains hidden from view, due to an almost complete data vacuum. While the English literacy outcomes of Indigenous children are constantly measured and debated, as evidenced in discussions around NAPLAN and school achievement in the Close the Gap policy framework, attention falls away once these children leave school. In fact, there is almost no reliable national data on English literacy rates among Indigenous adults. This data scarcity is not only true of the adult Indigenous population. Robust, contemporary estimates of English literacy levels in the adult Australian population are scarce. The main source since 1997 has been the Australian component of a series of three international adult literacy surveys, the Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL) in 1996 (McLennan 1997), the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) in 2006, and the Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) conducted in 2011-12. Each of these surveys provide national and state level estimates but sample size constraints mean that recent and reliable data on Australian Indigenous rates of adult English literacy are not available. The 1996 SAL reported 41-47% of Aboriginal adults were at ‘Level 1’ (defined as having very poor skills and experience considerable difficulties with printed material in daily life) and another 25-30% were at ‘Level 2’ (defined as experiencing some difficulties in using printed material in daily life) (McLennan 1997). The more recent surveys have not reported any findings on Aboriginal English literacy, and the ABS report on 2011-12 PIAAC said that discrete Aboriginal communities had been specifically excluded from the sample (ABS 2013).

As an indicator of the potential magnitude of this issue, Literacy for Life Foundation has worked with its academic partners to produce estimates of the level of English language literacy in eight Aboriginal communities in NSW with which it has been working since 2012. These estimates use both self-report data from household surveys conducted by local researchers and objective assessments by professional literacy advisers using the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). In the household survey, 800 of 1177 adults (n=68%) reported low or very low English-language literacy levels, including 50% of people who said they had finished Year 10. This casts doubt on the value of school completion data which is used, for example, in Close the Gap reporting, as an accurate predictor of adult literacy rates. Results further show that while self-reported low literacy was prevalent in the population studied, there was also a significant overestimation, with adults who have completed Year 10 nearly 17 times more likely to overestimate compared to people who only complete primary school. The most important finding is that, while English literacy as it is ascertained through self-report among Aboriginal adults in north-western NSW is a significantly greater problem than it is in the population as a whole, the actual extent of the problem is also being underestimated because of systematic overestimation of self-reported English literacy levels.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) said, in relation to the most recent PIAAC survey results, that PIAAC Skill Level 3 was the minimum level required by individuals to meet the complex demands of work and life in modern economies (SCOTese, 2012, p. 4), a view which has also been expressed in the Productivity Commission’s own publications on adult literacy. Although some literacy academics consider this a matter of debate, it is still necessary for effective planning and policy development to make some estimates of how many people operate at the lower levels, especially at Level 1 and below, since they are clearly the ones who will face most challenges dealing with the world of text. Literacy for Life Foundation has been informed that negotiations between the OECD and the Australian Government are already underway regarding the next iteration of PIAAC, planned for 2021, but at this stage there is no indication that results for localities or for Indigenous adults will be reported.



**Recommendation 2:** Literacy for Life Foundation recommends the Productivity Commission take immediate steps to ensure that Indigenous communities are properly represented in the next PIAAC survey, so that there is a baseline against which future program success can be measured.

### Data linkage

While survey self-reports and observational data provide some measure of the impact of the campaign, we have sought more objective evidence of outcomes through the process of data linkage. This involves analysing de-identified historic data on the health and justice system records of study participants to reveal any changes in their patterns of interaction before and after the campaign and between graduates and non-graduates. Behind this simple description of a research method, however, there lies a complex and time-consuming ethical and bureaucratic process, in which the maintenance of Aboriginal community control is extremely difficult. The most important issue, in our view, was how to secure informed consent not only from individual participants, but also from the community organisations who had agreed to the longitudinal study. But in order to access the databases listed above, we also had to follow a process dictated by CHeReL, the agency which manages data linkage in NSW. Under their processes, we first had to obtain approval from the data custodians, the agencies responsible for collecting and storing that data, and from two more Ethics Committees, the Human Research Ethics Committee of the NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (NSW AH&MRC) and the NSW Population & Health Services Research Ethics Committee (NSW PHSREC). Counting CHeReL itself, since they also rule on whether or not the study is feasible, this brought fifteen new agencies into the approval process, of which only one, the NSW AH&MRC, was Aboriginal community-controlled. A further complexity arose if CHeReL, or a custodian agency, or one of the additional Ethics Committees, requested any significant change in the study protocol, such as the wording of a Consent Form or a Participant Information Sheet, because that required a variation to the original approval from UNE's Human Research Ethics Committee. This in fact occurred on several occasions. As a consequence of this complexity, it has taken the research team almost three years to negotiate through this maze, and the team is still waiting for the data to be provided. As a result, there will be insufficient time to analyse it in any detail before current ARC funding runs out.

**Recommendation 3:** Literacy for Life Foundation recommends the Productivity Commission investigate ways to streamline the process for communities and community-controlled organisations to obtain approval from government agencies, ethics committees and data custodians so this locally generated and collected data can be utilised by the community and its organisations to improve evaluation and program effectiveness.

### Conclusion

Literacy for Life Foundation supports the work being undertaken by the Productivity Commission to enhance evaluation of initiatives aiming to improve the lives of Indigenous people. And we would welcome any opportunity to meet with the Commission to discuss the project in greater depth.

As an Aboriginal organisation working to lift levels of adult literacy, Literacy for Life Foundation has a community-driven approach embedded in all aspects of its work. This extends to the academically rigorous and genuinely participatory nature of evaluations carried out to date.

Delivering successful community-driven programs and creating successful community-driven evaluation practices go hand-in-hand. The current extent of low English language literacy among Aboriginal adults presents a significant challenge to these aims.

However, as outlined in Literacy for Life Foundation's submission, and reinforced through the positive achievements of the featured literacy campaign communities, there are existing models that offer much the Productivity Commission can draw on for this important project.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1:** Literacy for Life Foundation recommends that the Productivity Commission takes note of the evaluation model and framework which the organisation has developed with its research partners (the Lowitja Institute, UNE and UNSW) to evaluate its national Aboriginal adult literacy campaign, as an exemplar of local participatory evaluation process. We suggest the model meets four essential requirements, namely Aboriginal leadership, local community participation and capacity development, academic rigor and delivering high return on investment.

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## **Appendix 1. Evaluation framework**

Since the campaign began in Wilcannia in 2012, the Foundation's Evaluation Partner, the University of New England, has utilised a participatory action research (PAR) framework to conduct regular independent evaluations. The PAR framework requires the evaluation leader and team to actively engage with the people who play various roles in the campaign, including Literacy for Life Foundation staff, students, community members and donors/funders, to discover from them what they are learning as the campaign unfolds. The evaluation framework reflects the 'program logic' of the mass literacy campaign model across its three phases. That is to say, the campaign is evaluated on its own terms, to discover whether and how it is achieving the objectives the Literacy for Life Foundation has set itself, and the outcomes for which it has been funded.

The evaluation data is collected through multiple methods, including:

- Background research on the community/region where the campaign runs e.g. census statistics, local history materials, government reports;
- On-site participant-observation in campaign activities & ongoing dialogue with all the different actors;
- Examination of the following campaign records and documents:
  - household survey data
  - attendance records
  - examples of student work
  - literacy assessments
  - minutes of local Working Group meetings
  - submissions and reports to funding bodies
  - Literacy for Life Foundation financial and management reports to the Board
  - media releases and reports
- Semi-structured evaluation interviews and focus groups with participants, staff, community members, local organisations and external stakeholders including funders/donors.

All data collection is covered by an ethical approval from UNE, requiring individuals who provide information to give informed consent. Names are removed from the analysis unless the person who provided it explicitly agreed. A summary of findings and recommendations which apply to the community is presented at the end of one or two intakes to the local community working group and staff for further input and clarification. At the end of each evaluation period – usually between 12 – 18 months, the evaluator systematises the disparate and sometimes contradictory learnings from all the different sources, reviews findings from previous evaluations and from background research on the campaign model and produces a draft report, with conclusions and recommendations. This is then fed back to Literacy for Life Foundation management before the production of the final report for presentation to the Board, funding agencies and donors.

The report encompasses, for each community, a brief account of each campaign community and its history; the outcomes from the household surveys and the Expressions of Interest, which provides baseline data on population and need; evidence of community mobilisation and engagement; enrolment information, attendance and completion rates for each intake, for both the Yes I Can lessons (Phase Two) and post-literacy activities (Phase Three); analysis of withdrawals; analysis of level of literacy attainment, and, where available, post-campaign destinations (see below). It also covers workforce issues, including an analysis of staffing by gender and Aboriginality, and of local capacity building.

The evaluation framework is designed also to reveal the impact which the campaign has on aspects of individual and community well-being. That is to say, in addition to people improving their literacy, other changes that occur as a result of the campaign are investigated. For example, does the campaign change the way that low-literate adults interact with their children's and grandchildren's schooling? Does it lead to behavioural change in terms of the way people manage their health? Do people who have been in the campaign become more involved in their local organisations, like land councils? Do they become more adept at utilising local service agencies? Do they find employment?

Some changes can be observed during the course of a particular intake, especially in the post-literacy phase, which is specifically designed to open up pathways for the students who have completed the Yes I Can lessons, engaging them in activities where they use their literacy to achieve their personal goals. For example, in post literacy some students learn how to produce a resume, some undertake work experience, and some obtain employment. In some communities, students have learned how to read to their children, visited the school library and become more engaged with the school. In most communities, some participants have elected to study for their driver's license permit test, while others have collected family history. In some communities students have undertaken introductory courses at TAFE. In each community, the program for post literacy is designed in consultation with the students and the Campaign Working Group, which focuses on 2-3 of 8 potential domains of impact, according to what is available and what is prioritised. The domains are: employment and economy; further education and schooling; health; language, land and culture; housing; law and justice; community organisations; and active citizenship e.g. local government, voting etc.

However, as has been found in international studies of adult learning, often impacts only materialise after a participant has left the campaign. Therefore, in 2017, the Foundation commenced, in partnership with UNE, UNSW and the Lowitja Institute, a longitudinal study of campaign participants, funded by the Australian Research Council. This project includes a retrospective study of the participants who joined between 2012 and 2016 and their communities, and a prospective study following the students and communities who joined in 2017 and 2018. This study is focusing on health, employment, justice, community participation and further education. UNE and the Foundation have also supported a PhD student to examine the impact of the campaign on community-school relations, and work has recently begun to design a specific study of the impact on school outcomes of children and young people in households where adults have participated in the campaign. This research program will result in a better understanding of where impacts are being most felt. It will also inform the design of a simple system for ongoing post-participation data collection which can be done by local communities, so they can continue to play an active role in campaign monitoring, design, improvement, implementation and impact into the future.



## **Appendix 2. Brief summary ARC longitudinal research**

Literacy for Life Foundation is a partner with UNE, UNSW and the Lowitja Institute in an Australian Research Council (ARC) three- year study of the impact of the adult literacy campaign on the health and well-being of participating communities, using a social determinants of health framework. The Chief Investigator is Bob Boughton, from UNE; Jack Beetson, Pat Anderson & Ben Bartlett are partner investigators; and there are five other academic researchers on the team, Richard Taylor and Sophia Lin from UNSW School of Public Health, and Toni Schofield, Lorina Barker and Frances Williamson from UNE. The project began in September 2016 and is scheduled to complete in October 2019. The study is taking place in 5 communities: Wilcannia, Bourke, Enngonia, Brewarrina, and Boggabilla/Toomelah. It includes surveys of graduates and a 'control group' of non-graduates, in depth interviews and focus groups with a selection of the survey participants, community leaders and local staff, and a review of documentation and the campaign data held by Literacy for Life Foundation in its Communicare database. The surveys mainly consist of questions which are asked in the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) and Health Survey (NATSIH), which allows comparisons between campaign participants and national data. For those participants who consent, a 'data linkage study is being undertaken, analysing de-identified historic data on their health and justice system records to reveal any changes in their patterns of interaction before and after the campaign and between graduates and non-graduates. All research has been approved by the communities, by UNE Ethics Committee and by the NSW Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council, and, in the case of the data-linkage, by the data custodians, NSW Health and the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

Survey and interview collection was completed in March 2019, but data linkage analysis has been delayed because of a backlog of requests at the NSW Centre for Health Research Linkage. Two hundred participant surveys have been completed and entered into an EpiInfo database, with approximately equal number of graduates and non-graduates. A preliminary analysis found a statistically-significant difference was that graduates had greater confidence than non-graduates in the ability to "have a say within the general community on issues that are important to you". The UNSW researchers have used their statistical expertise, combining Literacy For Life Foundation's self-assessed literacy level data from household surveys and EOIs with the objective ACSF assessment of literacy levels, to develop a credible scientific measure of the extent of low literacy in the campaign communities.

The interview and ethnographic data combined with Literacy for Life Foundation data retrieved from the Communicare database and other sources (e.g. evaluations) provides essential additional information important for the communities and for the Foundation. This research demonstrates a significant number of campaign graduates have experienced major changes in their lives, confirmed by people in their families and communities. This is being written up in a series of community case studies. The first of these, on Brewarrina, will be published later this year in the Australian Journal of Indigenous Education.

### Appendix 3. Evaluation reports and papers

Boughton, B. (2012). *Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign. Wilcannia Pilot Project Final Evaluation Report*. October 2012.

Boughton, B., Chee, D. A., Beetson, J., Durnan, D., & Leblanch, J. C. (2013). An Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in Australia using Yes I Can. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 21(1), pp.5-32.

Boughton, B. (2014). *Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign Stage Two Pilot Final Evaluation Report*. August 2014. Copy available from LFLF website, at <https://www.lflf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/UNEEvaluation.pdf>

Boughton, B., & Durnan, D. (2014). Cuba's "Yes, I Can" mass adult literacy campaign model in Timor-Leste and Aboriginal Australia: A comparative study. *International Review of Education*, 1-22. doi:10.1007/s11159-014-9421-5

Durnan, D., Edwards, T., & Boughton, B. (2016). Literacy: Everyone's Right, Everyone's Business. Literacy for Life & the Cuban 'Yes, I Can!' adult literacy campaign in Western NSW. Paper presented at the Indigenous Leaders Conference, Charles Darwin University, November 2016.

Williamson, F., & Boughton, B. (2017). Case study 3: Yes, I Can Adult Literacy Campaign. In J. Guenther, J. Skewes, M. Bat, B. Boughton, F. Williamson, S. Woollorton, M. Marshall, A. Dwyer, & A. Stephens (Eds.), *Case studies of training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island learners* (pp. 17-23). Leabrook SA: NCVER.

Boughton, B., & Beetson, J. (2017). To lift literacy levels among Indigenous children, their parents' literacy skills must be improved first *The Conversation*, (June 9, 2017). Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/to-lift-literacy-levels-among-indigenous-children-their-parents-literacy-skills-must-be-improved-first-78827>

Boughton, B. (2017). *Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign Yes, I Can! Evaluation Report January 2016-June 2017*. Copy available from LFLF

Durnan, D., & Boughton, B. (2018). Making It Stick. The Post Literacy phase of the Literacy for Life Foundation Aboriginal adult literacy campaign. *Fine Print*, 41(3), 11-15.

Wise, J., Harris, B., Nickson, R., Boughton, B., & Beetson, J. (2018). Impact of the 'Yes, I Can!' adult literacy campaign on interactions with the criminal justice system. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* (No.562).

Boughton, B. (2019). *Yes, I Can! Adult Literacy Campaign Evaluation Report 2018*. Copy available from LFLF.

Ratcliffe, R., & Boughton, B. (2019). The relationship between low adult literacy levels and Aboriginal family and community engagement in educational decision making. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 29(1), 1-16.

Schofield, T., Boughton, B., Anderson, P., Beetson, J., Bell, S., & Bartlett, B. (2019). Adult literacy: a social determinant of Indigenous health and wellbeing. Paper presented at the Lowitja Institute International Indigenous Health Conference Darwin 18-20 June 2019.

Beetson, J., Boughton, B., & Williamson, F. (2019). *Longitudinal research challenges: Lessons learned from a study of adult literacy campaign's health impacts*. Paper presented at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Research Conference 1st-3rd July 2019, QUT, Brisbane.

Boughton, B., & Williamson, F. (In press. Publication 2019). 'A strong belief in the possibility of a better life'. The pedagogy of contingency and the ethic of solidarity in the Yes, I Can! Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign. In H. Harper & J. Rennie (Eds.), *Literacy education and Indigenous Australians: Theory, research, and practice*: Springer.

Williamson, F., & Boughton, B. (Submitted Jan 2019). 'I can speak on this here': Empowerment within an Aboriginal adult literacy campaign *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

Lin, S., Williamson, F., Beetson, J., Boughton, B., Taylor, R., & Bartlett, B. (Submitted August 2019). Quantifying low English literacy in Australian Aboriginal communities: a correlational study. *Australian Educational Researcher*.