Recolonising an ethics of life: Repositioning Indigeneity in Australian 'gap talk'

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Soon after it came to power in 2008, the Australian Government adopted six key targets relating to life expectancy, infant mortality, education and employment in its policy '*Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage*'. As it became apparent in 2011 that these targets were not being met, the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, in her annual report to Parliament on *Closing the gap* called upon Indigenous people to change their behaviour so that they could attain a position of equality with white Australians. In doing so, this call to reverse the historical inequalities that have traditionally produced poor outcomes in Indigenous health, education, housing and employment can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the government wants Indigenous people to become part of the mainstream of the Australian community with mainstream aspirations and desires. This can be read as a reaffirmation of twentieth century assimilation policy, which was reinstituted by the previous Howard Government. But, more than a mere return to the policy of assimilation, the government's call for Indigenous people to change their behaviour can also be interpreted as an intervention into the very being of Indigeneity. This paper will endeavour to demonstrate how the Australian Government is seeking to recolonise an ethics of life for Indigenous people.

Keywords: Indigeneity, policy, education, ethics, self

Targets and outcomes in Indigenous affairs

The Australian Federal Government released its new policy on Indigenous Affairs in February 2009. The policy is designed to 'close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage' and to build 'a fairer Australia' through the adoption of 'six ambitious targets relating to Indigenous life expectancy, mortality rates, early childhood and school education, and employment' (Australian Government, 2009, p.2). *Closing the gap* in outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia positions Indigenous disadvantage as 'a national responsibility' with the central strategy being to develop 'a new partnership with Indigenous Australians, based on mutual respect,

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mutual resolve and mutual responsibility' (Australian Government, 2009, p.4). The term 'mutual' is cited eight times throughout the 40 pages to reinforce the Labor Government's philosophy of working 'in partnership' with Indigenous people to provide 'an education, a job, and a decent home' (Australian Government, 2009, p.4).

Released in the wake of the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd's historic apology on 3 February 2008 to those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were forcibly removed from their families and communities, the policy is designed to finally acknowledge the damage done to relationships over the past 200 years, and to build 'a new partnership with Indigenous Australians' (Australian Government, 2009, p.5). The emphasis is on future hope, high expectations and positive thinking. The Prime Minister added at the time, 'the Government is determined to drive real improvements, focused on outcomes and guided by evidence' (Australian Government, 2009, p.4).

Kevin Rudd was replaced mid-term by his deputy, Julia Gillard who became Prime Minister in 2010. She justifies the government's focus on evidence-based education in her 2011 progress report to parliament on Closing the Gap (2011, p.17):

> Improving the availability of reliable data remains a priority for all governments. To improve the collection and reporting of data, the Australian Government has committed $46.4 million over four years from 2009-10. This investment will help build a better evidence base against which to measure progress.

The Australian Government has been moving to a system of governance reliant on evidence-based outcomes. The term 'outcome' is cited 56 times in the 40-page policy document (Australian Government, 2009), 'target' 26 times in the same document, and 'performance indicator' 28 times. In any evaluation of outcomes from *Closing the Gap* implementation, evidence is equated with numbers which are assumed to speak for themselves and resist political spin (Shahjahan, 2011). The Gillard government is intent on creating a climate of veracity around its claims to be improving the education outcomes for Indigenous students.

Elsewhere, Gillborn (2010, 2008) explicates how the government in England has been 'governing by numbers' for the past decade. And in the USA, the Department of Education argued around 10 years ago for 'evidence-based education' rather than educational research reliant on 'personal experiences to make policy choices' (Shahjahan, 2011, p.187).

This paper will demonstrate that achievement targets and outcomes have become a staple of policy and decision-making in Australian Indigenous education, and that these are deployed as a rationale for recolonising the lives of Indigenous people. Educational governance is endeavouring to reposition Indigenous people as enterprising individuals, as people who have a personal choice to make with regard to their own future. They are presented with a choice between who they are now (as disempowered people) and who they could be as 'successful' Indigenous people. I

will suggest that education policymakers are endeavouring to redefine and re-colonise Indigeneity around an ethics of life that has existed for many decades in Australia.

'Gap talk'

David Gillborn (2008, p.65) introduces the term 'Gap talk' to refer to the educational discourse around annual achievement fluctuations in student attainment. He argues that education policymakers in England are using Gap talk to construct the view that things are improving and the government is moving in the right direction. Politicians and policymakers draw on 'self-congratulatory gap talk' to suggest that the inequalities are being reduced when in reality, according to Gillborn (2008, p.68), 'they disguise a situation where pronounced racial inequalities of attainment are effectively locked-in as a permanent feature of the system'. He argues that British 'education policy is not designed to eliminate race inequality but to sustain it at manageable levels' (p.i).

In a later article titled, *The colour of numbers*, Gillborn (2010) draws on Critical Race Theory to propose that policymakers are manipulating statistical data to make under-achievement disappear. In one example described by Gillborn (2010, p.273), statisticians are able improve outcome variables for minoritiy groups by discounting under-achievement through the application of carefully selected out-of-school variables such as 'social class, maternal education, home ownership, free school meal status, single parent households'. When these variables are applied to a 'base model' which compares chiopage 5ldren's chances of getting into the top tier for mathematics, they moved from being in a group of disadvantaged students to ones who are 'significantly more likely than White British to be entered for higher tiers' in mathematics (Gillborn, 2010, p.262). Gillborn (2010) notes that quantitative analyses are no less subject to misunderstanding or manipulation than any other method; it is indeed being used in England to hide forms of racism that characterise the system.

Kozol (2005) raises similar concerns in *The Shame of the Nation*, an examination of America's renewed educational apartheid. He reminds us that schools are more racially segregated now than at any time since 1968. The moral imperative driving the public schools is found in the language of the nation's ideals as well as in the rhetoric of its political slogans, but that imperative has not been realized. Various forces still impede or distract from the realization of this vision, whether structural, moral, political, or pragmatic. This state of affairs dramatizes the urgency around the need to close the 'gap', and to address the discrepancy between the present realities of American schooling and a fulfilled vision of equal educational opportunities for all. Peoples on both sides of the Atlantic are still separate and unequal-as in Australia.

Meanwhile in Australia, Sweller, Graham and Van Begen (2012) report a significant increase in the number of Indigenous students being enrolled in special schools

in Australia, where children with behavioural, social and emotional problems are being enrolled at five times the rate of other students. Graham (2011) recently reported in the national press that Indigenous children in New South Wales, Australia comprise 25 per cent of students in specialist behaviour schools and 50 per cent in juvenile justice centres (also see Graham, 2012). Just as policymakers in England are manipulating statistical data to make under-achievement disappear (Gillborn, 2010), Indigenous students in Australia are being withdrawn from mainstream schools and hidden away in special schools in an attempt to cover-over low outcomes and under-achievement evident in national testing regimes. In Australia, school principals in conjunction with parents and caregivers may approve student exemptions from the national test on the basis of disability 'and /or significant co-existing conditions which severely limit capacity to participate in the tests' (ACARA, 2010, p.41).

Gap talk in Indigenous Australian education

Following the adoption of the Australian Government's policy of *Closing the Gap* on Indigenous disadvantage in 2009, the Prime Minister, state premiers and Chief Ministers agreed at a meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2010 to 'halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade' (MCEECDYA, 2011). State governments and Departments of Education ratified the Federal policy of *Closing the Gap* in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The New South Wales Aboriginal Education and Training policy goal is:

> That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will match or better the outcomes of the broader student population, [and specifically] ... The 2008 achievement gap in reading and numeracy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is reduced by 50 per cent by 2012 and eliminated by 2016 (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2010).

Further north, the Queensland Government (2009) notes how there is 'an urgent need to address the inequalities which continue to contribute to widening the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians'. To this end, the Queensland Department of Education (2010, p.14) adopted the 'Closing the Gap Education Strategy' in 2010: 'to halve the gap in Year 3 reading and numeracy by 2012, and to close the gap in student attendance by 2013 and in Year 12 retention by 2013'. It adds that the policy aims are set 'to create a sense of urgency'. The various state Departments of Education have adopted similar positions, aimed at 'addressing the urgent need to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous children, especially in literacy, numeracy and retention rates, to a level comparable with that of the school population as a whole' (Government of South Australia, 2011). Once *Closing the Gap* was adopted, the Federal and state governments were then faced with the task of converting their own rhetoric into reality.

Call for Indigenous Australians 'to change their behaviour'

Two years after the initial launch of *Closing the Gap*, and into a second term of government, the Prime Minister delivered the Government's third annual report to Parliament in 2011 on its progress in *Closing the gap* in outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Government, 2011). The report takes on an air of desperation and a hint of blame after two years of witnessing insignificant achievements in the six identified building blocks to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. It notes:

> Tackling Indigenous disadvantage is a national responsibility and a national challenge. It demands ongoing collaboration between all levels of government working in partnership with Indigenous Australians.

But the report adds:

> Beyond government, there is a role for each individual, family and community to take responsibility for rebuilding the social norms that are the foundation of lasting change and governments must support this. Positive social norms lead to personal choices that result in healthier individuals and families and greater life opportunities (Australian Government, 2011, p.5).

This conception of 'personal responsibility' is crucial to the government's perceived achievement of positive outcomes for Indigenous people in Australia. In the Prime Minister's 2011 report to Parliament, Indigenous people are reminded 12 times that they must take 'personal responsibility' for their own lives and affairs, in 2012 the term is repeated 26 times.

> In regard to the building block of education, the Government argues:

> A good education gives children the chance to reach their potential, opens up employment opportunities and encourages personal responsibility and independence. This is clearly demonstrated by the direct relationship between education attainment and employment – the greater the level of education, the greater the likelihood of employment (Australian Government, 2011, p.31).

In presenting the 2011 report to parliament, the Prime Minister recognised that, based on current progress, there is no chance of closing the life-expectancy gap by the target year of 2031. The prime minister's disappointment led her to call upon Indigenous people 'to change their behaviour to reach a position of equality with white Australians':

> Because I also believe that with opportunity comes responsibility and individuals only achieve progress though work and effort ... so I see *Closing the Gap* as a call for changes in behaviour. A call to every person, to every family, to every community. To take care of your children. To take a job when you find one. To create a safe environment. To send your kids to school, pay your rent, save up for a home. To respect good social norms and to respect the law. And to reach out to other Australians ... If I speak strongly, it is because I have listened to Indigenous people who do these things already, people who speak even more strongly. People like Chris Sarra, the inspiring Indigenous educator whose

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creed high expectations, and whose words stronger, smarter stay with me. People like Noel Pearson, who pioneered the arguments for social and personal responsibility as a driver of Indigenous opportunity (Gillard, 2011, p.1).

The tone of the policy changes from one of high expectation and future hope to exasperation and implicit blame of the individual. There is a clear shift away from the talk of 'mutual responsibility', to 'personal responsibility'. The Prime Minister calls for greater discipline, more restraint and harder work. Indigenous people can no longer be looked after by the state, they must begin to look after themselves. They are asked to change their attitudes and behavior, and this change becomes the major focus of the Prime Minister's 2012 report to Parliament. The Government considers that Indigenous people are being given a chance to choose their future, indeed a chance to leave the inequalities of the past behind and to 'move forward' to get a job, to buy a house and take personal responsibility for one's life.

The Prime Minister is now focused on *achievements*, on 'key achievements', on 'achieving tangible results', to 'achieve sustained improvements', to 'achieve targets', 'to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement for Indigenous children by 2018'. To 'achieve' is cited repeatedly throughout the Prime Minister's *Closing the gap* reports to Parliament in 2011 and 2012. 'Targets' and 'standards' become the medium for measuring these achievements.

While there is a strong shift towards the 'enterprising individual' (Rose 1998) and governing personal responsibility and achievement, there is a concomitant move away from talk of 'equality'. Policy makers are now firmly focused on governing the individual. The Prime Minister articulates in clear terms how Indigenous people must now manage their own desires and needs, like those she cites as exemplary individuals. The following section evaluates just how the Australian Government is endeavouring to establish its ideal of what an Indigenous individual *should be*.

Governing responsible individuals

Nicholas Rose (1998) draws on the work of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to analyse the presuppositions that are embedded in the language of contemporary human subjectivity in the British political and social context. He explores how we use language 'to make persons thinkable' and to produce 'ideals as to what people should be' (p.151). To do this, he draws on an advertisement for a 'Self-Helpline' that appeared in British newspapers in late 1989. It offered people self-help step by step answers to dealing with personal problems and improving the quality of their life (1998, p.150). Rose argues (1998, p.151) that this advertisement is symbolic of the emergent 'enterprise culture' at the time, a culture which was according ' a vital political value to a certain image of the human being'. He (1998, p.151) explicates how this small advertisement is grounded in a range of presuppositions about the approved self:

> The self is to be a subjective being, it is to aspire to autonomy, it is to strive for personal fulfillment in its earthly life, it is to interpret its reality and destiny as a matter of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice. These ways of *thinking* about humans as selves, and these ways of *judging* them, are linked to certain ways of *acting* upon such selves. The guidance of selves is no longer dependent on the authority of religion or traditional morality; it has been allocated to 'experts of subjectivity' who transfigure existential questions ... into technical questions of the most effective ways of managing malfunction and improving 'quality of life'.

Rose (1998) proceeds to argue that these ways of thinking, judging and acting are linked to the ways in which people are positioned in the language of liberal democracies, as 'enterprising individuals' with rights, freedoms, and personal responsibilities. This paper is directed at evaluating how the presupposition of the enterprising individual imbues the political mentality of the Government's *Closing the Gap* policy on Indigenous education. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister herself is becoming an 'expert of Indigenous subjectivity'. While the 'autonomous, choosing, free self as the value, ideal and objective' (Rose, 1998, p.152) has underpinned political mentalities and policy making in so-called mainstream Australian society, the governing of enterprising individuals is relatively new to policy making in Indigenous education in this country. This is not to suggest that we haven't already witnessed a variety of subjective constructions in the past; most of these have centered around a fairly traditional power relation: 'they can't help themselves so we must help *them*'.

A Foucauldian analysis of the power relation at play in the current policy suggests a different strategy at work where Indigenous people are not 'suppressed by the state' but are encouraged to become 'enterprising individuals' (Rose, 1998, p.152). They are positioned in the discourse of *Closing the Gap* not as 'they can't help themselves' but as autonomous, personally responsible individuals who can help themselves if they are willing to change their behaviour. The Prime Minister endeavours to define the changes required for each Indigenous person to reshape his or her personal capacities. Rose (1998, p.155) argues that 'governing in a liberal democratic way depends on the availability of such techniques that will shape, channel, organize, and direct the personal capacities and selves of individuals under the aegis of a claim to objectivity, neutrality, a technical efficacy rather than one of political partiality'.

Closing the gap calls for Indigenous Australians to contribute to and to be part of the Australian economy and with this, to achieve greater economic independence and security for themselves, their families and their communities. However, in its call to reverse the historical inequalities that have traditionally produced poor outcomes in Indigenous health, education, housing and employment, the Government is asking Indigenous people to become part of the mainstream, with mainstream aspirations and desires. According to the Prime Minister, to attain such a recolonised lifestyle, Indigenous people will need to look after their children, get a job and think more about their future.

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The following sections will demonstrate how, far from being reminiscent of the assimilation era in Australia (1937-1960s), current policy in Indigenous education is directed at repositioning Indigeneity, to be more like the exemplars of Chris Sarra and Noel Pearson (see above). Some of the techniques used by policy makers to imbue mainstream values in the Government's construction of the enterprising individual will be evaluated. Modelling 'successful Indigeneity' has become a crucial technique of the Government not just in its attempts to reshape the personal capacities of individuals (Rose 1998), but to achieve its education targets in literacy and numeracy, housing and employment. Indigenous people are presented with the dichotomy: they can choose success by following in the footsteps of Noel Pearson, and the mother who sends her children to school, or they can continue to be faced by economic dependence, 'poor housing', 'chronic disease' and low education outcomes (Australian Government, 2012). It's a personal choice, as far as the Australian Government is concerned.

Creating the enterprising individual

Jim Gallacher, Director of Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory Department of Education, became the first Territorian to be made a Fellow of the Australian College of Education in recognition of his outstanding contribution to Aboriginal education. During his Directorship, he was forthright in his argument that Aboriginal children must 'regrettably' assimilate to a competitive society if they are to succeed at school:

> Somehow our education system must bring to the Aborigine, a realization that his current way of life necessitates a concern for the future and in particular, a saving for the future ... Again regrettably, but realistically, we must as educators find methods by which we may sow the seeds of competitiveness-to a degree at least-if the Aboriginal child is to win for himself recognition in our highly competitive society (Gallacher cited in Dunn and Tatz, 1969, pp.100-1).

The Director of Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory was assured in his belief that Aboriginal children must assimilate to the values of non-Aboriginal society, if they were to be recognized by the wider society, and to win for themselves the same benefits as white people. This is an early construction of the enterprising individual in Indigenous Australia.

But, in a more recent statement on his motivation for launching the intervention into Aboriginal communities at Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory in 2007, Prime Minister Howard remarked:

> We have a simple aim and that is whilst respecting the special place of Indigenous people in the history and the life of this country, their future can only be as part of the mainstream of the Australian community. But unless they can get a share of the bounty of this great and prosperous country, their future will be bleak

The Howard Government of 2007 could see only one future for Indigenous people, and this was part of (non-Indigenous) mainstream society. It was time, according to Howard, to leave the old ways behind. Only then could they share in the benefits of non-Indigenous society thereby achieving 'equality'. Of course, the Prime Minister was not listening to what Indigenous people wanted, and he certainly would not have been aware of the possibility that they may not want the same 'bounty' as himself. Assimilation policy relies on the assumption that 'when you've got something, and others do not have it, then they must also want the same thing'. This was the essence of deficit policy theory. Policy in Indigenous affairs was again firmly set within the assimilation era in Australia, but it was soon to change. The change would be from: 'they can't help themselves so we must help *them*' to 'how can we help you if you don't help yourselves' (which is not intended as a question). Policy makers are presenting a program 'to sustain the ethic that individuals are free to the extent that they choose a life of responsible selfhood', while 'promoting the dreams of self-fulfilment through the crafting of a lifestyle' (Rose 1998, p.168).

Recreating an ethics of life

I have suggested so far that the Government in Australia has devoted considerable time to 'managing malfunction' (Rose 1998) and suffering in Indigenous education. The annual reports on *Closing the gap* would suggest that little progress has been made in terms of improving the outcomes for Indigenous children. The latest report from the Australian Governments Reform Council (2011) suggests that, while there have been small improvements in the early years of education, the reading outcomes for Indigenous student in Year 9 have declined. The Council (2011) reports, 'Aboriginal disadvantage in education is worsening despite government efforts to close the gap'.

The policy makers are working on two fronts. The first is to manage these poor outcomes and to demonstrate through the figures that the government is making a difference. It would appear to be losing on this front. Gillborn (2008) argues that British government implements policy to sustain the inequality at manageable levels. Similarly, the Australian government has defaulted in its policy making to a position where it now attempts to manage malfunction in Indigenous education, rather than working to eliminate the inequalities and disadvantage. The government wants to be seen to be doing something about the low outcomes in Indigenous education, while it is simultaneously talking on a second front to change the very ethics of what Indigeneity 'should be'.

Rather than working on systematic changes to social attitudes and the culture of the classroom, the Prime Minister is now arguing that Indigenous people must 'change their behaviour' if they are to enjoy a lifestyle of self-fulfillment and personal happiness. We have seen how Indigenous people have been problematised by the government in terms of their lack of enterprise. 'Their' failure to get a job, to send

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their kids to school, to save for a house epitomises this lack of enterprise, in the eyes of policy makers. Nevertheless, Indigeneity is concomitantly reconstructed by promoting the enterprising capacities of certain well-known Indigenous individuals such as Chris Sarra and Noel Pearson, who, we are told, display capacities such as 'high expectations', and 'personal responsibility' (*The Australian,* 2011, p.1).

But the Prime Minister adds:

> It is not only well known Indigenous Australians who are driving behavioural change. It is the mother in the city who feeds her children and gets them ready for school. The aunty in the country town who tells the stories to the young. The father in a remote community who sets an example of strength and gentleness to his sons. These are the hidden heroes of Indigenous Australia the people who are leading the change more than anyone else (Gillard quoted in *The Australian,* 2011, p.1).

After valorizing the achievements of individuals, and more particularly highlighting the 'change' that is about to occur, the Prime Minister proceeds to call upon all Indigenous Australians to 'commit to change' and to 'change together'. By 2012, 'change' becomes the government's policy mantra, as it continues to call for 'behavioural change' 'lasting change', 'positive change', 'intergenerational change' (Australian Government, 2012). *Closing the gap* is constituted as a national goal for all to pursue. Rose (1998, p.154) argues that enterprise can be given a 'technological form by experts of organizational life, engineering human relations' through policy, architecture and so forth, 'to achieve economy, efficiency, excellence and competitiveness'. Contemporary regulatory practices, as Rose (1998, p.154). observes, 'have been transformed to embody the presupposition that humans are, could be, or should be enterprising individuals, striving for fulfillment, excellence and achievement'. The Prime Minister postulates that Indigenous people in Australia must become 'enterprising individuals' if they are to achieve 'lasting behavioural and attitudinal change' (Australian Government, 2012). An ethics of life that 'should be' for Indigenous people, according to the policymakers, is one built upon initiative, 'personal responsibility', ambition (take a job), calculation and future orientation (send the children to school so that they can obtain a better job in the future). The government expects that the 'enterprising self will make an enterprise of its life...and seek to shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be' (Rose 1998, p.154). The policy makers have relied on Indigenous students and their parents becoming what the government expects they 'should be' in order to be successful in education.

What is an ethical student?
On a first reading, *Closing the gap* policy appeared to be yet more obfuscating rhetoric from the government, with the establishment of unrealistic targets for Indigenous children in schools. Over time, it became obvious that the government was serious in its intent to encourage Indigenous people to 'recognise their freedoms

and aspirations and to rise out of the despair of the past, and to lead a good life, a life of what 'should be', according to the policy makers. The government was calling upon Indigenous people to regulate their own behavior as Indigenous people, to take personal responsibility for their own quality of life, and to judge their own lives, rather than being judged by others. The Prime Minister was intent on maximizing choices for Indigenous people 'in the service of a life-style'. It continues to define the characteristics of a good student. But what does a 'good Indigenous student' in contemporary Australia look like to policy makers?

In a study conducted in a small Indigenous community in the north of Australia in the early 1980s, Michael Christie (1984) demonstrated how 8-10 year old Indigenous students were identifying *the techniques of self* required to succeed in western education. The students here believed that success would be obtained in the classroom through conformity to the rules of behaviour, passiveness and independence (Christie, 1984). A good student is perceived by the Aboriginal students themselves to 'remain quiet, behave well, listen, sit down, and not run away' (Christie 1984, p.354). The ability of each student to take personal control of academic learning is most basic to his or her success (Christie 1984, p.328). This means that students must be 'willing and able consciously to direct and regulate their own classroom learning behaviour' (Christie 1985, p.58).

Thirty years later, and policy-makers are arguing that a *good student* is one who takes 'personal responsibility' for his or her learning; a good life is one bestowed with economic choices and opportunities. *Closing the gap* policy presupposes that *ethical* students are those who are self-directed, reflective, and demonstrate purposeful behavior. To progress via education means that students need to be able to learn and employ these techniques of self so that they can control and manipulate goals and outcomes.

Indigenous education policy has completed full circle in its current attempt to recolonise an ethics of life. And since the government first launched *Closing the gap* in 2009, Indigenous students and their parents have shown to be just as perceptive in relation to what governments want and expect of them, as they were 30 odd years ago.

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