



Inspiring Stories

Dani discusses her professional development in *Make it Count*

Educator Story

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Biography

Dani Upton has been a primary school teacher for the past eight years. She has spent much of her career teaching in the suburbs of Western Sydney and currently teaches at Hebersham PS in Mt Druitt. Dani has been a part of the *Make it Count* project for the past three years where she has focused her own professional development around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners in K-2.

Introduction

Through my involvement in the *Make it Count* project I have learned, and continue to learn, so much about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students and the ways they learn most effectively. My lesson planning, teaching, choice and use of resources, professional development and so much more, has changed during my participation in this project that I am unable to sum it all up in one brief story. For this reason, I have chosen to write my story about my own professional development and how this has affected the way I teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.

What I've learned?

One of the key aspects of my professional development has been the willingness and support of the school to participate in the *Make it Count* project in the first place. For me personally, this support from the Principal and Executive has ensured that I have been able to remain a part of the project for three consecutive years and therefore continuously build upon my knowledge and understanding of the learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The support of the school has meant that I have had time to work collaboratively with school staff, colleagues from cluster schools Doonside PS and Blackett PS and our critical friend Peter Howard. Furthermore, it has given me the opportunity to attend local, state and national conferences focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues as well as encouraged me to present at many of these with Mona McFarlane (AEO). It has been during these opportunities that some of my most profound professional learning has occurred.

At a school level, I have worked closely with Mona McFarlane (AEO) to develop Monday Maths Mob. Through our shared vision to ensure the best possible outcomes for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students Mona and I continue to engage regularly in discussions about the effectiveness of the lessons we collaboratively plan both from an academic perspective and from a cultural perspective. Working with Mona allows me to talk through my ideas and look at them from a different perspective. She brings so much of her own knowledge and life experience to our discussions and helps me to better understand Aboriginal culture.

Graphic elements derived from a painting by Angelina Doolan, Worawa College, Healesville Cluster 2011

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The students themselves, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have challenged my rationale for how I implement the Monday Maths Mob program in Kindergarten. Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a small group setting allowed me to make connections and build relationships with them each week. This was enhanced by the participation of some of the students' parents who were able to attend each Monday as I have been able to build a relationship with them and include them in their child's learning outside of the home environment. Through discussions with many of my non-Aboriginal Kindergarten students it was clear that they too were interested in being a part of the Monday Maths Mob and sharing in numeracy activities that involved learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture. Therefore, along with Mona and Kindergarten staff members, I have designed Maths Mob to work as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student group for the first semester of each year to ensure relationships can be built. Then in Semester 2, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students share Maths Mob with all Kindergarten students in their own classrooms.

As I mentioned, the involvement of parents and carers in the teaching and learning process has really helped me to recognise the significant role parents play in their child's learning as well as how much I can learn from them. More to this point, I have been privileged to meet a local Elder from the Dharug land, Uncle Wes, who came to our school as part of our Koori Club program. During these visits I was captivated by the stories that Uncle Wes shared with the students. I felt as though I finally understood the significance of storytelling in Aboriginal culture. I could see how Elders were people to be respected with the children regarding him as an important Elder with an important story to share. They sat totally engaged, listening to him share stories he had been told as a young man. I was blown away. I could see how language was/is key to Aboriginal people and their culture and it really made me consider the profound impact of languages being lost.

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My professional development in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education has really been enhanced by our cluster's critical friend Associate Professor Peter Howard. Peter has made me think extensively about what I teach, how I teach it and why I teach it that way. He has helped me to see that there are always improvements that can be made, other factors to be considered and that there is no one 'right' way to achieve the best learning outcomes for Indigenous learners. He has highlighted through many thought provoking questions, that the teaching and learning cycle is ever evolving, that the way and what I teach needs to firstly consider the individual need and wants of my students and that how I relate to the students I teach is as critical as the content I am teaching. I value the impact Peter has had and continues to have on my teaching, as he often reminds me, no matter how long we have been teaching or how well we think we might be doing something, we always need someone to challenge us.

Through my involvement in the *Make it Count* team at Hebersham PS I have had many opportunities to attend a range of conferences focusing on mathematics and on Aboriginal education. Hearing from other educators at a local, state, national and international level has helped me consider my pedagogy from a range of view points. At a local level, I recently heard John Williams speak at the Western Sydney Region Aboriginal Education Conference 2012. His presentation highlighted to me the impact of attendance on learning and how in many instances Kindergarten students had some of the highest levels of non-attendance at school. Listening to him speak made me question 'How will I create an environment and build relationships that will ensure students will want to come to school and to connect with parents to ensure they value their child's education and bring them to school everyday?'

Also, last year I had the opportunity to attend AAMT *Make it Count* meeting in Sydney where I heard Tyson Yunkaporta talk about the '8ways of learning' and how it was developed. He challenged my thinking about what culturally responsive pedagogies look like and distinguished between authentic and tokenistic learning tasks. He inspired me to investigate this pedagogy further which I have done and have tried to implement into my own planning as well as share with the staff at my school.

Hearing what people from all over Australia are doing to meet the needs of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students is inspiring and makes me want to do things better. These conferences have not only allowed me to hear from other educators, they have also thrown me into the deep end with myself and my team members being invited to present what we have been developing in our school. To stand in front of a group of professionals and present the work we have done really exposed our pedagogy with people asking questions about how and why. It made me think a little more deeply about the true rationale behind the way we have implemented the Monday Maths Mob and how successful it really has proven to be. It made me question how I could measure its success more effectively and whether there are more effective ways to run the program. Each week as I prepare for the running of Maths Mob, I consider many of the questions posed to us along the way and work hard to make it an effective program.

In summation, my own professional development over the past several years has not necessarily given me answers. More importantly it has helped me to start asking myself the right questions, the questions that help me to think more critically about how I teach my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to ensure success .



Finding 6.6: Self-reflection

Focus on the development of critical self-reflection so you are more able to actively challenge deficit views and assumptions you and others may have about Indigenous learners and their communities.