



## Danielle Upton from Hebersham PS discusses her professional development in *Make it count*

### Biography

Dani Upton has been a primary school teacher for the past 8 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.

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 3 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 Island 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.

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 as well. 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 and 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 enough 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 as the children respected him as an important elder who had an important story to share and how they sat totally engaged and listening to him share the 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 effects of languages being lost through history has had such a profound impact.

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 to me, through the many thought provoking questions he has posed, that teaching and learning cycle is ever evolving, that the way I teach and what I teach needs to firstly consider the students in front of me and what their individual needs and wants may be and that how I relate the students I teach is as critical as the content I am teaching. I value greatly 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 to consider my pedagogy from a range of view points. At a local level, I recently heard John Williams (TITLE) 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 in 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?'

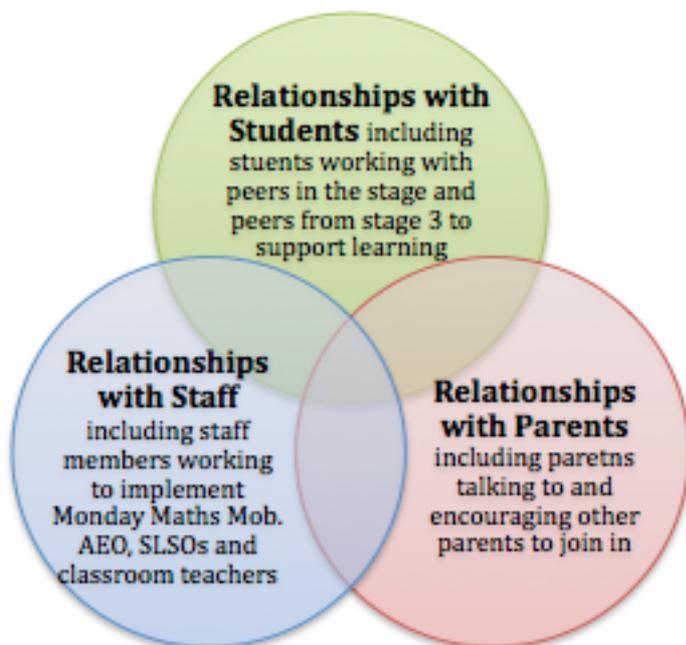
Also this year I had the opportunity to attend *Make it count* Network Meeting 2012 Sydney where I heard Tyson Yunkaporta talk about the '8 Ways of learning' and how it was developed. He challenged my thinking about what culturally responsive pedagogies look like and distinguished between authentic and 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 from people from all over Australia and what they are doing to meet the needs of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students is inspiring and makes me want to do things better. But these conferences have not only allowed me to hear from other educators, they have also thrown me into the deep end when myself and my team members have been asked to present on 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 as people all asked 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 that have been 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 for them.

## Relationships by Dani Upton

**Introduction:** Throughout our Make it count journey we, the Make it count team, have identified that relationships have played a major part of the successful implementation of the 'Monday Maths Mob' program. Below is a diagram of the interconnectedness of relationships as well as some of the most significant moments highlighting the impact of relationships on learning.



One of the key components to being able to successfully implement the 'Monday Maths Mob' program has been the development of relationships. As depicted in the diagram above relationships refer to relationships with staff, students and parents. Within each circle it is clear how relationships work within in each sector as well as how these relationships intertwine.

Some of the key significant moments that led us to value the impact of successful relationships are outlined below:

### **Relationships with parents:**

Initially, the Hebersham PS school plan intended for 'Monday Maths

Mob' to be implemented by Kindergarten teachers on a rotational roster so that each week a different teacher would teach the group. It was soon evident that the teacher implementing the program in the initial weeks of the program had built a strong rapport with the students and had made connections with the parents who were attending each week. It was therefore decided by the team that in the best interests of the program, one teacher would be assigned this role to ensure relationships between staff, students and parents could be maintained.

**Relationships with staff:** Following the decision to assign one teacher to the 'Monday Maths Mob' program Dani Upton was asked to implement the program along with Mona McFarlane (AEO). Since 2010 Dani and Mona have worked collaboratively to share expertise and plan culturally responsive learning experiences for students. Furthermore they have worked closely with SLSOs and Kindergarten teachers to monitor the effectiveness of the program and design learning experiences which best suit the learning needs of the students.

**Relationships with students:** One of the best examples of the impact of student relationships was during a Monday Maths Mob lesson that focused on totems. One of the Stage 3 students led a group of students in their numeracy activity which involved using possums (Dharug totem) to add and subtract. Whilst leading the group, this student began to discuss with the supporting teacher and group of Kindergarten students what his totem was and talked about the members of his family. This was not only a great opportunity for Kindergarten students to build their understanding of what a totem is but was also a great opportunity for the Stage 3 student to share and celebrate his culture with other students.