

Systematic synthetic phonics helps all students achieve reading growth

Read Write Inc.

Case Study

Age group

Preschool–Year 6

Students on roll

23

School context

Dundee Beach is a remote school 2 hours outside of Darwin. Mains electricity connection came to the area in 2006. The community has only recently had the road to Darwin sealed and most roads in the area are dirt in the dry season and mud in the wet. There are no shops or health services at Dundee Beach. There are two roadhouses in the local area, which service locals and tourists who come to the area for fishing.

Student demographic

Our student cohort is mainstream with no learners identifying as English as an Additional Language / Dialect. We have a high proportion of students who require additional support for their learning due to disability or developmental delays. The school has a low socio-economic status.

Jocelyn Seamer, Principal,
Dundee Beach School,
Northern Territory

When did you start teaching systematic synthetic phonics?

I learned about phonics as part of my Initial Teacher Education at a small, independent college in NSW. But it was during my first teaching contract in the Northern Territory that I really discovered systematic synthetic phonics. That discovery was made by our regional literacy coach and completely changed the way the 13 small schools in the region operated. We had wonderful successes and I was an instant convert! From there I actively sought schools that were either already using systematic synthetic phonics or where I could make a change to do so. When I came to Dundee Beach I taught using elements of a couple of different programs but it was a lot of work to create the resources myself. Our children did very well with a change of approach but I knew that it could be better.

When did you implement *Read Write Inc.*?

I am very lucky to be working in the Northern Territory at a time when evidence-based practice is being embraced. After much consideration and research, our Literacy and Numeracy Essentials team decided on *Read Write Inc.* (RWI) to deliver systematic synthetic phonics to our remote schools. We attended the training and commenced with the program in Semester 2, 2017. I was unsure at first about whether RWI would be for us because we were already delivering systematic synthetic phonics with good results, but when I attended the training I could see how RWI was different from other programs. I was excited!

“ Every child has benefited. ”

How would you describe the RWI training you received?

Hayley Goldsworthy, our trainer, was so passionate about phonics and the difference that it can make to children's lives. The training was comprehensive and I really appreciated the hands-on activities that gave us instant opportunities for practice. All of my questions were answered and I have had the opportunity to connect with Hayley since then.

“ RWI is a terrific vehicle for delivering high-quality systematic synthetic phonics. ”

Have you put any strategies in place for mentoring and coaching staff to help everyone adopt RWI?

We have made a start on weekly practice sessions. As we are a very small school and work in the same room much of the time, we have the opportunity to see each other's lessons. We have recorded our own lessons to reflect on our work and will have a schedule of practice in place in 2018.

How has your school as a whole changed as a result of implementing RWI?

We now have a common language about early literacy instruction. We are able to confidently group students and be responsive to their needs based on a common understanding of their progress. Our planning time has also drastically reduced. Once everything was set up, a whole week's planning and preparation only takes us about 20 minutes. For a small school with very limited time, that's really important.

The students have responded very well to the program. I saw an immediate improvement in the engagement levels for our students with additional needs. The systematic, sequential nature of the lessons means that they have a firm understanding of what it takes for them to be successful. The lessons are also forming the basis for Tier 3 work with some of our students, meaning there's a greater connection between the classroom and intervention work, which is really important for our students.

How have your students benefited from RWI?

Our whole school has benefited from the implementation of systematic synthetic phonics. We have no separate spelling program, no spelling lists and no homework, but our children's spelling results have increased phenomenally. At our presentation day last week I gave two awards for spelling, both to upper primary students. One has increased their spelling age by 2.6 years and the other 2.9 years in 10 months. All students have made terrific gains because they are learning how words work and are utilising their phonemic skills more.

Have you seen any impact on your results?

Every student in our school made at or above the expected growth in Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading (PAT-R) over the last 12 months. This figure includes our students with additional needs and I am most proud of that fact. We have seen extremely encouraging growth in reading scores (NEALE Reading analysis), PAT and in spelling across the

school. They aren't all at the desired level but when you're achieving more than 12 months growth for 12 months of learning, you know that good things are happening. Every child has benefited.

Since implementing RWI I have noticed that students are actually reading all through the word instead of guessing when they come to an unfamiliar word. They know that the answer to their decoding dilemma is the word itself, not the picture or the context or their understanding of what would make sense. They self-correct a lot more and most importantly, our families are reporting that children's skills and enthusiasm for reading have come ahead in leaps and bounds. There were a few tears at the presentation day! Part of this has been the decision to only expose our beginning readers to decodable books for instruction. This creates a reading environment where the student can be certain of success. Of course, students are exposed to terrific literature and shared reading opportunities too!

“ We now have a common language about early literacy instruction. ”

What would you say to other schools considering adopting RWI?

Do it! RWI is a terrific vehicle for delivering high-quality systematic synthetic phonics. I love that there are so many elements of reading and writing instruction built in and that once it is all set up there is very little preparation involved. It has meant that we have maintained our lessons right up until the last week of the year. It sends a really powerful message to our students about our work here at school and our high expectations.

Do you have any practical tips for other schools to help them be successful?

Set up your resources from the start so that you aren't printing, cutting and laminating as you go. Also, display your speed sound strips and text teaching progressions where the students can see them. This keeps you on track while you are learning the routines and helps students be motivated to stay focused right until the end of the lesson.