

Education

## Advancing Whole-Book Reading Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools by Regional Instructional Cooperation A Case Study of Yangzhong City in Jiangsu Province of China

Yuling Yanghuang,<sup>1</sup> Yong Huang<sup>2,\*</sup>

1. Zhejiang Wanli University, Ningbo 315100, Zhejiang, China

2. Xinglong Middle School, Yangzhong 212215, Jiangsu, China

\*: All correspondence should be sent to: Yong Huang

Authors' Contact: Yuling Yanghuang, E-mail: [1954224849@qq.com](mailto:1954224849@qq.com); Yong Huang, E-mail: [113325248@qq.com](mailto:113325248@qq.com)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15354/si.24.or173>

Funding: No funding source declared.

COI: The authors declare no competing interest.

AI Declaration: The authors affirm that artificial intelligence did not contribute to the process of preparing the work.

**For primary and secondary school students, enhancing reading skills at the basic education level is crucial for their lifelong linguistic and cognitive development. However, instructors may find reading teaching, particularly the teaching of whole-book reading, time-consuming and unproductive. This article is a case study of the possibilities of advancing whole-book reading education via regional instructional cooperation, citing the practices of Yangzhong City in China's Jiangsu province as an example. It also highlights the implications of Yangzhong City's experiences for popularizing regional instructional cooperation in Chinese language education across the nation.**

**Keywords:** Whole-Book Reading; Instructional Cooperation; Primary and Secondary Schools; China

Science Insights, 2024 July 31; Vol. 45, No. 1, pp.1425-1429.

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**R**EADING instruction is a chief component of language literacy education. Reading skill training at the primary and secondary schooling stages is critical to the individual's development of essential competences, such as thinking abilities and language representation capacities. Traditional reading instruction at the basic education level is often based on book excerpts. This method is likely to fragment reading content, making reading boring as well as unfavorable to the cultivation of holistic thinking ability in students. In contrast, whole-book reading instruction emphasizes students' comprehension of the spirit of the whole work, aiming to make reading a natural and enjoyable experience and to lead students from superficial to

deep reading by developing their higher-order reading skills and laying a solid foundation for their lifelong reading habits (1). Despite the widespread recognition of the notion of whole-book reading in China, its teaching effectiveness remains low due to inadequacies in organizational support and instructional techniques. At the same time, the implementation of whole-book reading instruction requires higher professional competence from the Chinese language teacher in developing a legitimate reading list for students and actualizing the program (2).

Research shows that instructional cooperation within a regional Chinese language education community is an effective coping strategy for issues arising in whole-book reading teach-

ing. Instructional cooperation in this study refers to the partnership of a group of educators in a certain area of instruction aimed at enhancing teaching outcomes as well as boosting their own professional development (3). It plays a significant role in normalizing teaching behavior and producing high-quality teaching research results (4). Regional instructional cooperation has the potential to support whole-book reading teaching by facilitating the sharing of curriculum development workloads by Chinese language teachers from different schools and by optimizing their reading instruction techniques in the process of collaboration. It is imperative for educational administrators to work to create a cooperative climate in regional basic education to promote collective efforts in advancing whole-book reading instruction (5).

Yangzhong City in Jiangsu Province has a population of 315,500. Currently, there are 27 basic education schools, including 16 primary schools, eight junior secondary schools, two senior secondary schools, and one nine-year school, and a competent, stable teaching force in the city. These schools adopt unified textbooks and follow the same reading schemes in reading teaching, providing preconditions for instructional cooperation in the enactment of whole-book teaching within the region. Since 2018, primary and secondary teachers and education researchers in Yangzhong City have worked together to explore the pathways to a successful implementation of the whole-book reading teaching program via regional instructional cooperation. This article seeks to summarize the avenues proving crucial for their program and highlight the implications of their practices for promoting regional instructional partnerships in reading education across China.

### Upgrading Teachers' Notion of Instruction

The change in the teacher's notion of instruction is the pre-requisite for the realization of effective whole-book reading teaching. First off, it is imperative for the teacher to replace the outmoded cramming approach to Chinese language teaching with methods that focus more on the development of students' essential language skills. The teacher must have in mind the four core competences to be cultivated in students in conducting whole-book reading instruction: cultural confidence, language proficiency, thinking ability, and aesthetic creativity. Furthermore, there is a need for the transition from teacher dominance to student-centeredness in reading teaching. The teacher should respect students' agency in the classroom and their autonomy in learning while also providing reasonable guidance for their independent study, reflection, and collaboration. Whole-book reading should contribute to encouraging self-conception in students and boosting their spiritual growth (6). To this end, teachers and education researchers in Yangzhong City advanced the "learning-centered classroom" model, which specifies quantitative standards for classroom instruction evaluation with a distinctive emphasis on student autonomy in learning. Autonomous reading, in-class sharing, group inquiry, and after-reading consolidation are the four main steps of "learning-centered classroom" teaching. With these processes, students engage in meaningful whole-book reading and develop independent thought under the guidance of the teacher.

To support future practice and research in Chinese lan-

guage education, *Research on the Role of Independent Thinking in Student Development* was published (7). This monograph gathers the teaching experiences of Chinese language teachers in Yangzhong City and presents their insights into Chinese language education. It is a highly illuminating work, expounding on the importance of strengthening independent thinking ability and cultivating key competencies in students. It provides a theoretical justification for whole-book reading education.

### Creating Structured Curriculum Programs for Promoting Whole-Book Reading

A structured curriculum program is key to the smooth enactment of whole-book reading education (8). To further popularize whole-book reading instruction and heighten its outcomes, schools collaborated to create the "Implementation Program for 'Greater Reading' in Primary and Secondary Schools of Yangzhong City" on the basis of the reading education curriculum of Xinba Secondary School, a provincial-level model of multidisciplinary reading education. This program specifies the "Reading Plus" curriculum for Yangzhong City's basic education schools, which integrates reading instruction with "Five Educations" (moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education). There are three key points to highlight in this reading education curriculum program:

#### 1. *Making Reading Permeate Students' Schooling*

To ensure ample reading time for the student, teachers encourage them to make good use of those "fragmentary" short periods in addition to the scheduled sessions of reading instruction. For example, students can choose to read for 20–40 minutes at noon. Also, teachers of all subjects coordinate to assign a reasonable amount of homework to students to make sure that the latter have adequate reading time at home. Furthermore, each school invests in improving its library facilities, not only expanding its collection of books but also providing students with a better reading environment. In the meantime, schools in Yangzhong City collaborate to operate an e-library online to increase students' access to reading materials.

#### 2. *Launching a Wide Variety of Reading-Inspiring Events*

According to Yangzhong City's reading education curriculum program, every school has the duty to organize reading-focused events based on the needs of its students as well as its actual circumstances. For instance, compulsory reading events for every academic year include a "reading festival," "reading week," and "reading month," among others. Students have the opportunity to regularly give multifarious reading-related displays, such as story sharing, reading experience exchange, speech-making contests, handwritten newspaper competitions, Chinese poetry recitation contests, reading notes exhibitions, drama performances, and reading knowledge competitions, to showcase their progress in literature literacy development. Additionally, writers, scholars, anchor teachers, alumni, and other celebrities are invited to schools to give lectures on reading.

#### 3. *Establishing a Reading Capability Rating System*

The reading capability rating system is applied to students at all education phases at all schools in Yangzhong City to institution-

alize whole-book reading instruction and to encourage extensive and deep reading in students (9). The system is a product of the collective efforts of the Chinese language education community in Yangzhong City, consisting of a specialized agency, rating-oriented evaluation, assessment materials, a question bank, results accreditation, and standard procedures. With this rating system, the student is expected to progressively upgrade their reading competence while continuously expanding their reading repertoire.

## **Leveraging Useful Tools to Support Whole-Book Reading Instruction**

### **Using Mind Maps to Increase Teaching Efficiency**

How to address a voluminous work in finite reading periods is a serious challenge in whole-book reading instruction. Selective reading is rated as an effective strategy for coping with this issue (10), and mind-mapping is often adopted to implement this reading strategy. With the aid of mind maps, teachers can guide students to develop a basic comprehension framework to facilitate their grasp of the whole book, which assists with the realization of in-class teaching objectives. It is worth noting that the mind map in this context is not only about summarizing the book content but also includes various teaching-supportive hints such as reading methods and instructional strategies. In the meantime, the mind map is a valuable instrument for kindling students' deep contemplations of the book by graphically representing intricate substances with an explicit framework and enabling students to focus on central information.

The development of mind maps for all the books in the reading lists for various grades involves colossal workloads. To share the burdens, primary and secondary Chinese language teachers in Yangzhong city worked together to create mind maps for all must-read classics and optional reading materials at the basic education level under the principle of division of responsibility and coordination. This practice is strong evidence of the value of instructional cooperation in regional education development.

### **Applying “Learning Task Cards” to Reinforce Student Reading Behavior**

The “learning task card,” developed by Yangzhong City’s education researchers, has been widely introduced in basic education schools in the region and has proven to be an effective teaching aid. It specifies concrete tasks the student must complete for certain core subject matter or a learning activity and is applied in subjects such as mathematics, English, and Chinese. The learning task card for whole-book reading instruction prescribes the objectives and specific assignments the student needs to fulfill for a certain book, enabling the teacher to monitor their reading performance in a timely manner. At the same time, the school has the discretion to adapt the uniform learning tasks to the actual circumstances of their whole-book reading education, guaranteeing they are truly applicable and supportive of reading instruction.

### **Developing Microlectures to Enrich Teaching**

## **Materials**

Microlecture is a form of instruction in which digital technologies are employed to stream the presentation of a certain teaching subject in a relatively short period (often less than 60 minutes) to support students’ self-directed learning (11). Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, microlectures have become valuable online supplementary teaching resources. Yangzhong City’s education department organized the production of whole-book reading microlectures, engaging Chinese language teachers and education researchers in the region to provide online backing for the whole-book reading education curriculum. For instance, the team has developed more than 30 microlectures for eighth grade reading instruction. Each microlecture is of appropriate length and is presented in an intelligible way for an optimal online learning experience for the student.

## **Improving Teachers’ Reading Instruction Proficiency by Increasing Research and Training Activities**

### **Encouraging Cross-School Teaching Research**

A wide range of cross-school teaching research activities have been conducted by teachers and education researchers in Yangzhong City for active, deeper explorations of methods for optimizing the effects of whole-book reading instruction. Special attention has been paid to the use of legitimate tools to assist in whole-book reading teaching. Using the first semester of the 2022 academic year as an example, there were four regional teaching research sessions focusing on the theme of “assisting whole-book reading with mind maps.” In-depth research was conducted into how to improve the design and application of learning task cards for better teaching results. In addition, research on reading education evaluation has been strengthened in the region with a view to optimizing interactions between teaching, learning, and evaluation in reading instruction.

Regional cooperative teaching research on whole-book reading instruction brought a series of accolades to the teaching and research staff concerned, including the Model Lessons in Zhenjiang City Award (Yangzhong City is under the jurisdiction of the greater Zhenjiang region) for a whole-book reading lesson plan created by two young Chinese language teachers; the first prize won by another two teachers in “Jiangsu Province’s whole-book reading lesson design competition;” and the first prize won by a teacher in “Zhenjiang City’s excellent lesson selection.”

### **Strengthening Practical Explorations via Project-Based Research**

Practical explorations of whole-book reading instruction can be traced back to the city’s provincial-level education science planning project 2018 titled “Actions for Promoting Voluntary Extensive Reading in Junior Secondary School Students: Research Based on the Practice of Reading Clubs at Schools in Yangzhong City.” With this research project, a reading education curriculum development base was established at Yangzhong No. 1 Middle School. Using this base as a model, each school set up a “reading club” to sponsor reading instruction research projects

and demonstration lessons of whole-book reading for teachers, as well as organizing whole-book reading activities for students. As a result of the advances in the said project and the establishment of the “reading club,” a reading-friendly environment has been created for every basic education student, winning schools in the region considerable recognition for their reading education. For instance, Yangzhong Experimental Primary School’s multidisciplinary reading project was selected as a “Provincial-Level Education Quality Enhancement Project.”

### Boosting Teachers’ Reading Instruction Competence via Various Competitions

The city’s Chinese language education community regularly hosts reading instruction-focused competitions to propel the upgrading of the whole-book teaching competence of teachers. For example, the “mind map design for whole-book reading competition” was held to encourage the use of mind maps by Chinese language teachers in their reading instruction. The teacher participant was required to create an electronic version of the mind map for any of the must-read classics. The organizers of the competition collected over 500 mind maps from teachers across the city and selected nearly 40 of them as first and second prize winners. The competition not only successfully sparked teachers’ interest in researching reading-supportive tools but also produced a host of scaffolding instruments for students’ whole-book reading.

### Conclusion

The successful instructional cooperation in whole-book reading teaching among Yangzhong City’s Chinese language teachers is attributable to their modified notions of education, efforts to build a structured whole-book reading education curriculum, innovative use of supplementary tools, and engagement in purposeful activities for enhancing reading instruction competence. This experiment has implications for popularizing regional instructional partnerships in reading education across the country. (i) Substantial investment in teacher professional training is needed to popularize the notion of regional instructional cooperation and improve corresponding teaching techniques. (ii) It is imperative to encourage the sharing of high-quality teaching materials and courses on reading instruction in the regional education community while also assisting the development of reading programs of individual characteristics by each school. (iii) Equally important is establishing uniform action and evaluation frameworks for the implementation of regional reading education curricula, which could serve as the bedrock for normalized and efficacious partnerships across schools in the region. Reading education development is promising in China with the assistance of regional instructional cooperation, in that the latter has the potential to bring about an overall enhancement of the nation’s quality of language education by igniting teachers’ creativity as well as balancing the distribution of education resources. ■

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Received: May 20, 2024 | Revised: June 25, 2024 | Accepted: June 30, 2024

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