

Reading Ability Development in Children: Key Factors and the Role of the Teachers' Reading Instruction Competence

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*"Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."
-Frederick Douglass*

IN MODERN society, reading ability is deemed the bedrock of student learning and lifelong education. Reading is crucial for information acquisition, intellectual development, and social development of the individual. Research shows that reading ability is not innate but rather the result of an ongoing educational process, in which early reading education plays a critical role (Shu & Li, 2014). Hulme and Snowling (2011) emphasized that a primary objective of early education is to teach the child how to read accurately and fluently with optimal comprehension of reading materials as reading is the paramount instrument for knowledge development in formal schooling. The reading skills developed in childhood and the low grades in the primary school have long-term effects on future learning outcomes (Mwoma, 2017). Hence, both parents and schools place a high value on child reading education.

Earlier research finds that among children with normal intelligence and comparable educational opportunities, 5%-10% of them still have the risk of suffering developmental dyslexia, irrespective of the language contexts. (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Shu & Li, 2014). To address this issue, educational researchers have conducted extensive studies of the factors that may influence reading ability development of the child. First off, many studies suggest that personal factors have a significant effect on the child's reading performance. According to Yin et al.'s (2021) study, executive function is closely related to reading ability development in children. Olson et al. (2014) argued that the impact of genetic factors on child reading ability persists throughout all grades. However, the existence of innate factors like these does not mean the environmental factors are less impactful in child reaching ability development.

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Home-related factors like family socioeconomic status, parental attitudes towards reading, and the home reading environment have proved to be of vital importance to child reading acquisition (Li & Dong, 2004; Mwoma, 2017; Yin et al., 2021). The size of home book collection is a strong predictor of the child's reading ability (Park, 2008); nevertheless, a large collection of books at home does not necessarily result in reading proficiency of the child. Ultimately, it is the child's reading ability that determines their reading volumes (van Bergen et al., 2018). In addition, amid the advancement of digital technologies, digital reading is getting increasingly prevalent in young children, which provokes the parents' concerns about the potentially negative impact of digital media on child reading ability development. Yet, Jiang et al.'s experimental study finds that there is no significant difference in the effects on child reading proficiency between print books and electronic books. As digital natives, the younger generation may develop the habit of digital reading, but this will not impose adverse impacts on their reading competence development.

The school reading environment can also make significance difference to the child's reading ability. Providing children with abundant reading materials and creating a reading-valued climate can help foster their love of reading. These moves, however, may not be sufficiently effective in light of the children's young age; the teacher's intervention in student reading behavior is often more critical (Li & Dong, 2004). As per Mwoma (2017), the teacher-student relationship and the teacher's reading instruction techniques are key to student reading ability development. More importantly, school-based reading education should not be confined to the established language education curriculum or be examination-focused (Zhong, 2019). This warrants high reading instruction proficiency of the language teachers.

A Practical Exploration of Teacher Training for Child Reading Education in China: A Case Study of Qinjinmuyu's "Reading Teacher Professional Competence Certification" Program in this issue is a study of how to construct a reading teacher professional competence training paradigm using Qinjinmuyu's (a private reading education and research institution) training program as an example. The program integrates reading instruction knowledge training, practical training, and assessment in a bid to enhance the reading teachers' professional standards (Yuan & Xu, 2024). Despite the lack of a quantitative validation of the program's outcomes (e.g., a large-scale experimental study or statistical analysis) in the study, the results of the post-training questionnaire and interviews with participants suggest that the program is effective in elevating the teachers' reading instruction competence.

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