Reading is an important component of learning in all subjects. Effective reading instruction encourages students to read and influences future learning. Current educational trends demonstrate significant changes in student populations and teachers are challenged to respond to a variance of experiences and devise appropriate strategies and activities to meet students’ needs. Differentiated reading is one instructional model that responds to addressing learner variance. It involves a restructuring of teaching and learning activities directed by continuous assessment, flexible grouping and tasks through which instructional strategies, techniques and activities are adjusted to match students’ needs, readiness levels and learning profiles.

The purpose of this research was to explore and explain teachers’ understanding of and practices in differentiated reading instruction through content, process and product. This research sought to test Vygotsky's (ZPD) Zone of Proximal Development and his concept of ‘readiness’ in relation to differentiated reading instruction. This comparative survey examined teachers’ implementation of differentiated reading in primary/elementary schools in a major city in Ireland and a major city in southern US. It identified the type of differentiated reading instruction used by teachers in both countries and the classroom management practices necessary for differentiated reading. The five research questions were: What is differentiated reading? What differentiated reading models are used by teachers? What is the content of the differentiated reading instruction? What processes are used in differentiated reading instruction? What are the products of differentiated reading instruction? The research investigated teachers’ conceptions about differentiation to their pedagogical practice. It ascertained the school, classroom and individual related factors that shape teachers’ perspectives and practices in relation to differentiation. It identified some factors that support and facilitate differentiation in reading in primary/elementary schools. Finally, a robust model of best-practice differentiated reading is proposed, informed by theory and derived empirically from the study.

Current research indicates that the teachers’ response to differentiated reading is positive whilst also indicating the desire for further guidelines, staff support and continuing professional development programmes in differentiated reading instruction. The research findings can help towards the creation of a new model of understanding on differentiated reading instruction and present a practical, workable model that can be employed in classrooms through content, process and product and help shape future policies and guidelines for teachers, schools and districts with more general implications for pre-service teacher education and professional development.