

Principal Leadership and the Virginia Literacy Act:  
From Policy Interpretation to Implementation

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State  
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education  
In  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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April 9, 2025  
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: early literacy policy, evidence-based literacy instruction, leadership,  
scientifically based reading research, Virginia Literacy Act

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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the role of elementary school principals in implementing early literacy policy changes within Virginia's school districts, focusing on the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). Amid concerns about declining literacy rates, recent legislative reforms mandate evidence-based reading instruction across the state, bringing urgent challenges and demands for effective leadership. Using a generic qualitative research design, this study examines principals' perceptions of how they navigate the interpretation and implementation of the VLA, guided by Fullan's Change Theory. It explores how principals interpret and communicate policy expectations and the leadership strategies they use to implement the VLA and support teachers. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with elementary school principals from districts actively engaged in VLA implementation. Through thematic analysis, findings identified key leadership strategies, challenges in policy enactment, and the support systems necessary for effective policy integration. This study contributes to the literature on educational leadership and policy implementation by offering insights into the practical role of principals in leading instructional change. The findings provide recommendations for improving professional development, leadership practices, and policy structures to support early literacy reform efforts.

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**GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT**

This study explores how elementary school principals influence the implementation of early literacy policy changes in Virginia, specifically examining their role in carrying out the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). This state law requires schools to use evidence-based reading instruction, requiring school leaders to guide teachers and ensure effective implementation. Principals serve as key decision-makers, shaping how schools interpret, adopt, and implement these policy changes. Through interviews with elementary principals, this study examines how they understand the VLA, how they support teachers during the transition, and what strategies they use to ensure lasting change in literacy instruction. Findings highlight effective leadership practices, challenges in implementing policy, and ways to improve support for educators. This research provides valuable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and educators, offering practical recommendations to improve the process of implementing literacy policies and ultimately enhance students' reading success.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The evolving landscape of early literacy instruction has sparked significant educational reforms, driven by the need to align teaching practices with the latest research in the science of reading (Slavin & Chambers, 2017). Literacy serves as the foundation for academic success and lifelong learning, making it a central focus of educational policy (Brown, 2014). Recent legislative trends in the United States reflect a decisive shift toward evidence-based literacy instruction, aiming to improve literacy outcomes across diverse student populations (Shanahan, 2020). In Virginia, this shift culminated in the passage of the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) by the General Assembly in 2022, which mandates extensive measures to enhance literacy instruction and outcomes statewide. Set to take effect in the 2024-2025 school year, the VLA mandates curriculum alignment, teacher training, student reading plans, and intervention supports (Virginia Literacy Act, 2022).

The urgency for educational reform in Virginia has been driven by recent poor performance on national assessments according to Governor Glenn Youngkin (Office of the Governor, 2022). Youngkin described the learning losses of Virginia fourth- and eighth-grade students on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as catastrophic (Office of the Governor, 2022). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the average score of fourth-grade students in Virginia in 2022 was below that of the national average and marked a notable decline from Virginia's average score in 2019. Additionally, only 32 percent of fourth-grade students in Virginia performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level in 2022, a decrease of six percentage points from 38 percent in 2019. Governor Youngkin highlighted that these results were “another loud wake-up call,” indicating devastating learning losses exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and prolonged school closures (Office of the

Governor, 2022, para. 2). The substantial declines demonstrated the need for comprehensive educational reforms to address these issues and support Virginia's students in regaining lost ground (Office of the Governor, 2022).

While the VLA establishes a clear policy framework, its success ultimately depends on how principals interpret and implement the law within their schools. Principals play a pivotal role in shaping instructional culture, guiding teachers through change, and ensuring alignment with new mandates. However, little is known about how principals navigate early literacy policy shifts, particularly in the earliest stages of VLA implementation. Given that principals must bridge state directives with school-level realities, their perspectives provide critical insights into the challenges and strategies involved in translating literacy policy into practice.

This study explores how elementary principals interpret the Virginia Literacy Act, how they communicate its requirements to staff, and what leadership strategies they employ in supporting teachers through the transition. By capturing principals' first-hand experiences, this research offers practical insights for policymakers, district leaders, and educators as they work to implement evidence-based literacy instruction across Virginia's schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Early literacy is a crucial determinant of future academic performance, with research indicating that early reading proficiency is strongly correlated with later academic success and graduation rates (Hernandez, 2011). In response to declining literacy performance, policymakers have emphasized evidence-based reading instruction, yet the implementation of these policies presents persistent challenges (Coburn et al., 2013; Woodard & Kline, 2015). Principals, as school-level leaders, play a critical role in translating policy into practice, yet little research has examined their experiences in navigating literacy policy reforms. The Virginia Literacy Act

(VLA), passed in 2022 and set for full implementation beginning in the 2024–2025 school year, represents a major shift in early literacy policy. The legislation mandates that all Virginia public elementary schools adopt evidence-based core literacy instruction grounded in the science of reading, with a particular emphasis on structured literacy practices. Under the VLA, divisions are required to provide (1) high-quality, evidence-based core instruction, (2) universal literacy screening for K–3 students using state-approved tools, (3) individualized Student Reading Plans (SRPs) for students not meeting benchmarks, and (4) targeted interventions and progress monitoring based on diagnostic data. In addition, the policy requires that reading specialists coordinate intervention services and support classroom teachers, and that divisions adopt state-approved literacy curricula aligned with science-based reading research. The law also includes new expectations for teacher preparation, requiring professional development aligned with structured literacy and the science of reading for both preservice and in-service educators (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). The VLA represents a major policy shift, requiring schools to implement structured literacy instruction. Structured literacy refers to a systematic, explicit approach to reading instruction that emphasizes foundational skills necessary for decoding and comprehension, distinguishing it from balanced literacy methods that typically include less structured phonics instruction (Moats, 2020).

However, principals face multiple obstacles in enacting these mandates, including budget constraints, teacher readiness, resistance to change, and alignment of policies with classroom realities (Lyon et al., 2005; Terhoven, 2022). Teachers often perceive curriculum and assessment mandates as obstacles to implementing what they consider best practices in literacy instruction (Barrett-Tatum, 2015). They frequently feel that one of the biggest challenges is their preparedness to implement new policies (Barrett-Tatum, 2015). Additionally, educators

frequently believe that policy-imposed barriers have substantially changed their classroom dynamics, due to the inflexibility and demands associated with policy, curriculum, and assessment mandates (Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth, 2021; Barrett-Tatum & Dooley, 2015; Coburn, 2006).

Existing research highlights teacher perspectives on policy adoption and instructional change (Barrett-Tatum, 2015; Coburn, 2006), but there is a gap in understanding how principals interpret and operationalize early literacy policy at the school level. Specifically, how do principals navigate the complexities of VLA implementation, communicate state directives to teachers, and manage competing demands? This study seeks to fill this gap by examining principals' leadership strategies in the early stages of VLA rollout, offering insights into the challenges and decision-making processes that shape policy outcomes. By addressing this underexplored dimension of literacy policy, the study aims to provide actionable findings for policymakers, district administrators, and school leaders striving to enhance early literacy instruction in Virginia.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how elementary school principals interpret and implement early literacy policy changes, focusing on their leadership strategies in navigating the Virginia Literacy Act. Specifically, this study explores principals' perceptions and experiences during the early stages of VLA adoption, investigating how they translate state policy into school-level practice and how their leadership decisions influence implementation. Because policy implementation is complex and context-dependent, a qualitative approach is essential for capturing the nuanced, real-world challenges principals face. Unlike a quantitative study, which might focus on broad trends or outcomes, this research seeks to understand the

human dimensions of leadership in policy change—how principals negotiate challenges, build buy-in, and adapt strategies within their unique school contexts.

By examining principals' perspectives, this study contributes to the field of educational leadership by identifying effective leadership practices that facilitate policy transitions.

Additionally, findings offer practical insights for district administrators, policymakers, and future research on how school leaders shape the early phases of literacy reform.

### **Research Questions**

This study is guided by two research questions, framed through the lens of Fullan's 2007 Change Theory, to explore how principals lead early literacy policy changes under the Virginia Literacy Act. The questions are designed to examine the stages of interpretation and implementation: How do principals interpret the Virginia Literacy Act, and how do they communicate and align state guidelines with school-level practices? What leadership strategies do principals use to implement the Virginia Literacy Act, including supporting teachers and addressing challenges? The findings from these questions are vital in shaping a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship among leadership, policy changes, and teaching practices. This investigation offers actionable recommendations to enhance future literacy initiatives and improve organizational practices and procedures.

### **Overview of the Study**

This study employs a generic qualitative research design to explore the perceptions and experiences of elementary school principals in the context of early literacy policy implementation. A generic qualitative approach is appropriate as it allows for an exploratory investigation of principals' perspectives without being confined to a single theoretical framework or methodological tradition (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014). Semi-structured interviews with

elementary school principals were conducted to gather rich, detailed data on their interpretation and implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). The study focuses exclusively on principals to provide a focused understanding of leadership practices, strategies, and challenges in navigating this mandatory state-wide reform initiative. It aims to present insights into how principals interpreted the requirements of the law, communicated expectations to their staff, supported teachers during the transition, and addressed challenges. By focusing on leadership practices, this research contributes to the limited literature on how school-level leaders perceive state early literacy policy and influence its enactment within their schools.

The VLA was established in response to the pressing need to improve literacy rates across the Commonwealth of Virginia, particularly in early literacy (Virginia Literacy Act, 2022). Under the VLA, every student in kindergarten through grade five must receive core literacy instruction rooted in scientifically-based reading research and evidence-based literacy practices (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). Additionally, students from kindergarten through grade eight who do not meet literacy benchmarks must receive supplemental instruction and intervention, detailed in individualized student reading plans (Virginia Literacy Act, 2022).

The VLA requires that teachers use evidence-based literacy curricula selected from a state-approved list, assess student learning with an approved literacy screener, and use student-level data to guide instruction and interventions (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). Teachers must also complete professional development on evidence-based literacy instruction. Each school division develops a comprehensive literacy plan, ensures the use of evidence-based literacy curricula, and employs enough reading specialists to support intervention needs. Divisions are also responsible for providing professional development to support teachers,

reading specialists, and principals in effectively implementing the literacy plans (Virginia Department of Education, 2022).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study applies Fullan's (2007) Change Theory to examine how elementary school principals interpret and implement the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). Fullan's framework offers a comprehensive lens to understand the complex processes of educational change and the pivotal role of leadership in driving successful implementation. Fullan (2007) explains that effective change in education requires a deep understanding of the multifaceted interactions among various components within the educational system. Fullan (2007) emphasizes that change is a process, not an event, and successful implementation involves multiple stages: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. Each stage encompasses different challenges and requires specific strategies to manage them effectively.

In the context of the VLA, Fullan's Change Theory provides a valuable framework to explore how elementary school principals navigate the stages of policy change. The initiation stage involves recognizing the need for change, understanding the driving forces behind the VLA, and preparing the groundwork for its implementation. During this stage, leaders must build awareness and generate buy-in among stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and the community.

The implementation stage focuses on the actual process of putting the VLA into practice. This involves translating policy into actionable steps, providing necessary resources, and supporting educators in adapting to new instructional practices. Fullan (2007) highlights the importance of capacity building during this stage, which includes professional development, ongoing support, and fostering collaborative cultures within schools.

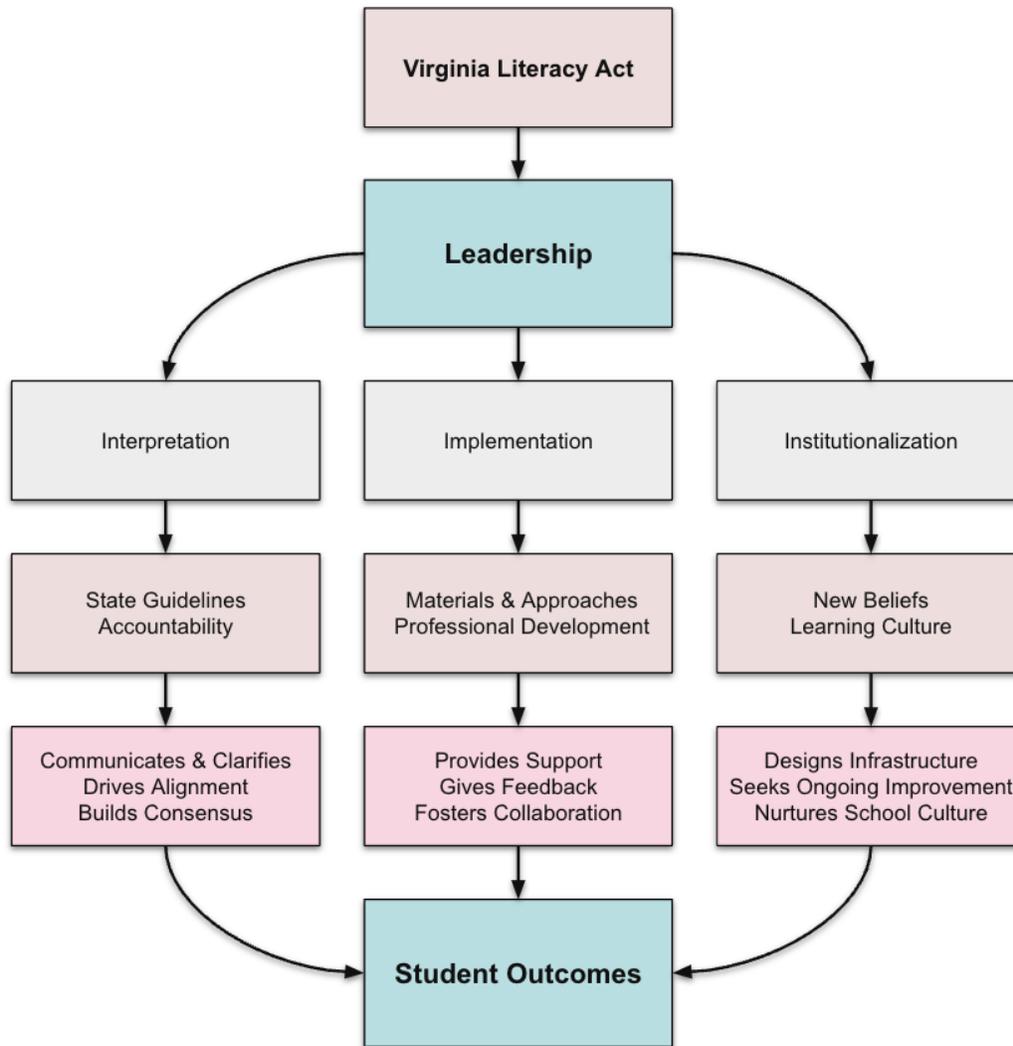
The final stage, institutionalization, refers to embedding the changes into the fabric of the educational system so that they become the norm. For the VLA, this means ensuring that the new literacy practices are sustained over time, continually assessed, and refined based on feedback and outcomes. Leadership plays a crucial role in maintaining momentum, addressing resistance, and ensuring that the benefits of the policy are realized in improved student literacy outcomes.

Although Fullan's framework includes a third stage, institutionalization, this study focuses solely on the first two phases. Given that the VLA is still in the early stages of implementation and this research concluded within the first academic year of its rollout, the study focuses only on how principals navigate the initiation and implementation phases. However, understanding the institutionalization phase remains important for future research and policy refinement.

To further illustrate the application of Fullan's Change Theory to the interpretation and implementation phases of the VLA, this study introduces a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that highlights the role of leadership across the stages of policy change, and their connection to student outcomes.

### **Figure 1**

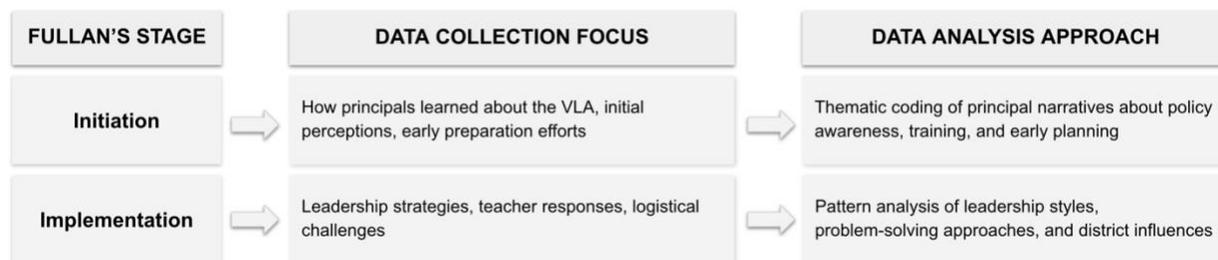
*Leadership's Role in the Virginia Literacy Act Through Fullan's Change Theory*



The study's semi-structured interviews were designed to capture principals' real-time experiences with these stages. Interview questions aligned with Fullan's framework to trace how principals moved from early understanding (initiation) to active problem-solving (implementation). Figure 2 illustrates how Fullan's stages guided data collection and analysis by structuring interview design, coding categories, and thematic analysis.

## Figure 2

*Mapping Fullan's Stages to Data Collection & Analysis*



By applying Fullan's Change Theory, this study aims to uncover how elementary principals in Virginia interpret and influence the processes and outcomes of the VLA. It examines the strategies they use to overcome challenges, build capacity, and foster a supportive environment for policy implementation. The insights gained from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of effective leadership practices in educational change and provide practical recommendations for future policy development and implementation.

### Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions are key to this study:

*Early Literacy Policy:* Legislative or administrative directives that establish standards, assessments, and instructional practices aimed at enhancing reading and writing skills among young children (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006).

*Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction:* Structured instructional practices, including sequential, systematic, explicit, and cumulative teaching, that (i) are based on reliable, trustworthy, and valid evidence consistent with science-based reading research; (ii) are used in core or general instruction, supplemental instruction, intervention services, and intensive intervention services; (iii) have a demonstrated record of success in adequately increasing students' reading competency, vocabulary, oral language, and comprehension and in building mastery of the foundational reading skills of phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, phonics, spelling, and text reading fluency; and (iv) are able to be differentiated in

order to meet the individual needs of students. "Evidence-based literacy instruction" does not include practices that instruct students to gain meaning from print through the use of (i) three-cueing, which includes semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic cues; (ii) meaning, structure, and visual cues; or (iii) visual memory for word recognition (Virginia Literacy Act, Va. Code Ann. § 22.1-1 et seq., 2022).

*Science-Based Reading Research:* Research that (i) applies rigorous, systematic, and objective observational or experimental procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading and writing difficulties and (ii) explains how proficient reading and writing develop, why some children have difficulties developing key literacy skills, and how schools can best assess and instruct early literacy, including the use of evidence-based literacy instruction practices to promote reading and writing achievement (Virginia Literacy Act, Va. Code Ann. § 22.1-1 et seq., 2022).

*Professional Development (PD):* Structured training and education for teachers to improve their teaching skills and knowledge and improve student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

*Structured Literacy:* A systematic, explicit approach to reading instruction that focuses on the foundational skills necessary for decoding and comprehension. This method contrasts with balanced literacy, which often includes less structured phonics instruction (Moats, 2020).

*Balanced Literacy:* A reading instruction model that integrates phonics, whole-language techniques, and leveled readers but does not always follow a systematic, research-based approach to phonemic awareness and phonics instruction (Shanahan, 2014).

*Student Reading Plans (SRPs):* Individualized instructional plans required under the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) for students in kindergarten through third grade who demonstrate

substantial reading deficiencies. These plans are based on diagnostic assessment data and include specific reading goals, progress monitoring measures, evidence-based interventions, family resources, and other services necessary to support reading development (Virginia Department of Education, 2023).

*Virginia Assessment of Literacy and Learning System (VALLS)*: A state-mandated literacy assessment system designed to monitor student progress and guide instructional decisions under the VLA (University of Virginia, 2023).

*Language Essentials for Teacher of Reading and Spelling (LETRS)*: A comprehensive professional development program designed to equip educators with deep knowledge of the science of reading. LETRS focuses on the foundational skills necessary for effective reading instruction, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, and writing (Moats & Tolman, 2018).

### **Assumptions and Delimitations**

This study was conducted under several assumptions. First, engaging in a qualitative study I approached the study with the assumption that principals provided authentic and reflective responses in their interviews, though it is possible that some felt pressure to present the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) in a positive light. While every effort was made to create a nonjudgmental space for discussion, principals may have framed their responses in ways that aligned with district expectations or policy mandates. Additionally, it is assumed that participants had sufficient familiarity with the VLA to offer meaningful insights into their interpretation and leadership strategies. Given that the VLA was still in its early stages during data collection, variations in understanding were expected. Another assumption is that, while this study focuses solely on principals, the broader influences of teachers and district-level leadership on

implementation decisions are acknowledged, even though these perspectives were not the primary focus of the research.

Several delimitations define the scope of this study. The research is limited to elementary school principals in Virginia, as they are the key decision-makers in implementing the VLA at the school level. This study does not examine the experiences of teachers, reading specialists, or district officials, though their roles are integral to literacy policy enactment. Additionally, the study is state-specific, focusing on Virginia's education system, and the findings may not be fully transferable to states with different literacy mandates or policy structures. Another delimitation is the timing of data collection. Since the VLA was newly enacted, this study captures principals' initial experiences with policy adoption rather than long-term institutionalization. By narrowing the scope in this way, the study provides a focused examination of school-level leadership during the early stages of a significant literacy policy change.

### **Organization of the Study**

The dissertation is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study's purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, and significance, setting the stage for an investigation into the role of leadership in early literacy policy reform. Chapter 2 includes a literature review of prior empirical research related to leadership and educational policy change in literacy. It examines the historical context of literacy education policies, successful policy changes, challenges and barriers to policy change, and the impact of policy changes on teachers and teaching practices. Chapter 3 details the research methodology, including the qualitative approach, participant selection criteria, data collection procedures, and analysis methods. This chapter also addresses considerations for research trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and

potential limitations of the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings derived from principal interviews, organized thematically to align with the study's research questions. This chapter provides a detailed account of how principals interpreted the VLA, communicated expectations to staff, supported teachers, and navigated obstacles during its initial rollout. Finally, Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature, highlighting the implications for educational leaders, policymakers, and future research. It synthesizes the key insights drawn from the study, emphasizing the practical significance of the findings for school leadership and literacy policy enactment. The dissertation concludes with the researcher's reflections.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

Literacy is a critical foundation for academic success, as it lays the groundwork for children's ability to comprehend and communicate effectively (Masseti, 2009). The significance of literacy in education extends beyond traditional reading and writing skills. The science of reading provides a crucial foundation for 21st-century education, emphasizing the need for evidence-based approaches in literacy instruction (Petscher et al., 2020). Additionally, the role of knowledge in the literacy classroom is a critical aspect to consider, as engaging with varying theoretical frameworks and empirical research informed our understanding of the intersection of knowledge and literacy in educational settings (Hattan & Lupo, 2020). Understanding the profound impact of literacy on educational outcomes underlines the critical role of educational policy and its effective implementation in shaping literacy development and educational success (Westall & Cummings, 2023). Thus, the purpose of this literature review is to examine research on how elementary school principals interpret and implement early literacy policy changes to inform leadership decisions about organizational policies and procedures related to early literacy.

### **Search Procedures**

Between January 2023 and February 2024, Virginia Tech (VT) Library's Databases and Google Scholar were searched to locate the literature on leadership and educational policy changes. The search parameters included academic journals, books, reports, and literature reviews written in English, peer-reviewed, from the United States, and published between 2004 and 2023. These searches were conducted using guidance from the Virginia Tech Online and Graduate Engagement Librarian. The keywords and results of these searches are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Search of the Databases ERIC, Education Research Complete, and Teacher Reference Center*

Search Criteria	Results
Educational Policy AND literacy	3,199
Literacy Policy	1,410
Early Literacy	7,399
Leadership Styles in Education	215
Early Literacy AND Policy	666
Teacher professional Development AND Effective	233
Teacher Beliefs AND Reading OR Literacy	111,387
Evidence Based Literacy Instruction	42

For this review, 185 abstracts were read and 111 sources were read in their entirety. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to effectively narrow down the selection. The criteria for inclusion were: empirical studies (both qualitative and quantitative) that directly addressed literacy within the K-12 education sector in the United States, articles that contributed to understanding the impact of leadership and educational policy on literacy outcomes, and studies published between 2004 and 2024. Additionally, priority was given to sources that offered insights into the practical implications of educational policies on literacy.

Exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the focus and quality of the literature review. Articles that were not written in English or were not empirical in nature, such as opinion pieces or theoretical discussions without direct research findings, were excluded. Furthermore, studies that did not specifically relate to the field of K-12 education or were outside the scope of leadership and educational policy's influence on literacy were also set aside.

After abstracts were read, it was determined if the information was relevant and if it could be considered a salient source. Salient sources were closely analyzed and compiled in Appendix A. It is color-coded to show the main themes that emerged from the research of the

literature. Most of the research for the literature review came from Education Research Complete and ERIC from EBSCOhost. Additional sources were found in the reference sections of the reviewed studies.

### **Organization of Chapter**

This literature review is organized based on the themes that emerged from the studies. It is divided into distinct sections that provide a comprehensive overview of leadership and policy change in literacy education. Initially, the review outlines the historical and theoretical foundations of literacy education, setting the context for understanding the evolution of literacy teaching practices and policies. It then examines the strongest themes, the role of educational leaders in implementing policies and the impact of policy changes on teachers. It then covers studies which provide policy recommendations for future literacy initiatives and it concludes with suggestions for future research.

### **Historical Context of Literacy Education Policies**

Tracing the evolution of literacy education policies reveals a fascinating journey, marked by pivotal research breakthroughs and shifting educational paradigms, each strongly influencing how reading instruction has been conceptualized and implemented over the years. The study of how the brain learns to read has been an active area of research, and researchers continue to investigate the historical development and theoretical foundations of this complex process (Castles et al., 2018). Systematic research on cognitive processes and reading acquisition first appeared during the mid-20th century, and provided valuable clues to the way the brain acquires reading skills (Castles et al., 2018). Over time, there was a major theory called the bottom-up processing theory, which posited that the development of reading mostly involved acquiring sublexical skills, which included letter-sound associations and phonics (Treiman, 2017). The idea

was that children learn to read by building up from individual letters to words and sentences, gradually developing their decoding abilities (Moats, 2000).

The Orton-Gillingham approach, initially developed in the 1930s by Dr. Samuel T. Orton and Anna Gillingham, is a structured, sequential, multisensory instructional method intended to support students with difficulties in reading, spelling, and writing. It emphasizes explicit teaching of phonological awareness, phonics, spelling rules, and decoding strategies through the simultaneous engagement of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities (Gillingham & Stillman, 1936). This method aligns with the principles of bottom-up processing and has led to the creation of multiple commercial literacy programs utilized widely in educational contexts, though outcomes have varied (Rose & Zirkel, 2007). The variability in outcomes might be attributed to factors such as the diverse needs of students, including those experiencing trauma, learning English as a second language, struggling with executive functions, developing fixed mindsets about their reading abilities, or exhibiting general disengagement in school (Rosheim & Tamte, 2022).

While the Orton-Gillingham approach and its varied outcomes illustrate the complexity of addressing diverse learner needs in the context of bottom-up processing, the emergence of The Simple View of Reading (SVR) model, first proposed by Gough and Tunmer (1986), marked an evolution in our understanding of reading acquisition, shifting the focus toward an integrated view of decoding and language comprehension (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). This theoretical framework emphasized the importance of two key components in reading comprehension: word recognition (decoding) and language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). According to this model, reading comprehension can be predicted by the product of word recognition and

language comprehension abilities. Poor performance in either of these components can lead to reading difficulties (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

The SVR model gained substantial attention and became a widely cited theoretical framework for understanding reading comprehension, particularly in elementary school education (Lervag et al., 2017). Its influence is evident in the development of reading intervention programs and instructional approaches across U.S. states and school districts (Florit & Cain, 2011). Research has shown that the SVR has guided the assessment of reading development, including the implementation of mandated phonics screeners, illustrating its impact on educational policy (Florit & Cain, 2011).

In contrast to the emphasis on decoding skills, the whole language approach also gained popularity and was widely used in the early 1990s (Pearson, 2004). Whole language theory was a philosophy of reading instruction that emphasized the importance of meaningful, contextual language experiences (Goodman, 1997). It was developed by linguists as a reaction to the phonics-based approach to reading instruction that was popular at the time (Goodman, 1986). Whole language theorists, such as Goodman (1967) and Smith (1971), argued that children learn to read naturally, in the same way that they learn to speak. They believed that children should be immersed in language, and that they should be encouraged to read and write for meaning. Whole language theory emphasized the integration of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, treating reading as a holistic process (Smith & Goodman, 1971).

### ***Evolution of Literacy Policies***

The whole language theory influenced changes in state and district policies, curriculum design, and teaching methodologies (Hopkins, 2014; Moats, 2007). Hopkins (2014) revealed that the principles of whole language theory notably shaped district-level education policies, thereby

aligning classroom practices closely with this theoretical approach. Whole language theory reached its peak popularity during the 1980s and 1990s, but then encountered considerable criticism. Critics contended that whole language theory lacked sufficient explicit phonics instruction, potentially resulting in reading difficulties for certain children (Adams, 1990; National Reading Panel, 2000). At the same time, whole language theorists argued that phonics-based instruction was too narrow, and that it did not take into account the importance of meaning in reading (Moats, 2000). Consequently, a prominent alternative theory, balanced literacy, emerged as a response to the perceived limitations of both whole language and phonics-based approaches to reading instruction (Pearson, 2004). Balanced literacy instruction combined elements of whole language and phonics-based instruction to develop reading and writing skills (Moats, 2009; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

Pearson (2004) outlined several converging factors that spurred a shift away from whole language towards a more skills-focused approach in literacy instruction: unintended curricular gaps, misapplications of whole language, the rise of balanced literacy as a middle ground, and shifts in reading research paradigms. This evolution was further shaped by increased politicization of reading research and a demand for measurable outcomes, particularly under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001. NCLB marked a crucial point in literacy policy, mandating evidence-based instruction and elevating *Reading First* as the new standard in reading education. The legislation emphasized phonics and other foundational skills as essential components of literacy instruction, leading to widespread implementation in place of the whole language practices previously prominent. This shift, as Pearson (2004) notes, represented a politically driven transformation that prioritized skills-based instruction in response to federal accountability measures (Pearson, 2004).

Despite NCLB's emphasis on skills-based literacy instruction, subsequent state policies, like South Carolina's 2014 Read to Succeed (RTS), responded to the federal mandate but still incorporated elements of balanced literacy (Pearson 2004). RTS emphasized teacher training and varied reading intervention services, such as guided reading, which align with the balanced literacy philosophy of integrating different teaching methods (Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth, 2021). Additionally, Vaughn et al. (2019) found that principals in various states exercised a degree of autonomy in implementing literacy curricula that aligned with balanced literacy principles. This study revealed that while some schools were required to adhere closely to specific, prescriptive literacy programs, others enjoyed greater flexibility, allowing educators to develop their own literacy curricula in line with the balanced literacy approach. This included alignment with state or Common Core State Standards, but without strict adherence to a single prescribed program, highlighting a shift towards more adaptable, teacher-driven literacy instruction methods (Vaughn et al., 2019).

Similarly, O'Day (2009) explored the progression of balanced literacy reforms within San Diego City Schools where teachers and school leaders recognized the importance of tailoring instruction to the varied learning needs of students, including English learners. The study pointed out that through the balanced literacy initiative, educators were able to improve their instructional skills and were better able to comprehend literacy teaching and learning. These findings further validate the Vaughn et al. (2019) study which suggests that under a balanced literacy approach, schools provided freedom to teachers in implementing literacy curricula, demonstrating a movement towards teacher-driven literacy practices.

While the balanced literacy approach emphasizes flexible, teacher-driven instruction, contrasting educational theories like the whole language approach stem from earlier

psychological research, which lacked the insights into the brain's reading processes that contemporary cognitive neuroscience offers (Seidenberg, 2009). The development of educational theories like the whole language approach is based on the studies of a select few psychologists (including Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner), whose research came before the progress in cognitive neuroscience seen in recent times (Seidenberg, 2009). Researchers at that time had limited understanding of the neural mechanisms underlying reading; however, with the advancements in neuroimaging techniques, researchers have gained new insights into how the brain processes written language (Dehaene, 2009). This has led to a shift towards studying the development of language skills and investigating the neural correlates of reading, with researchers identifying the complex neural circuitry involved in reading and emphasizing its importance for reading comprehension (Dehaene, 2009).

Dehaene argued that learning to read is a complex process that involves a variety of brain regions. These regions work together to form a neural circuit that is responsible for reading. He calls this circuit the *reading network*. The reading network is not specific to reading, and it is also involved in other cognitive tasks, such as visual processing and language comprehension. However, the reading network is specialized for processing written words, and it is essential for reading comprehension (Dehaene, 2009). The reading network is still not fully understood, but Dehaene's research contributes to the vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research known as the science of reading (Seidenberg, 2017).

### ***Legislation and Reading Science***

The science of reading has led to the development of new approaches to reading instruction that are evidence-based, such as the structured literacy approach (Spear-Swerling, 2019). The structured literacy approach emphasizes the systematic and explicit teaching of

phonology, orthography, morphology, syntax, and semantics. There is a growing body of research that suggests that structured literacy is an effective approach to reading instruction, especially for struggling readers (International Dyslexia Association, 2019; Spear-Swerling, 2019).

This paradigm shift in understanding reading development has been reflected in recent legislative trends across the United States. Neuman et al. (2023) conducted an extensive survey of state laws from 2019 to 2022 which revealed a notable shift towards policies focused on evidence-based reading instruction. In response to the growing call for improved reading outcomes and in light of troubling performance data, 45 states and the District of Columbia have enacted 223 bills that focus on various aspects of reading instruction and literacy. These legislative efforts target not only traditional K-3 education, but also extends to preschoolers in 31 states and beyond the 3rd grade in 42 states. The laws of 37 states feature provisions for charter schools, which shows that reading reform is offered under an inclusive approach (Neuman et al., 2023).

Central to this wave of legislation is an insistence on science and research evidence in reading instruction. A commitment to the science of reading is explicitly named in legislation from 18 states, representing an unambiguous focus on grounding reading policy in scientifically derived understandings (Neuman et al., 2023). This trend is corroborated by historical analyses indicating a clear shift toward evidence-based reading instruction within federal and state policies, reflecting a move from generalized educational directives to a more focused, research-oriented approach (Shanahan, 2014). In addition, teacher preparation and professional development have been at the core of legislative effort, with 25 states addressing teacher preparation in depth and 32 dealing with in-service professional development in depth (Neuman

et al., 2023). The focus on equipping teachers aligns with Shanahan's (2014) assertion that teachers must be comprehensively involved in all facets of the educational enterprise, which includes a robust understanding and active participation in the formulation of literacy education policies.

While these legislative trends reflect a strong commitment to grounding reading instruction in scientific research, not all scholars fully endorse the current interpretations and applications of the science of reading movement. Critics argue that the dominant discourse on the science of reading often presents a narrow view of reading instruction, prioritizing systematic phonics instruction while minimizing the importance of comprehension, meaning-making, and sociocultural influences (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2021; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Goodwin and Jiménez (2021) contend that while cognitive science provides valuable insights into how students acquire reading skills, literacy instruction is a complex process that extends beyond decoding. They argue that reading instruction should be responsive to diverse learners and account for sociocultural factors that influence literacy development.

Furthermore, Wyse and Bradbury (2022) critique the politicization of reading science, arguing that legislative efforts promoting the science of reading often oversimplify reading research and dismiss alternative approaches that also have empirical support. They point out that historical reading debates, such as the phonics vs. whole language controversy, have influenced policy decisions in ways that are not always aligned with the complexity of reading development. Similarly, Mesmer and Griffith (2005) argue that many science of reading-based policies have failed to acknowledge the variability in students' reading development, leading to rigid instructional mandates that do not accommodate individual learning differences.

Additionally, there is ongoing debate regarding the interpretation and application of “scientifically based reading instruction” in policy and practice. Mesmer and Griffith (2005) highlight that while systematic phonics instruction is widely supported, the term “explicit and systematic phonics” has been interpreted inconsistently across different educational policies, resulting in varying implementation quality and unintended instructional consequences. Yet, despite the clear legislative intent, only a subset of states have a clear definition of the “science of reading,” which may imply there is a lot of interpretation and application of this term in educational policy (Neuman et al., 2023).

A further critique comes from Brinegar et al., (2024), who argue that current science of reading frameworks often overlook the cultural and linguistic diversity of students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities. They emphasize the need for a culturally sustaining science of reading, which integrates students’ linguistic backgrounds, home literacy practices, and social experiences into reading instruction. Their research suggests that many evidence-based reading programs fail to acknowledge the sociocultural dimensions of literacy, reinforcing a one-size-fits-all approach that may not serve all students equitably (Brinegar et al., 2024).

Taken together, these critiques suggest that while the science of reading has contributed valuable knowledge to literacy instruction, it is not without controversy, misinterpretation, and challenges in implementation. Recognizing these concerns ensures that literacy policies and instructional practices remain responsive, flexible, and inclusive rather than rigidly prescriptive.

### **Successful Policy Changes in Literacy**

Although these critiques highlight valid concerns about the scope and implementation of science-based reading instruction, research also demonstrates that well-designed literacy policies

can lead to measurable improvements in student outcomes. Examining the successes of early literacy policies provides insight into how states have navigated these challenges and effectively leveraged evidence-based practices to enhance reading achievement. Reflecting the shift towards evidence-based reading instruction, the success of these legislative efforts is further demonstrated through the findings of Westall and Cummings (2023). Their findings serve as a compelling example of how policy changes can improve literacy outcomes. This study used an event-study design to analyze the effects of early literacy policies on student literacy across 41 states and the District of Columbia at the end of third grade. It was found that the adoption of any early literacy policy led to improvements in high-stakes reading scores in the elementary years for cohorts that were exposed to the policy.

Specifically, there were positive, statistically significant effects for these cohorts on their third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade reading scores (Westall & Cummings, 2023). States with comprehensive early literacy policies experienced more substantial and sustained increases in high-stakes reading scores. These policies were defined as including all 16 components identified by ExcelinEd (2021), such as supports for teachers, assessment and parent notification, instruction and intervention, and retention and intensive intervention (Westall & Cummings, 2023). The effects in these states ranged from about 0.025 standard deviations for third-grade students to 0.1 standard deviations for those starting kindergarten a year after policy implementation. The study also highlighted the role of third-grade retention mandates in improving literacy outcomes whereas states with such mandates witnessed notable and persistent increases in high-stakes reading scores across all cohorts. The magnitude of these gains is, therefore, consistent with the overall impact from early literacy policies and points to a key role for retention components.

Although the net impact on low-stakes reading test scores was not as large, there were gains in low-stakes test scores for states with comprehensive policies (Westall & Cummings, 2023). This is exemplified by the statistically significant rise of approximately five scale score points in fourth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores six to seven years post-policy implementation, as observed in Mississippi’s “miracle” where, after the implementation of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act in 2013, fourth graders showed a 1.2 standard deviation increase in reading scores on the NAEP by 2022, positioning Mississippi as a top performer nationally in reading (Folsom et al., 2017; Burk, 2023). Furthermore, Florida’s early literacy policy, initiated in 2002, led to an increase of 13 points in NAEP fourth-grade reading scale scores by 2015, demonstrating an equivalent improvement of one-and-a-half grade levels (Burk, 2023). This legislation mirrors the components recommended by ExcelinEd (2021) and demonstrates the profound effects of systemic early literacy policies, including professional development for educators, targeted interventions for struggling readers, and retention for those not meeting literacy benchmarks by the end of third grade (Folsom et al., 2017).

### **Challenges and Barriers to Policy Change in Literacy**

Expanding upon Barrett-Tatum and Ashworth’s (2021) findings about the crucial role of educators in putting literacy policies into action, it becomes essential to take a closer look at the wider range of obstacles and difficulties these policies may face. Lyon et al. (2005) pointed out that the Reading Excellence Act (REA) of 1998 was the first federal legislation to focus expressly on reading. However, the REA could not achieve its targeted outcomes majorly because of weak implementations and monitoring at the federal and state levels. Although there were initial efforts to monitor state application for grants under the federal peer review process, state applications for funding were characterized by inconsistent and unsystematic application of

research-based program criteria. Added to this was a great underestimation of resistance to scientifically based reading programs and correlated professional development. This underestimation, in fact, revealed vast gaps in understanding and capacity at various levels - from state and local authorities to schools - about the implementation of these scientifically based reading programs. Furthermore, professional development support was found to be lacking across university, state, and district levels (Lyon et al., 2005).

Another powerful example of failed policy implementation as presented by Lyon et al. (2005), involves the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act. The barrier here was predominantly financial, with some states choosing not to accept the act's funds due to the perceived financial burden of compliance outweighing the benefits of the funding provided. In a related instance, Terhoven (2022) presented that schools have had scarcity in their resources, even though funding has been given to change their policies. Several institutions showed resource scarcities, which included lack of infrastructures and inadequate teachers who are properly trained in the respective subjects. These are major setbacks in the effective delivery of curriculum and the education system as a whole.

### ***Policy Design and Classroom Realities***

In literacy policy change, various challenges arise, including policy interpretation, curriculum limits, high-stakes testing, changes in teaching, and school-level struggles, as many studies show. Woodard and Kline (2015) discussed the delicate balancing act required in policy design and interpretation. They found that effective literacy policies must provide clarity while also acknowledging the varied landscapes of educational contexts. However, when policies are misaligned with classroom realities or allow for too broad an interpretation, the execution of best

practices in literacy instruction suffers. This misalignment can create inconsistencies across different districts which directly impacts literacy instruction.

Re-emphasizing this concern, according to Bromley et al. (2019), other curriculum-focused challenges included the tendency of policies to prioritize improved results in national testing, like the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). In fact, this focus may lead to a narrowed literacy curriculum, concentrating mostly on skills to be measured on the tests and thus restraining the scope of literacy education. This policy-induced narrowing of the curriculum ignores the wider literacy development goals and could detract from developmentally appropriate practices, particularly in early childhood education, and for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

This is further confirmed by Terhoven's (2022) study which discussed the overwhelming pressure to perform on academic scores demanded by education departments. Such pressure was usually taken to mean pinpointed focus on learner performance scores only, then overshadowing other educational goals and becoming a barrier towards an all-encompassing education approach.

These policies are shifting the practices of teaching. For instance, Bromley et al. (2019) observed how there was a shift towards explicit teaching of literacy and reduction of emphasis on other curricular components such as play-based pedagogy. This has been viewed as a move that, while with the intention of enhancing literacy results, has served to impede effective early childhood literacy development strategies. In addition, this has also been an implication of a loss in the professional autonomy of teachers, on account of the technical functions of jobs, such as data analyses. In this respect, this shift in role can deprofessionalize teachers in that they may feel less capable of applying professional judgment and experience in literacy teaching.

### ***Challenges in Diverse Educational Environments***

Terhoven (2022) shed light on challenges of policy implementation, particularly within working-class school settings marked by poverty, crime, and overcrowded classrooms. Schools had problems in offering adequate development and support for teachers, often making do with ad hoc measures influenced by external pressures. Implementation was further compounded by administrative and bureaucratic challenges, as well as disciplinary problems within challenging classroom environments. This was not taken into account in the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to a variety of curriculums, including the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Further, compliance as a culture supported through serious surveillance and pressure coming from district officials, as noted by Terhoven (2022), actually hinders the infusion of innovative and contextually relevant educational practices. Such a compliance orientation rather than one of innovation may prove potentially harmful for the purposes of the holistic development of literacy education and highlights the complexities of policy enactment across varied educational settings.

### **Impact of Policy Changes on Teachers and Teaching Practices**

Policy changes in literacy education directly influence teaching practices in the classroom. Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) asserted that curriculum, professional development, and leadership are interconnected factors in translating literacy policies into effective teaching practices. This triadic relationship is critical in understanding how policy changes are actualized in the classroom. Gallo-Fox and Cuccuini-Harmon (2018) described the relationship between policy mandates and the pedagogical decisions teachers make daily. They concluded that while curriculum and PD are crucial, local contexts and teacher beliefs also play essential roles in how policies are interpreted and implemented on the ground.

### ***Influencing Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs***

Leadership actions that accompany policy changes in literacy have a deeply felt impact on the perceptions of teachers. Research has revealed that teachers are more amenable to change as long as the changes are clear, well-communicated, well-supported, and evident as being contributory to student outcomes (Day, 2008). Leadership plays an influencing role in the determination of these attitudes through engaging the teachers in the decision-making processes, which would later nurture a sense of ownership and alignment with the new policies (Coburn, 2005). However, there can be resistance when changes are perceived as a top-down prescription that does not consider the realities of classroom application (Hynds, 2010). Teachers value leadership that provides a rationale for changes, showing how new policies or curriculums enhance literacy instruction and student learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

### ***Facilitating Teacher Acceptance and Readiness***

Several factors impacting teachers' acceptance and readiness for policy change include their perception of the change's relevance, the support available, and the change's alignment with their educational philosophies (Abernathy-Dyer et al., 2013). Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013) explored how policy changes profoundly reshape teaching methods and focus on the key role of teachers' beliefs and their sense of efficacy during these transitions. They argued that even when schools try to align instructional practices with new standards or policies, individual teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning critically mediated the implementation process. This often lead to varied adaptations in classroom practices, reflecting personal teaching philosophies rather than uniform compliance with policy mandates (Abernathy-Dyer et al., 2013).

This process is further complicated when considering the preparation of pre-service teachers, who often enter the classroom with varying levels of confidence in their ability to implement effective literacy instruction, as discussed by Sigmon and Fogelson (2021). They

revealed that pre-service educators identify pronounced gaps in their preparation, particularly in enlisting parental involvement and using research to guide instruction—areas crucial for addressing the needs of struggling readers. Tortorelli et al. (2021) further argued that teacher preparation programs often emphasize technical linguistic knowledge (e.g., phonemic awareness, decoding) but may neglect pedagogical and situational knowledge. This disconnect can affect how well new teachers are equipped to apply their knowledge in diverse classroom settings.

Addressing this issue requires literacy policy revisions paired with substantial professional development programs that strengthen the abilities and confidence of both pre-service and in-service teachers. Such preparation enables teachers to embrace changes that align with their beliefs about effective instruction and address the multifaceted challenges of literacy education, thereby ensuring a smoother transition into adopting new instructional strategies (Abernathy-Dyer et al., 2013; Kisa & Correnti, 2015). The study by Sigmon and Fogelson (2021) highlights the need for teacher education programs to integrate comprehensive training that equips educators to effectively engage with parents and utilize research-based practices, thereby facilitating acceptance and readiness for policy-driven changes in literacy instruction.

### ***Supportive Frameworks for Policy Adaptation***

The level and quality of support provided to teachers during policy changes are crucial for successful implementation. Professional development tailored to the specific changes, ongoing training, access to literacy coaches, and mentorship programs are highlighted as effective strategies for supporting teachers (Kraft et al., 2018). In this context, Woodward and Thoma (2021) provided valuable insights into the specific roles and preparation of literacy coaches. Their study emphasized the need for clear definitions and expectations for literacy coaches, whose effectiveness hinges on their preparation and the clarity of their roles within the

educational system. Teachers, administrators, and literacy coaches themselves hold varied expectations and perceptions of the literacy coach's role, which can influence the effectiveness of coaching practices. Woodward and Thoma's findings suggested that when literacy coaches are well-prepared, with clear and consistent roles, they greatly contribute to the successful implementation of literacy policies by providing targeted support and professional development to teachers. This is in alignment with the broader educational reform efforts that aim to enhance literacy instruction through informed and supportive leadership.

Additionally, literacy coaches play a crucial mediating role in the interpretation and adaptation of literacy policies to classroom practices. As Woodward and Thoma (2021) indicated, the alignment of coaches' roles with district and school expectations facilitates more effective support for teachers, thereby enhancing the instructional practices in classrooms. This aligns with the findings of Vandeyar (2017), who noted that educational reform achieves its greatest success when teachers lead the change as part of their personal and professional initiatives, taking full ownership of the reform process.

Teachers also value collaborative environments where they can share experiences and strategies with peers undergoing similar transitions (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011). Here, literacy coaches can serve as facilitators of such environments, providing the scaffolding necessary for teachers to exchange ideas and develop practices that align with new literacy policies. The role of literacy coaches, as detailed by Woodward and Thoma (2021), highlighted the importance of structured support systems that not only facilitate policy adaptation but also foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

In a study conducted by Barrett-Tatum and Ashworth (2021), it was found that there were disparities depicted in the different levels of implementation of the literacy intervention policies

between the districts and schools. The study described the role of reading coaches and literacy specialists in making the policy language relevant to practice. The district policy and roles for administration were much less detailed and leaned heavily on reading coaches and literacy specialists for teacher support. It said the success of policy change is not only dependent on the policy itself but also on the adjustability and capacity of educational systems in carrying out these changes in an appropriate way. Therefore, acknowledging and providing assistance to essential educators in effectively turning policy into better literacy results was deemed as highly important (Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth, 2021).

### **Leadership and Decision-Making in Policy Change**

Following the exploration of challenges and barriers to policy change in literacy, it becomes evident that overcoming these hurdles necessitates strong, adaptive leadership. Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) argue that it is the role of leadership at various levels—district, school, and classroom—to foster and sustain an environment conducive to the successful execution of literacy policies. School leaders are tasked with both managing the day-to-day operational aspects of a building and leading their staff towards achieving educational goals (Bush, 2007). Their policy implementation efforts are strongly influenced by pressures from external factors like legislation and explicit policy directives. The ability to navigate these pressures and hence frame reforms that make sense, are doable, and sustainable in context is a condition for their success (Lambert & Penney, 2023).

Leaders seem to have to take on a mediatory role in bridging the gap between policy mandates and pedagogical practice. They engage deeply with the content and intentions of policy documents, interpreting and adapting these to fit the educational contexts and needs of their jurisdictions, as found by Lambert and Penney (2023). Similar to the findings of Woulfin and

Gabriel (2020), Lambert and Penny also found that there is a great necessity for educational leaders to be adept at translating policy into actionable strategies that resonate with the pedagogical goals of their schools. At the same time, they must also adapt policy directives to the context of their specific school or district such as addressing issues like poverty, overcrowded classrooms, and limited resources (Terhoven, 2022).

### ***The Impact of Leadership Styles***

Principals, in most cases, are the ones who contribute greatly to the formation of culture and effectiveness of schools with their leadership styles, particularly in support of teachers (Adarkwah & Zeyuan, 2020). Eranil and Ozbilen (2017) further argued that the style of leadership oriented towards supporting teachers significantly contributes to the effectiveness of the environment in the school. This support would not only reinforce job satisfaction and retention of teachers, as highlighted by Ladd (2011), but would directly influence the teacher's motivation and determine his/her perception about the teaching profession (Adarkwah & Zeyuan, 2020; Wasserman et al., 2016).

Further, as argued by Balyer and Ozcan (2012) and also in agreement with Haj and Jubran (2016), leadership should be of a transformative nature within the educational setting so that the diverse challenges could be attended to within an appropriate manner, even more so in a complex environment. Thus, there is a clear need for principals to embrace transformational leadership practices to foster positive outcomes for both teachers and students, ultimately contributing to the overall success of educational institutions (Adarkwah & Zeyuan, 2020). As evidenced by Inandi et al. (2013), leadership styles seriously influence behaviors related to resistance to change. Autocratic and laissez-faire leadership are negatively associated with

certain aspects of resistance, while democratic and transformational leadership show positive relationships with others (Inandi et al., 2013).

Another leadership approach relevant to literacy policy implementation is servant leadership, first conceptualized by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977). Unlike traditional models that emphasize authority and control, servant leadership prioritizes the growth, development, and well-being of those being led. Greenleaf posited that effective leaders begin with a natural desire to serve and that this orientation cultivates trust, collaboration, and a shared sense of purpose within organizations. In education, servant leadership has been associated with increased teacher empowerment, morale, and instructional efficacy (Black, 2010). This leadership style is particularly well-suited to times of instructional change, such as the implementation of new literacy policies, as it emphasizes listening, empathy, stewardship, and a commitment to building community. Principals who embody servant leadership may be more likely to foster teacher buy-in by modeling shared responsibility, engaging in professional development alongside staff, and advocating for the needs of their school community. These behaviors not only strengthen school culture but also contribute to more sustainable and collaborative implementation of policy mandates (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006).

### ***Key Strategies for Effective School Leadership***

Ylimaki et al. (2022) synthesized and reviewed two decades of research on successful principalship in the United States. They found that to contribute to the school's success, effective principals enacted several key practices. These principals effectively conveyed clear visions for their schools, created a shared sense of purpose, and developed staff through professional development and support. These principals have worked on reshaping school structures in line

with policy directives, encouraging collaboration and shared leadership in order for teachers and the staff to take up leadership positions.

By utilizing data for reflective decision-making and strategic planning, these principals effectively responded to policy mandates that emphasize evidence-based decision-making and accountability. In addition, they demonstrated active engagement with the parents and the community which was not only best practice, but also met the requirements of policy that were put in place to foster community involvement and partnership in education. It is within these aligned practices that successful principals demonstrated an unwavering commitment to inclusivity, equity, and continuous improvement.

### **The Role of Principals in Literacy Policy Interpretation and Implementation**

Principals play a pivotal role in shaping the uptake and implementation of literacy policies, acting as both mediators of policy messages and instructional leaders who influence how reforms unfold in schools (Matsumura & Wang, 2014; Printy & Williams, 2014; Vaughn et al., 2021). Their interpretations of policy directives, strategic decision-making, and leadership practices directly affect whether literacy reforms are effectively integrated into classroom instruction or result in superficial compliance.

A key factor in successful literacy policy implementation is principals' sensemaking of policy directives. Matsumura and Wang (2014) found that principals' understanding of literacy reforms, particularly in high-stakes accountability environments, shaped their promotion of coaching and instructional strategies. When principals perceived specific instructional approaches as aligned with accountability targets, they were more likely to support literacy coaches and frame them as credible experts for teachers. This shows how principals serve as policy interpreters, filtering and emphasizing certain aspects of literacy policy while de-

emphasizing others, thereby shaping teacher practice and literacy instruction within their schools.

Beyond sensemaking, principals also function as instructional leaders who guide the structures and processes supporting literacy reform. Printy and Williams (2014) demonstrated that principals' leadership decisions regarding Response to Intervention (RTI) policy implementation significantly influenced how literacy interventions were integrated into core instruction. Schools where principals fostered collaborative, data-driven cultures saw greater alignment between RTI and general literacy instruction, whereas principals who viewed policy as a separate entity tended to maintain traditional instructional models. Their study explains the importance of principals actively shaping professional learning, instructional norms, and resource allocation to ensure policy initiatives become embedded in school culture.

Principals' decision-making power in literacy curriculum adoption also determines the extent to which new literacy policies are effectively implemented. Vaughn et al. (2021) examined how principals navigated top-down mandates and district-wide literacy initiatives, finding that their authority and autonomy varied depending on local policy conditions. In some cases, principals played a central role in collaborating with teachers to adapt literacy curricula, while in more rigid policy environments, they acted as enforcers of prescribed curricula with little flexibility for adaptation. This variation in principal influence demonstrates that the degree of autonomy afforded to school leaders affects how literacy policies are enacted in classrooms.

Together, these studies illustrate that principals are not passive recipients of literacy policies but rather active agents in their interpretation and implementation. Whether through their sensemaking of policy messages (Matsumura & Wang, 2014), instructional leadership in reform integration (Printy & Williams, 2014), or decision-making in curriculum adoption

(Vaughn et al., 2021), principals shape the degree to which literacy reforms lead to meaningful instructional change. Their role in policy uptake is contingent on their leadership capacity, instructional expertise, and the policy environment in which they operate, reinforcing the need for professional learning opportunities that empower school leaders to navigate and sustain literacy reforms effectively.

### **Fullan's Change Theory in the Literature**

Fullan's Change Theory (2007) provides a well-established framework for understanding the complexities of educational reform. His model identifies three key stages of change: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization, each of which plays a critical role in determining whether policy changes lead to meaningful and lasting improvements. Within the context of literacy policy reform, Fullan's framework has been applied to examine how leadership influences the success of instructional shifts.

Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) examined how principals mediate literacy mandates, finding that effective leadership in the implementation phase determines whether teachers embrace or resist new instructional approaches. Their study demonstrates the importance of principal-led communication, job-embedded professional development, and collaborative decision-making—factors that directly influence policy enactment in schools.

Lambert and Penney (2023) explored the introduction of structured literacy practices in diverse school settings, revealing that inconsistencies in the initiation phase—such as unclear policy directives, variations in district-level support, and differing levels of principal preparedness—led to uneven adoption across schools. These findings reinforce the idea that leadership is essential in shaping how policies are introduced and interpreted at the school level.

Research also highlights the challenges of sustaining literacy reforms over time. Westall and Cummings (2023) found that while early literacy initiatives often led to initial improvements in student achievement, schools struggled to maintain these gains without continuous leadership support, professional learning, and systemic reinforcement. These findings reflect the institutionalization phase, where long-term sustainability hinges on whether reforms become embedded into school culture and practice.

Fullan's Change Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing the leadership strategies that facilitate or hinder policy-driven instructional change. This study applies Fullan's model to examine how elementary school principals in Virginia navigate the initiation and implementation stages of the VLA, focusing on their interpretation of policy requirements, communication strategies, and efforts to support teachers through the transition.

### **Policy Recommendations for Future Literacy Initiatives**

Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) proposed an integrated approach to policy implementation. They emphasized the need for an interconnected infrastructure in literacy policy change, aligning curriculum, professional development, and leadership. This approach, as also highlighted by Gallo-Fox and Cuccuini-Harmon (2018), bridges the gap between policy formulation and classroom practice, recognizing the importance of leadership and contextually relevant professional development in creating an environment conducive to effective literacy policy implementation. Gallo-Fox and Cuccuini-Harmon (2018) also stressed the need to customize support to meet educators' specific needs. The studies reviewed demonstrate that to overcome the challenges in changing literacy policies, it is essential to develop strategies that are flexible, clear, and tailored to each educational environment.

### ***Recommendations for Leaders***

This literature review uncovers a range of recurring themes which can offer insights for shaping future policy recommendations. As Dehaene (2009) and Seidenberg (2017) asserted, policies must be firmly grounded in the latest findings from educational research and cognitive science. Given the critical role of leadership in driving policy changes, leaders should prioritize staying abreast of current research to effectively support teachers and align instructional strategies with evidence-based practices. Zuckerman et al. (2018) found that leadership actions that prioritize clear communication, provide necessary resources, and establish a culture of continuous learning undoubtedly impact teacher adaptation to policy changes. By integrating these elements into the support framework, it becomes evident that the successful implementation of policy changes relies on understanding and addressing teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and needs (Abernathy-Dyer et al., 2013). The literature suggests that leadership that actively involves teachers in the process, provides adequate support and professional development, and fosters a collaborative and supportive school culture can facilitate smoother transitions (Woodward & Thoma, 2021; Zuckerman et al., 2018).

Acknowledging the pivotal role of teachers in the successful enactment of literacy policies, professional development programs should be meticulously tailored to meet the specific needs of educators (Kraft et al., 2018). By offering ongoing, interactive training that is directly applicable to classroom practice, teachers can more readily adapt to and integrate new literacy policies with their existing instructional approaches. Recognizing the challenges teachers face in adapting to change, leaders should prioritize initiatives that support teacher readiness and acceptance. This includes creating a supportive culture that values teacher feedback (Kraft et al., 2018).

## Summary

The literature reviewed addresses the relations among leadership, policy change, and literacy outcomes within education settings. Key findings underpin an evidence-based policy implementation, stressing leadership as a critical lever guiding effective change and a crucial impact of such policies on teachers' instructional practices and attitudes towards literacy instruction. For educational leaders and policymakers, the review discusses the importance of adopting a collaborative approach that includes teachers, uses contemporary research, and offers tailor-made professional development in support of policy changes. Future research may want to focus on longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of policy changes on literacy outcomes and investigate the impact of leadership styles on the sustainability of policy changes.

Additionally, a critical area for further investigation involves the interpretation and implementation of policy, specifically how policies are translated and operationalized from the state to local level leaders and ultimately to teachers. This encompasses understanding the mechanisms, challenges, and facilitators of policy interpretation at different educational levels. Another area for further research is related to teacher adaptation. Research is needed to explore how teachers specifically adapt to and implement early literacy policies that conflict with the practices they have previously learned and used, especially as policies increasingly emphasize evidence-based approaches. Understanding the factors that support or hinder teachers' ability to effectively incorporate new literacy policies is essential for enhancing literacy outcomes across diverse educational contexts.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This qualitative study aims to explore and understand the dynamics of policy change in early literacy within educational settings, focusing on the roles and strategies of elementary school principals. Through in-depth interviews, the study seeks to uncover principals' perceptions of how leadership influences the processes and outcomes of early literacy policy changes, including the challenges they face during implementation and their views on how these changes impact teaching practices.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how elementary school principals interpret and implement early literacy policy changes, focusing on their leadership strategies in navigating the Virginia Literacy Act. This study contributes meaningfully to various aspects of educational research and practice. The findings are anticipated to have important implications for educational leaders, policymakers, teachers, and ultimately, students. The research contributes to the field of educational leadership by shedding light on the effective practices and approaches leaders can adopt to facilitate and guide policy changes. This study's focus on policy changes in early literacy provides significant implications for enhancing literacy outcomes in education. It provides a basis for developing and implementing policies that are more effective in promoting literacy, thereby benefiting students at a fundamental level. By examining elementary school principals' perceptions of how policy changes impact teachers, this study explores how school leaders understand and respond to teachers' needs as they integrate new literacy requirements into their classrooms. This understanding can lead to more supportive and effective professional development programs, tailored to meet the evolving needs of educators in response to new policies. The findings of this research offer practical guidelines and recommendations for

educational leaders and policymakers in formulating future literacy policies. Additionally, it contributes to the academic literature on policy change and educational leadership, with a specific focus on early literacy.

### **Research Questions**

This research is driven by two fundamental questions, framed through the lens of Fullan's 2007 Change Theory, to explore how principals lead early literacy policy changes under the Virginia Literacy Act. The questions were designed to examine the stages of interpretation and implementation: How do principals interpret the Virginia Literacy Act, and how do they communicate and align state guidelines with school-level practices? What leadership strategies do principals use to implement the Virginia Literacy Act, including supporting teachers and addressing challenges? The findings from these questions are vital in shaping a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship among leadership, policy changes, and teaching practices. This investigation offers actionable recommendations to enhance future literacy initiatives and improve organizational practices and procedures.

### **Research Design and Justification**

This study employs a generic qualitative approach to explore how elementary school principals perceive, interpret, and implement the Virginia Literacy Act in their schools. A generic qualitative design is appropriate for this study because it focuses on gathering and analyzing participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of a given phenomenon within a real-world setting (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014; Percy et al., 2015). Unlike other qualitative methodologies that focus on bounded systems or lived experiences, the generic qualitative approach allows for a flexible, exploratory investigation of principals' perspectives without being confined to a single theoretical framework or methodological tradition (Ellis &

Hart, 2023). This study is guided by Fullan's Change Theory (2007), which frames educational policy change as a process encompassing initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. The research design is structured to explore how principals navigate the first two stages in their leadership roles. By examining principals' perceptions and strategies within this framework, the study provides insights into how leadership decisions facilitate or hinder early literacy policy enactment.

The primary purpose of a generic qualitative study is to examine how individuals make sense of their experiences rather than focusing on the essence of a lived experience, as in phenomenology, or a bounded system, as in case study research (Kahlke, 2014; Percy et al., 2015). This study aligns with that purpose by exploring principals' perceptions of how they navigate policy interpretation and implementation in their leadership roles.

This study relies on semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. A key benefit of a generic qualitative design is that it enables researchers to ask open-ended questions while maintaining focus on key research themes, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Percy et al., 2015). This approach offers the flexibility to explore a range of perspectives while maintaining a structured focus on the research questions.

Additionally, the generic qualitative approach is particularly well-suited for studies that examine policy implementation, leadership strategies, and systemic change because it allows for detailed descriptions of beliefs, attitudes, and professional practices rather than requiring alignment with a singular theoretical framework (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014). Given that research on principals' leadership roles in early literacy policy implementation remains limited, this approach provides an exploratory framework to identify emerging patterns and leadership strategies. By using generic qualitative research, this study contributes to the growing body of

educational leadership research that seeks to understand how principals interpret and implement policy mandates in ways that impact instructional practices and school culture.

### **Participant Selection**

This study focuses on a purposefully selected group of elementary school principals in Virginia who have been directly involved in implementing significant early literacy policy changes under the Virginia Literacy Act. To ensure a diverse and information-rich sample, thirteen elementary school principals were selected from a range of urban, suburban, and rural school districts. This variation allowed for comparative insights into how different school contexts influenced principals' interpretations and implementation of the VLA.

Principals were chosen using a purposive sampling method (Creswell & Poth, 2018), prioritizing individuals with direct experience in policy implementation, instructional leadership, and decision-making regarding early literacy practices. This approach is well-suited for generic qualitative research, as it prioritizes information-rich cases that contribute to a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014). Criteria for participation included:

- currently serving as an elementary school principal in Virginia
- directly involved in implementing the Virginia Literacy Act
- responsible for leading policy-related instructional changes and supporting teachers

Recruitment was conducted through publicly available school directories, professional networks, and referrals from colleagues in educational leadership roles. A snowball sampling approach (Heckathorn, 2011) was also employed to identify additional participants who met the study's criteria, ensuring representation from districts with varied instructional and policy

implementation models. This approach ensures a well-balanced participant pool, enhancing the credibility and depth of the study's findings (Ellis & Hart, 2023).

To enhance transferability, the study sought representation across key demographic variables, including:

- **School size:** The participating schools ranged from small (250 students) to large (950 students) in student enrollment, reflecting differences in administrative capacity, staffing structures, and resource allocation.
- **District type:** Principals represented rural, urban, and suburban school districts, ensuring that findings accounted for geographic differences in funding, community engagement, and instructional priorities.
- **Title I status:** Several schools were designated Title I, highlighting the challenges of implementing literacy reforms in high-poverty communities. The inclusion of non-Title I schools provided a basis for comparing policy uptake in schools with differing socioeconomic contexts.
- **Principal experience:** Participants had a range of 1.5 to 10 years in their current role, with overall education experience varying from 15 to 30 years. This breadth of experience allowed for perspectives from both newer principals navigating early literacy policy for the first time and veteran leaders with extensive experience in educational change.

Table 5 in Chapter 4 provides a detailed overview of these demographic variables. By incorporating a diverse set of participants, this study accounts for the ways in which school size, district type, principal experience, and socioeconomic factors influence how elementary school leaders interpret, adapt, and implement the Virginia Literacy Act.

### ***Identification and Contact Process***

To recruit participants, this study used a purposive sampling strategy to identify elementary school principals with direct experience implementing the Virginia Literacy Act. A list of eligible participants was compiled using publicly available district and school directories from the Virginia Department of Education as well as professional networks.

Initial contact was made with potential participants through email (see Appendix D), explaining the study's purpose. The contact included a brief overview of the study, its significance, and what participation entails. Participants were asked to recommend other potential participants within their professional networks who meet the study criteria. This snowball sampling approach helped in identifying additional participants beyond the initial scope.

### **Instrument Design and Validation**

The initial phase of developing a data collection tool involved creating an instrument that was sufficient, valid, comprehensive, and efficient. The method for structuring and carrying out interviews in this research conformed to the guidelines for interview procedures recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), as outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2***Interview Protocol Aligned to Creswell and Poth (2018)*

Creswell & Poth (2018)	Interview Protocol Procedure
Determine the research questions that will be answered.	The research questions were formulated based on the insights gained from the scholarly articles reviewed in the literature.
Identify interviewees through purposeful sampling.	Interviewees include 13 elementary principals.
Determine the interview logistics.	30-60 minute, one-on-one interviews were scheduled to allow for a thorough discussion of the interview questions.
Collect data using adequate recording procedures.	The interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed through the online platform, Zoom. Handwritten notes were taken in addition to recordings and transcriptions.
Design and use an interview protocol.	The interview questions were reviewed, with Dr. Lowery, committee chair. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.
Refine the interview questions.	The protocol was refined through a practice run with an individual who was a former teacher and current district leader.
Select a distraction-free location for conducting the interviews.	The researcher used the online Zoom platform from an office with no distractions. The interviewee selected a location that was also distraction-free.
Obtain consent from the interviewees to participate using a form approved by the IRB.	The consent form for the interview (Appendix C) was used upon approval by the HRPP through the IRB.
Pre-determine transcription logistics.	Interviews were recorded and transcribed through Zoom. A Google Spreadsheet was stored on a Google Drive with each interviewee's name and numerical code. The recordings and transcripts were verified by interview participants prior to data analysis.

The primary instrument for this study was a researcher-developed interview protocol which includes a mix of demographic questions, questions directly tied to the research questions, and those crafted from the literature (see Table 3). This protocol was designed to facilitate a semi-structured interview format, allowing for flexibility to probe deeper into participant responses while ensuring that all relevant topics are covered. The protocol includes questions related to principals' roles in policy implementation, the leadership strategies they employed, the

challenges they faced, and the impact of these changes on school-level practices and instructional leadership. The interview questions were crafted to ensure a logical flow and are designed to be engaging while still aligning with the study’s research questions. The protocol also includes prompts and follow-up questions to encourage detailed and reflective responses from participants. This approach aims to create a comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences and insights freely (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kahlke, 2014).

**Table 3**

*Interview Questions and Sources Aligned to the Research Questions*

Interview Question	Sources	Research Question	Theoretical Alignment (Fullan’s Change Theory)
How did you first learn about the Virginia Literacy Act? What were your initial impressions of it?	Neuman et al. (2023), Westall & Cummings (2023), Folsom et al. (2017), Burk (2023)	1	Initiation Stage – Understanding the driving forces behind policy change
How did you interpret the VLA’s expectations for your school?	Lambert & Penney (2023), Vaughn et al. (2019), Woulfin & Gabriel (2020)	1	Initiation Stage – Building awareness and policy interpretation
How did you communicate the VLA’s requirements and expectations to your staff?	Lambert & Penney (2023), Crafton & Kaiser (2011), Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013)	1	Initiation Stage – Policy dissemination and stakeholder buy-in
What steps did you take to implement the VLA at your school?	Woulfin & Gabriel (2020), Adarkwah & Zeyuan (2020), Erani & Ozbilen (2017)	2	Implementation Stage – Translating policy into practice
What strategies did you use to support teachers during this transition? What challenges did you encounter during the implementation of the VLA, and how did you address them?	Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth (2021), Vandeyar (2017), Sigmon & Fogelson (2021), Kraft et al. (2018)	2	Implementation Stage – Capacity building and teacher support
What professional development opportunities were provided for teachers regarding the VLA?	Crafton & Kaiser (2011), Woodward & Thoma (2021), Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth (2021)	2	Implementation Stage – Training and skill development
What steps have you taken to make these literacy reforms part of your school’s long-term culture and instructional practices?	Neuman et al. (2023), Westall & Cummings (2023), Lambert & Penney (2023)	2	Implementation Stage – Systemic impact on literacy instruction

**Table 3 Continued**

Interview Question	Sources	Research Question	Theoretical Alignment (Fullan's Change Theory)
What strategies do you use to ensure that new teachers and staff are aligned with the VLA's expectations? How has the VLA influenced broader school-wide literacy goals and practices?	Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013), Zuckerman et al. (2018), Woulfin & Gabriel (2020)	2	Implementation Stage – Embedding practices into school culture
Reflecting on your experience, what leadership styles or approaches have been most effective in interpreting and implementing the VLA?	Adarkwah & Zeyuan (2020), Eranil & Ozbilen (2017), Ylimaki et al. (2022), Inandi et al. (2013)	1, 2	Implementation Stage– Leadership strategies for policy adoption
Based on your experience, what recommendations would you make to other school leaders or policymakers for improving the implementation of the VLA?	Woulfin & Gabriel (2020), Seidenberg (2017), ExcellInEd (2021)	2	Implementation Stage – Lessons learned and policy refinement

### Interview Protocol

All participants in the study participated in a consistent interview protocol, adhering to the approach recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018) (see Appendix B).

### Data Collection Procedures

This study collected data exclusively through semi-structured interviews with elementary school principals to examine how they interpret and implement the VLA within their schools. Interviews served as the primary method to capture their experiences, leadership strategies, and challenges. The semi-structured interview format provided flexibility to explore participants' insights while maintaining alignment with the study's research questions. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to explore principals' perspectives on the stages of policy implementation.

Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes, depending on participant responses and follow-up discussions. All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, ensuring accessibility and participant convenience. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants'

consent and transcribed verbatim via Zoom to ensure accuracy in data analysis. Transcriptions were reviewed and checked for errors before coding.

To ensure credibility and confirmability, multiple strategies were employed throughout the research process. Member checking allowed participants to review their interview transcripts to confirm accuracy and clarify any misinterpretations, ensuring that their perspectives were authentically represented. Additionally, analytical memoing was used during data analysis to document researcher reflections, coding decisions, and emerging themes. These memos served as an additional layer of data, enhancing transparency and supporting the triangulation of findings with interview responses. To further ensure trustworthiness, a comprehensive audit trail was maintained, recording decisions made throughout the research process, including data collection, coding, and analysis steps. This documentation strengthened the study's dependability and ensured that findings could be traced back to the original data, reinforcing the rigor and reliability of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

In the exploration of policy change within early literacy and the roles of elementary principals, a detailed and comprehensive qualitative analysis is essential. The complexity of human experiences and the dynamics of leadership and policy implementation calls for an approach that goes beyond mere description to unearth the underlying themes and patterns. Among the myriad qualitative analysis methods—ranging from content and narrative analysis to discourse analysis—the thematic analysis stands out for its adaptability and depth (Saldaña, 2013). This decision is supported by the characteristics of the data and the precise inquiries directing the study.

### *First Cycle Coding*

The first cycle of coding commenced with a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts. This initial coding phase utilized open coding, along with descriptive, in vivo, and process codes, aiming to stay close to the participants' language and experiences (Saldaña, 2013). Open coding laid the foundational groundwork by breaking down the data into discrete components, enabling the initial identification of key concepts and categories without preconceived notions (Saldaña, 2013). Each transcription document was pasted into a table within a digital document. The left-hand column of the table was dedicated to the raw data from the transcripts, while the right-hand columns was used for open, descriptive, in vivo, and process coding.

This method allowed the researcher to catalog the emerging open codes, ensuring a clear and methodical approach to identifying preliminary patterns (Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive codes helped to keep the data segments organized for further analysis in second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2013). The goal was to categorize data based on preliminary themes and observable patterns directly from the participants' narratives (Patton & Schwandt, 2015). For example, codes like "teacher frustration" or "lack of resources" were assigned directly from interview transcripts. In vivo codes were then used in order to capture and preserve the interpretations of the participants by using their own voice (Saldaña, 2013).

Direct quotes were analyzed and recorded in the In Vivo Coding column. Finally, process codes were used to code data that describe processes or actions which is crucial for a study concerning policy change (Patton & Schwandt, 2015). Table 4 provides a sample of this tabular approach which facilitated an organized and efficient coding process. The digital document served as a live coding matrix that evolves iteratively, allowing for an orderly review and

refinement of codes. This method not only aided in the visualization of data patterns but also ensured that all coding types are systematically addressed and aligned with the progression of the data analysis (Saldaña, 2013).

### ***Second Cycle Coding***

Subsequently, the second cycle of coding refined these initial categories into broader themes using pattern, axial, and theoretical coding. This structured approach deepened the analysis by examining relationships among categories identified during the open coding phase. Pattern coding played an important role during this phase by aggregating similar codes into cohesive themes that reflected the data as a whole (Saldaña, 2013). For example, grouping codes such as “teacher frustration” and “lack of resources” under a broader theme like “challenges in policy implementation.” This iterative process ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data, while also aligning with the study’s conceptual framework and research questions.

Next, the study continued to draw inspiration from grounded theory to incorporate axial coding techniques (Saldaña, 2013). Axial coding was used to reassemble the data and provide a means to explore how these initial categories interconnect and influence each other within the broader context of the study as seen in Table 4 (Chenail, 2012).

**Table 4**

#### *Sample First and Second Cycle Coding*

Interview Transcription	Open Coding	Descriptive Coding	In Vivo Coding	Process Coding	Pattern Coding	Axial Coding
I felt like I was walking on eggshells around my boss, never knowing what would upset him.	Tension, Uncertainty	Workplace Tension	“Walking on eggshells”	Navigating unpredictability	Communication Breakdown	Workplace Dynamics: Communication and its impact on employee well-being

**Table 4 Continued**

Interview Transcription	Open Coding	Descriptive Coding	In Vivo Coding	Process Coding	Pattern Coding	Axial Coding
We were all in the same boat, struggling to stay afloat during the implementation.	Teamwork, Struggle	Team Challenges	“In the same boat”	Collaborating under pressure	Group Struggle; Solidarity	Interrelationship: Team dynamics & implementation challenges

### ***Inductive and Deductive Codes***

This study employs both inductive and deductive coding throughout the analytical process. Inductive codes emerged directly from the data and ensured that the analysis was rooted in the participants’ experiences. Deductive codes, derived from the conceptual framework and existing literature, guided the analysis towards the study’s theoretical underpinnings (Kalpokas & Radivojevic, 2022). Emergent codes, particularly relevant in a constructivist paradigm, were pivotal for adapting the coding framework to the characteristics of the data.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

This study adopts thematic analysis as its core methodological framework for analyzing data. Thematic analysis is particularly suited to addressing the research aims, as it allows for a flexible, yet rigorous examination of the data (Patton & Schwandt, 2015; Chenail, 2012). This method facilitates the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within data, enabling an insightful account of the data set (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the study’s emphasis on exploring the varied impact of elementary principals on policy change, thematic analysis offers the necessary tools to thoroughly investigate these social interactions (Saldaña, 2013).

### *From Codes to Themes*

The transition from codes to themes involves a careful synthesis of the coded data, looking for overarching patterns that can answer the research questions. This reflective process involved moving back and forth between the dataset and the developing themes, a reflective activity supported by analytical memoing (Saldaña, 2013). The memoing process provided a detailed account of the analysis and help create an audit trail (Saldaña, 2013). It is through this engagement with the data that themes emerged to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study.

The analysis culminated with theoretical coding, which served as the integrative step that synthesized the themes and categories around a central or core category that represented the essence of the phenomenon under study (Saldaña, 2013). This was done by adding a final column, Theoretical Coding, to the table in order to note the relationships between central/core categories identified in previous coding phases. Connections, conditions, interactions, and consequences were highlighted to define the relationships. Additionally, insights, hypotheses, or questions that arose during this process were documented in the column.

The precision of the thematic analysis and the detailed coding process ensured a thorough exploration of the roles and strategies of elementary principals in the context of early literacy policy change. By meticulously applying both inductive and deductive coding, and by transitioning thoughtfully from codes to themes, this study contributes to the understanding of educational policy implementation.

### **Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

Ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research is essential for maintaining the integrity and reliability of the study. Strategies were employed to enhance credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as well as address ethical considerations related to the study.

### ***Credibility***

Credibility refers to the believability and accuracy of the study findings. To enhance credibility, several strategies were implemented. Prolonged engagement with the data, through thorough and persistent analysis, allowed for a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. Additionally, alternative perspectives were considered to ensure diverse viewpoints are reflected in the findings. To ensure the accuracy of the study, member checking was used by sharing the preliminary findings with participants. This process allowed them to confirm that their viewpoints have been accurately represented in the research. Referential adequacy was achieved by employing a combination of comprehensive data collection methods and rigorous analysis techniques to ensure accuracy and authenticity in representing participants' experiences.

### ***Transferability***

While qualitative research does not aim for broad generalizability, it strives for transferability so that findings can be applied to various educational leadership contexts. Thick, rich descriptions of the research setting, participants, methods, and procedures are provided here and elaborated on in Chapter 4 to allow readers to assess the applicability of the findings to their own contexts. Detailed accounts of the research process were documented to enhance transparency and facilitate the replication of the study in similar settings.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability, like qualitative reliability, ensures the consistency and thoroughness of the study findings. For strengthening dependability in the study, peer debriefing and member

checking were used to ensure the interpretations are consistent and grounded in the data. Detailed descriptions of research methods and procedures have been provided to facilitate replication and ensure transparency. Rigorous analysis included clear documentation of analytical decisions made and relevant systematic notes.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability addresses the neutrality and objectivity of the study findings and makes sure they are not influenced by the researcher's biases or assumptions. To enhance confirmability, an audit trail was maintained, documenting all research decisions, analytical processes, and interpretations. Analytical memoing was used to reflect on the researcher's attitudes and biases during analysis, encouraging self-awareness and minimizing the potential for bias.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The study followed ethical guidelines set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to protect participants' rights and well-being. This study obtained approval from the IRB before making any participant contact. Informed consent (see Appendix C) was obtained from all participants which outlined the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits, and participants' rights to confidentiality and voluntary participation. All participant data was kept confidential using pseudonyms and secure data storage. Participants were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequence. Additionally, ethical considerations guided every step of the research process in order to uphold the principles of integrity, respect, and justice.

## **Delimitations**

This study was intentionally delimited to focus on the experiences and perceptions of principals within elementary schools experiencing high-level changes due to early literacy policy changes. The choice to limit participants to this group is based on the objective to understand leadership and teaching strategies surrounding literacy policy and change. This choice was made to focus on the leadership strategies and decision-making processes of elementary principals within the framework of early literacy policy implementation. The research was conducted within a select number of schools in Virginia. This geographical and contextual boundary was set to manage the study's scope and ensure a detailed examination of the subject matter.

A primary delimitation of this study is the potential for selection bias in the participant sample, as volunteers may have unique perspectives or motivations that do not represent the broader population. Another delimitation is the exclusion of teacher, student, parent, and broader community perspectives which restricts the scope of the study but allows for a concentrated focus on the professional insights and experiences of elementary school principals.

## **Role of Researcher**

As the primary instrument in this qualitative study, my role as a researcher necessitated an awareness of my own positionality, including the assumptions, experiences, and potential biases I brought to the study. I am an educational leader with expertise in literacy instruction, policy implementation, and school leadership, as well as a researcher examining how elementary school principals interpret and implement the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). Given my professional background, I recognize that my familiarity with literacy policy and school leadership could shape how I interpret participant responses and construct meaning from the data.

My leadership role within a school division presents both advantages and challenges in conducting this research. My insider perspective offers a nuanced understanding of the complexities principals navigate in policy implementation, particularly regarding early literacy reform. However, this familiarity also necessitates careful reflexivity to mitigate potential biases in data collection and analysis. To maintain objectivity, I employed strategies such as analytical memoing, in which I documented reflections on my assumptions, emergent interpretations, and any shifts in my thinking throughout the research process.

Another key consideration in my role as a researcher was the potential for power dynamics in interactions with participants. As a literacy leader, some participants may have viewed me as an expert in early literacy policy, which could have influenced their responses. To minimize this, I maintained a neutral and open-ended questioning approach, emphasizing that the study sought to understand their lived experiences rather than assess their implementation of the VLA. Additionally, member checking provided participants the opportunity to review transcripts and confirm that their perspectives were accurately captured, further ensuring authenticity and reducing potential researcher influence.

Finally, I acknowledge that the Virginia Literacy Act is a politically charged policy, with debates surrounding its emphasis on structured literacy, funding allocations, and professional learning requirements. To avoid imposing any personal stance, I approached the study through an exploratory lens, allowing principals' narratives to shape the findings rather than fitting them into predetermined policy debates. By incorporating reflexivity, transparency, and triangulation, I aimed to uphold the integrity of the research process while contributing meaningful insights into leadership and literacy policy implementation.

## Summary

Chapter 3 presented a detailed overview of the methodology used to examine how elementary school principals interpret and implement early literacy policy changes under the Virginia Literacy Act. This study adopts a generic qualitative research design, providing flexibility to explore the unique leadership strategies and challenges principals face in implementing policy mandates. The chapter justified the selection of this methodology as particularly well-suited for capturing the richness of participants' experiences and the practical realities of leadership in policy implementation.

The participant selection process, informed by purposive sampling, ensures a diverse and information-rich sample of thirteen elementary school principals with direct involvement in implementing the VLA. Recruitment strategies included the use of publicly available directories and professional networks, with snowball sampling serving as a supplementary method to identify additional participants who meet the study's criteria. This approach maximized the relevance and depth of insights gathered from participants.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, designed to facilitate detailed, reflective responses while maintaining alignment with the research questions. The interview protocol, informed by existing literature and reviewed by expert researchers, includes demographic questions, open-ended questions related to the research focus, and prompts for further exploration of key topics. Interviews were conducted via Zoom to ensure convenience and accessibility while maintaining a professional and distraction-free environment. Data analysis followed a rigorous multi-step process, beginning with first-cycle coding to identify initial categories and concepts using open, descriptive, in vivo, and process coding. This was followed by second-cycle coding, employing pattern, axial, and theoretical coding to refine and

connect categories into overarching themes. Thematic analysis served as the core analytical framework, enabling the identification of patterns and themes that address the research questions. This iterative, reflective approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives while contributing to the broader theoretical understanding of leadership and policy change.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed strategies for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, including member checking, peer debriefing, and the maintenance of an audit trail. Ethical considerations were central to the research process, with strict adherence to Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, including informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' rights to withdraw at any time.

This comprehensive methodological framework establishes a strong foundation for exploring the complexities of early literacy policy implementation from the perspective of school leaders. By integrating a flexible research design with robust data collection and analysis methods, this study provides actionable insights that inform future literacy policies, leadership practices, and educational outcomes.

## Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how elementary school principals interpret and implement early literacy policy changes, focusing on their leadership strategies in navigating the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). The research questions used to guide this study were as follows. How do principals interpret the Virginia Literacy Act, and how do they communicate and align state guidelines with school-level practices? What leadership strategies do principals use to implement the Virginia Literacy Act, including supporting teachers and addressing challenges?

The principals who participated in this study brought a range of experience levels and worked in diverse school contexts, including urban, suburban, and rural districts across central and northern Virginia. Their schools varied in size, grade configurations, and Title I status, providing a broad perspective on how different settings influenced VLA implementation. Table 5 presents an overview of the principal participants, including their years of experience, school district type, and approximate student enrollment. This demographic diversity allowed for a comparative analysis of how contextual factors—such as school size, student demographics, and geographic location—could shape principals' interpretations and implementation strategies for the VLA. The interview protocol consisted of thirteen questions designed to elicit principals' experiences, challenges, strategies, and insights related to the VLA.

**Table 5***Demographic Results of Principal Participants*

Principal	Years in Current Role	Years in Education	District	Approximate School Enrollment
Adams	3	15	Rural	650 Pre-K-5 students; Title 1
Brown	1.5	15	Urban	450 K-5 students
Clark	2	25	Rural	450 Pre-K-7 students; Title 1
Davis	5	15	Suburban	800 Pre-K-6 students
Eve	7	15	Urban	300 Pre-K-4 students; Title 1
Finn	3	25	Suburban	850 Pre-K-6 students
Geller	4	19	Urban	250 K-5 students; Title 1
Howell	2	21	Suburban	400 Pre-K-5 students; Title 1
Illig	3	16	Rural	650 Pre-K-5 students; Title 1
Jackson	10	30	Urban	600 Pre-K-5 students
Knight	3	21	Rural	650 Pre-K-5 students
Lee	3	25	Suburban	950 Pre-K-5 students
Moore	3	24	Urban	300 Pre-K-4 students; Title 1

Following data collection, each interview was transcribed, coded, and analyzed using a multi-cycle coding process. First-cycle coding involved open, in vivo, descriptive, and process coding to identify emerging themes. Second-cycle coding involved pattern coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding to further refine the findings and develop broader themes related to policy interpretation, implementation, and leadership approaches.

In this chapter, the findings are presented through a thematic analysis of the data collected from principal interviews. While the term ‘findings’ is used throughout, it is important to note that these insights emerge from an interpretive analysis rather than an assertion of objective truths. These themes provide a foundation for further discussion and synthesis in Chapter 5, where their implications for leadership and policy implementation are explored in greater depth.

Eight key findings emerged from the data, each of which is directly tied to the research questions. Findings are presented in a structured format, including a statement of the finding, a detailed analysis with supporting data from interviews, and visual representations such as tables or figures to illustrate patterns and trends. Each finding is grounded in principals' experiences and perspectives, with direct quotes used to highlight key insights. The data in this chapter serve as the foundation for the discussion and implications in Chapter 5, which connects these findings to the theoretical framework, existing literature, and policy considerations.

### **Finding 1**

Principals were aware of the VLA early in its development, but their initial understanding of its requirements and implications varied, leading to inconsistencies in preparation and implementation strategies.

**Analysis to Support Finding 1.** Principals first learned about the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) through various channels, including district leaders, literacy coordinators, and state communications. However, their initial understanding of the law was inconsistent, with some principals feeling well-prepared due to prior engagement with structured literacy approaches, while others found the policy's details unclear or overwhelming. Several principals noted that their school divisions had already begun transitioning to Science of Reading (SOR)-aligned practices before the law was enacted, which made the VLA feel like a natural continuation rather than a disruptive shift. For example, Principal Moore stated, "Our school division was already ahead of the game with the Science of Reading, so the VLA didn't feel like a major shift for our K-2 teachers." Principal Jackson was initially invited to participate in the VLA Advisory Group, which gave her an early look at the policy's development. She explained:

To be honest, I received an email at that time to participate in the Advisory Group. I used to be part of the Advisory Group for the education of the gifted... and the conversation began around literacy and the efforts the Commonwealth was putting into improving literacy across the state right after COVID. I just got so interested because of my background as a former EL teacher and having been a student of color. I was like, these are the populations that have been the most impacted by what happened during COVID. She emphasized that her background working with culturally and linguistically diverse students made the policy especially relevant to her. This early exposure allowed her to take a proactive stance in interpreting and preparing for the policy's rollout.

Conversely, principals in districts still rooted in balanced literacy models experienced more uncertainty about what the law required. These principals expressed concerns about the lack of clear guidance in the early stages of the VLA rollout. Principal Davis recalled:

It wasn't totally clear at first what was expected. We heard 'structured literacy,' but what did that actually mean for our classrooms? There was a lot of discussion happening at the state level, but very little trickled down to us at first. Within my district, there was confusion—principals weren't getting updates in a timely manner, and by the time we received guidance, it felt like we were already behind. Even something as simple as signing up for training was a challenge because the information arrived too late for our principals to register. When we finally started learning about the expectations, we realized how much work would be involved in making this transition.

Principal Finn recalled, "It felt like we were suddenly expected to abandon everything we had done for years, but without a clear roadmap for what came next." Another common theme was that districts provided information at different rates, leading to some principals feeling well-

informed early on, while others felt behind. “We didn’t get clear guidance right away,” one participant noted. “Some districts had all these meetings and rollout plans. We were waiting to hear specifics for months.” Table 6 summarizes how principals initially learned about the VLA and whether they felt prepared to implement its requirements. As shown, there was a wide range of initial understanding, with some principals feeling confident due to prior exposure to structured literacy through professional development (PD), while others experienced uncertainty and confusion.

**Table 6**

*How Principals First Learned About the VLA and Their Initial Understanding*

Principal	Initial Source of Information	Early Understanding	Level of Clarity
Adams	District Literacy Coordinator	Positive, aligned with existing practices	High
Brown	Virginia Department of Education Communication	Unclear at first, but improved with training	Moderate
Clark	Division PD	Concerned about major instructional shifts	Low
Davis	State Presentation	Understood broad expectations but lacked details	Moderate
Eve	Literacy Specialist Meetings	Felt well-prepared due to prior SoR work	High
Finn	District Emails	Limited clarity, required further explanation	Low
Geller	Principal Professional Learning Community	Strong understanding from collaboration	High
Howell	State Conference	General knowledge but limited specifics	Moderate
Illig	Informal District Discussions	Initially unclear, but gained clarity over time	Moderate
Jackson	Virginia Department of Education Webinar	Confusing at first, needed more context	Low
Knight	District-led PD	Well-prepared due to early division focus on SoR	High
Lee	Literacy Coordinator & Workshops	Initially overwhelmed but gained clarity	Moderate
Moore	In-House Team Discussions	K-2 expectations clear, upper grades less so	Moderate

The data suggest that early clarity on the VLA depended largely on the strength of district communication and prior structured literacy initiatives. This variation in initial understanding

had direct implications for how smoothly principals were able to begin implementing the VLA in their schools. Those who had prior exposure to structured literacy concepts or were provided with detailed district guidance found it easier to interpret the policy and communicate expectations to staff. On the other hand, principals who felt unprepared reported greater frustration, uncertainty, and reliance on trial-and-error approaches.

The discrepancies in initial understanding also affected how principals framed the VLA to their staff. Some were able to present it as a logical next step in their literacy improvement efforts, while others struggled to explain the policy in a way that felt cohesive and manageable. This inconsistency in initial awareness and preparedness laid the groundwork for the challenges and successes principals experienced in subsequent stages of VLA implementation. The next finding examines how principals communicated the policy's requirements to their staff and the degree to which their messaging impacted school-wide adoption of structured literacy practices.

## **Finding 2**

Principals recognized that effectively communicating the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) to staff was critical for successful implementation, yet their communication strategies and the level of clarity provided to teachers varied depending on district support, school culture, and staff readiness for change.

**Analysis to support Finding 2.** Once principals developed an initial understanding of the VLA, they faced the challenge of translating state policy into actionable steps for their teachers and staff. The way in which principals communicated the VLA's expectations played a crucial role in determining teacher buy-in and the overall effectiveness of implementation. Some principals took a gradual, scaffolded approach, while others had to address confusion and resistance stemming from abrupt shifts in literacy instruction expectations.

Many principals emphasized the importance of framing the VLA as an enhancement of existing best practices rather than a total overhaul of instruction. For example, Principal Moore noted, “We framed the VLA as a continuation of what we were already doing well, especially in K-2, while also supporting teachers beyond second grade in expanding their literacy instruction.” Similarly, Principal Eve explained, “We reassured teachers that this wasn’t about throwing everything out, but about refining and strengthening our approach to literacy.”

Others, however, encountered challenges in balancing transparency with managing teacher concerns about change. Principals in schools where balanced literacy had been deeply embedded in instructional practices found that teachers struggled to let go of long-standing routines, such as using leveled readers at guided reading tables or relying on three-cueing strategies. Principal Lee stated, “We had teachers who had been doing balanced literacy for twenty years, and they were going to have a really hard time just dropping this and picking up something new. We had to be really intentional about messaging.”

The communication strategies used by principals varied widely across schools, with some divisions providing structured communication plans, while others left it largely up to individual school leaders to determine how to introduce the policy to their staff. The most commonly used strategies included:

- Staff Meetings: Principals introduced the VLA and reviewed key components in large-group settings to ensure all teachers had a baseline understanding of the policy.
- Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): Literacy expectations were broken down into smaller, grade-level discussions where teachers could ask questions and engage in deeper learning.

- Collaborative Coaching Models: Principals worked alongside reading specialists to provide ongoing support, modeling, and individual coaching for teachers adapting to new practices.
- Gradual Rollout Approach: Some principals deliberately phased in changes rather than implementing everything at once to reduce staff overwhelm. Principal Howell shared, “We focused on small, manageable shifts over time instead of expecting teachers to master everything immediately.”
- Use of Division-Level Literacy Leaders: Principals with strong district literacy leadership support found it easier to communicate the VLA effectively. Principal Adams emphasized, “Our literacy coordinator played a huge role in making sure everyone had a clear understanding of what was expected and how it aligned with what we were already doing.”

Table 7 provides an overview of how principals communicated the VLA to staff, portraying the different strategies used and their perceived effectiveness in achieving teacher buy-in.

**Table 7**

*Communication Strategies Used by Principals to Introduce the VLA*

Principal	Primary Communication Strategy	Additional Supports Provided	Perceived Effectiveness of Strategy
Adams	Division-led Meetings	Literacy Coordinator, PLCs	Highly Effective
Brown	School-based Meetings	Follow-up Q&A Sessions	Somewhat Effective
Clark	Gradual Rollout in PLC	Literacy Coach Support	Highly Effective
Davis	Email Communication	Minimal Additional Supports	Ineffective
Eve	Direct Coaching & PLC	Modeled Instruction	Highly Effective
Finn	Leadership Meetings & Teacher Input	Collaborative Approach	Highly Effective
Geller	School-based Meetings and Workshops	PD on Structured Literacy	Effective
Howell	Gradual Rollout	Literacy Specialist Support	Effective

**Table 7 Continued**

Principal	Primary Communication Strategy	Additional Supports Provided	Perceived Effectiveness of Strategy
Illig	Clear Division Messaging	State-provided PD	Highly Effective
Jackson	PLC-Based Discussions	Peer Mentorship	Somewhat Effective
Knight	One-Time Staff Meeting	No Follow-Up Training	Ineffective
Lee	PLCs	Individualized Coaching	Somewhat Effective
Moore	Division-Led Communication and PD	Reading Specialist Modeling	Highly Effective

This data in Table 7 shows that principals who combined multiple communication strategies—such as structured PD, ongoing PLC discussions, and literacy coaching—reported higher levels of staff understanding and buy-in. In contrast, those who relied primarily on one-time meetings or email communication without follow-up experienced lower effectiveness and more confusion among teachers.

### **Finding 3**

The shift from balanced literacy to structured literacy posed a significant challenge for many schools, as teachers accustomed to long-standing instructional practices struggled with unlearning familiar strategies and adopting new, evidence-based approaches mandated by the VLA.

**Analysis to support Finding 3.** One of the most frequently cited challenges in implementing the VLA was the fundamental shift in literacy instruction philosophy from balanced literacy to structured literacy. This transition was especially difficult for teachers who had been trained in and had practiced balanced literacy for years and now had to abandon familiar strategies, such as three-cueing, leveled readers, and implicit phonics instruction, in favor of explicit, systematic, and code-based literacy practices.

Principals reported that while some teachers embraced the change, many experienced frustration, skepticism, or resistance. Principal Lee described the shift as “undoing decades of what teachers had been told was best practice.” Similarly, Principal I shared, “There was a lot of pushback. Some of our veteran teachers felt like they were being told everything they had done before was wrong, and that was hard for them to accept.”

Resistance to structured literacy was especially pronounced in schools where balanced literacy had been deeply embedded in the school’s culture. Principal Brown explained,

We had a whole generation of teachers who had built their instruction around leveled readers and guided reading groups. Telling them that those strategies were no longer aligned with the research wasn’t just a small tweak—it was a complete identity shift.

Even principals who supported structured literacy faced challenges in getting all teachers on board with the change. Some noted that the biggest hurdle was convincing teachers that structured literacy was not just another educational trend, but a research-backed shift based on the Science of Reading. Principal Howell noted, “We had to keep coming back to the research. Otherwise, teachers just saw it as another top-down mandate.”

Teachers encountered a variety of challenges as they transitioned to structured literacy, including:

- **Unlearning old habits:** Teachers had to abandon strategies they had used for years, such as prompting students to guess words based on pictures or context clues and instead they had to follow their new curriculum’s sequence and methods for teaching phonics.
- **Lack of confidence in teaching phonics explicitly:** Many upper-grade teachers, who had not previously taught foundational reading skills, struggled with phonemic awareness and

phonics instruction. Principal Geller admitted, “Some of my third- and fourth-grade teachers felt lost because they had never been trained to teach decoding skills.”

- Concerns about student engagement: Some teachers worried that structured literacy would be too rigid and dry for young learners. Principal Knight stated, “Teachers were used to a more flexible approach, and they were afraid that their new curriculum and structure would take the joy out of reading.”

The level of teacher resistance versus acceptance varied across schools, with some divisions providing more structured support for the transition than others. Table 8 outlines the degree of teacher buy-in at each school based on principal observations.

**Table 8**

*Teacher Buy-In, Concerns, and Strategies*

Principal	Teacher Buy-In Level	Primary Concerns Expressed by Teachers	Strategies Used to Address Resistance
Adams	High	Initial discomfort with phonics focus	Modeled instruction, ongoing coaching
Brown	Low	Loss of familiar strategies (three-cueing)	Literacy specialist-led PD sessions
Clark	Moderate	Concerns about engagement in scripted programs	Peer collaboration & PLC discussions
Davis	Low	Resistance from veteran teachers	Phased implementation approach
Eve	High	Need for more phonics instruction training	LETRS training, structured modeling
Finn	Moderate	Confusion about integrating structured literacy into upper grades	PLC discussions, admin support
Geller	Moderate	Uncertainty about phonemic awareness instruction	Reading specialist support, modeling
Howell	Hugh	Overwhelmed by new materials and strategies	Job-embedded coaching, gradual rollout
Illig	Low	Veteran teacher resistance	Used early adopters as mentors
Jackson	Moderate	Frustration with changing expectations	Data-driven discussions to show impact
Knight	Low	Concerns about rigid lesson structures	PD focused on instructional flexibility

**Table 8 Continued**

Principal	Teacher Buy-In Level	Primary Concerns Expressed by Teachers	Strategies Used to Address Resistance
Lee	Moderate	Fear of failing at something new	Reassured teachers, highlighted small wins
Moore	High	Some initial skepticism	Division-wide training & clear messaging

As the table illustrates, schools that proactively supported teachers with ongoing training, modeling, and coaching reported higher teacher buy-in, while those that did not provide sufficient professional development or framed the transition as a top-down mandate saw more resistance.

#### **Finding 4**

Professional development was widely recognized as essential for successful VLA implementation; however, while some districts provided comprehensive, job-embedded training and instructional coaching, others lacked sufficient ongoing support, leaving principals and teachers to navigate significant changes with minimal guidance.

**Analysis to support Finding 4.** A critical component of VLA implementation was professional development (PD) to support teachers in shifting to structured literacy practices. However, principals reported significant variation in how training was delivered and the extent to which it met their schools' needs. Some relied heavily on state-provided training, such as the Virginia Literacy Partnership (VLP) modules, while others supplemented or replaced these with in-house training, including LETRS, Orton-Gillingham, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and reading specialist coaching. Several principals also leveraged outside sources, such as external consultants or VLP regional coaches.

Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of principals who utilized each type of professional development to implement the VLA. Many principals also reported utilizing multiple sources of

training to ensure comprehensive support for their teachers. The data show the diversity of training approaches taken across schools, revealing a reliance on multiple sources of professional learning rather than a singular, uniform model. Several principals praised the state and division-led professional development opportunities, particularly those that provided hands-on training and embedded coaching. Principal Finn described, “The LETRS training was a game-changer for my early elementary teachers because it gave them the why behind structured literacy, but it also took a lot of time to complete.” Similarly, Principal Davis noted, “The district did a great job rolling out training for K-2 teachers, but upper-grade teachers were kind of left to figure things out on their own.”

**Figure 3**

*Principals Utilizing Various PD Methods for VLA Implementation*

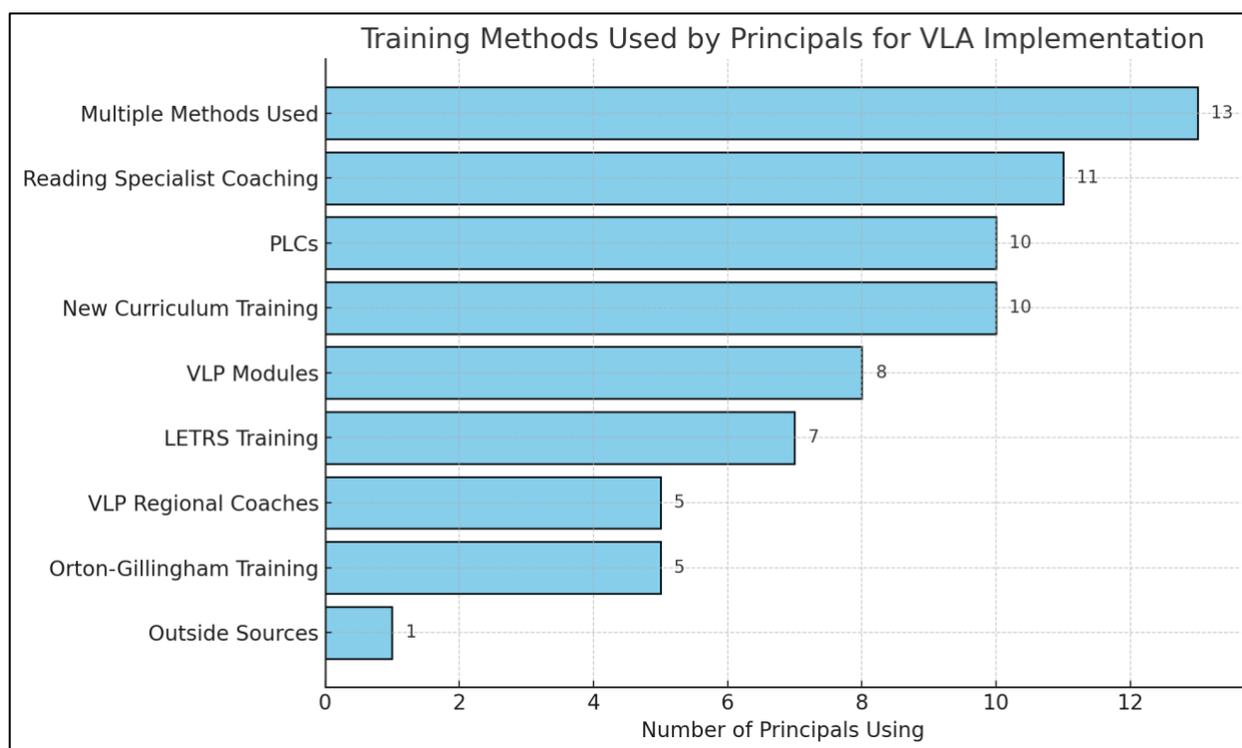


Figure 3 illustrates the various training methods used by principals to support their teachers in implementing the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). Notably, all principals reported using multiple

professional development approaches rather than relying on a single method. Reading specialist coaching (11 principals) and PLCs (10 principals) were among the most widely used supports, reflecting a strong reliance on in-house expertise and peer collaboration. While 8 principals noted the use of the state-provided VLP modules, the fact that many sought additional training could suggest that these resources alone were not sufficient to meet the needs of all schools.

The significant use of LETRS training (7 principals) highlights the emphasis on structured literacy approaches. However, some principals noted that LETRS, while informative, was time-consuming and challenging to integrate into teachers' daily workloads. Meanwhile, 5 principals reported using VLP regional coaches, with mixed reviews on their effectiveness depending on the alignment with school-specific needs. Only 1 principal reported using outside sources, such as consultants or literacy experts from beyond Virginia, indicating that most professional learning was localized.

One key challenge was the 10 principals who had to simultaneously train teachers on a new curriculum, adding to the cognitive and logistical load for educators. The VLA requires that districts use a curriculum from the approved list, so if a district was not already using one, they had to adopt a new one. The combination of learning new instructional frameworks and adjusting to new curricular materials contributed to feelings of professional fatigue in some schools. This finding demonstrates the importance of ensuring that training is both targeted and sustainable, with clear connections between policy mandates and classroom application.

### **Finding 5**

The process of adopting and aligning curriculum materials with the VLA presented numerous implementation challenges, including delays in receiving new resources, inconsistencies between existing instructional materials and structured literacy approaches, and

difficulties in maintaining teacher buy-in when mandated programs did not fully meet student needs.

**Analysis to support Finding 5.** The VLA required schools to adopt structured literacy-aligned curricula, but the rollout of new materials was uneven, leading to frustration and adaptation challenges. Some divisions had already transitioned to structured literacy-based programs, while others had to make a rapid shift and purchase new materials.

Principals in districts that had proactively adopted Science of Reading-aligned curricula before the VLA faced fewer challenges. Principal Howell explained, “We were already using an approved curriculum, so the shift wasn’t drastic—it just reinforced what we were doing.” However, other districts struggled with delayed textbook and resource deliveries, leaving teachers without materials at the start of the year. Principal Brown shared, “We got our phonics materials halfway through the first quarter, so teachers had to make do with what they had.” Another issue was misalignment between new curricula and teachers’ existing instructional habits. One principal shared that some teachers were still trying to mix balanced literacy materials with their new curriculum materials, which caused confusion.

For upper-grade teachers, the lack of structured literacy-aligned curricula was particularly problematic. Principal Moore explained, “There were plenty of phonics-based materials for K-2, but our 3-5 teachers didn’t yet have approved intervention and supplemental resources to support older struggling readers.” Overall, divisions that had already embraced the Science of Reading transitioned more smoothly, while late curriculum deliveries and resistance to change created implementation hurdles.

**Finding 6**

Principals reported that managing Student Reading Plans (SRPs) and the Virginia Assessment of Literacy and Learning System (VALLS) data was one of the most overwhelming aspects of VLA implementation, as teachers and administrators struggled with increased documentation requirements, frequent progress monitoring, and logistical challenges in ensuring compliance.

**Analysis to support Finding 6.** A significant challenge that emerged across the interviews was the management of Student Reading Plans (SRPs) and VALLS (Virginia Assessment for Literacy and Learning System) data. While these tools were intended to support literacy interventions and accountability, principals described difficulties with implementation, time constraints, and ensuring that data was used effectively to drive instruction. Many principals found the additional administrative burden overwhelming, particularly in balancing compliance with the meaningful use of data to support student learning. Principal Clark’s school adopted a digital tool to streamline student reading plans. However, she acknowledged ongoing challenges, stating, “We adopted EduClimber to assist with holding all school data and reading plans, but it is still not fully implemented and won’t be ready to share with staff until the 2025-2026 school year.” This reflects a common implementation challenge where schools must balance new policy requirements with logistical constraints.

Several principals noted that while VALLS provided valuable insights into student reading proficiency, the frequency of assessments and the volume of data generated required extensive time for teachers and reading specialists to interpret and act upon. Principal Geller described the challenge as “a data overload situation where teachers are drowning in assessment results but have limited time to adjust instruction accordingly.” Others expressed concerns that

teachers spent more time completing required documentation for SRPs than actually providing targeted interventions to struggling readers.

To better understand how principals managed these challenges, Table 9 presents the percentage of principals who reported key difficulties related to Student Reading Plans and VALLS data implementation.

**Table 9**

*Challenges in Managing Student Reading Plans (SRP) and VALLS Data*

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Percentage of Principals Reporting</b>
Time-consuming nature of SRP documentation	85%
Struggles with integrating VALLS data into instruction	69%
Need for additional training on data interpretation	54%
Lack of alignment between VALLS and other assessments	46%
Limited staffing to support data management	62%
Concerns about over-testing students	50%

The data in Table 9 highlights that 85% of principals cited the time-consuming nature of Student Reading Plans as a major obstacle. Many described how teachers were required to document extensive details about interventions and progress monitoring, often at the expense of actual instructional time. Similarly, 69% of principals struggled with effectively integrating VALLS data into instruction, with some noting that while the data was valuable, it was not always user-friendly or immediately actionable.

A recurring concern among 54% of principals was the need for additional training on data interpretation. Some expressed frustration that teachers and administrators were expected to make instructional decisions based on VALLS results but had not received sufficient guidance on how to do so. Another 46% of principals found that VALLS did not always align with other

literacy assessments used in their division, leading to confusion about how to interpret student progress.

Furthermore, 62% of principals reported limited staffing to support the additional workload required for SRP development and data analysis. This was particularly evident in smaller schools with only one reading specialist or instructional coach, placing the burden of data management primarily on classroom teachers. Lastly, 50% of principals raised concerns about over-testing students, noting that among VALLS assessments, curriculum-based measures, and other literacy screeners, instructional time was often sacrificed to meet assessment mandates.

### **Finding 7**

Teacher resistance to VLA implementation varied based on experience level, with veteran educators who had spent years teaching balanced literacy demonstrating the highest levels of skepticism and hesitation, whereas early-career teachers—who had been trained in Science of Reading-aligned methods—were more open to the transition and required less support.

**Analysis to support Finding 7.** Teacher responses to VLA implementation varied significantly based on their experience level and prior instructional beliefs. Many veteran teachers, particularly those with backgrounds in balanced literacy, were resistant to structured literacy changes, whereas early-career teachers were more adaptable. Principals observed that teachers with decades of experience often had deeply ingrained instructional habits that conflicted with the new requirements. Principal Davis explained, “Some of our veteran teachers really struggled to let go of old practices. They had been teaching reading the same way their entire career and were skeptical of this sudden shift.”

Conversely, newer teachers were more open to structured literacy approaches, particularly those trained in Science of Reading-aligned methods during their teacher preparation programs. A principal noted, “Our younger teachers didn’t push back as much because this was the way they were taught in their teacher prep programs. They didn’t have to unlearn old habits.”

However, even among those resistant to the change, gradual exposure to professional development and peer modeling helped increase buy-in. Principal Brown shared:

We had a whole generation of teachers who had built their instruction around leveled readers and guided reading groups. Telling them that those strategies were no longer aligned with the research wasn’t just a small tweak—it was a complete identity shift. Many teachers didn’t take the VLA seriously at first. In education, we see initiatives come and go, and some assumed this was just another trend. ‘This will just be another thing that lasts a year and disappears,’ one veteran teacher told me. I had to make it clear that this was a fundamental shift, not a passing mandate. The hardest part was unlearning—not just learning the new methods, but actually undoing deeply ingrained habits. For some, that was frustrating. They were asking, ‘Why is what I’ve been doing for twenty years suddenly wrong?’ My role as a leader was to validate their concerns while also guiding them through the process of adapting to structured literacy. Over time, as they started seeing student progress, the resistance softened. One of my most skeptical teachers eventually admitted, ‘I hate to say it, but I think I’m seeing results.’ That was a turning point.

This moment reveals that direct evidence of student success was a key factor in shifting teacher resistance. While skepticism was strong initially, seeing positive outcomes firsthand helped

change perspectives. This suggests that sustained support and opportunities to witness progress can be powerful in overcoming resistance to instructional change.

### **Finding 8**

Principals' leadership styles significantly influenced the success of VLA implementation, with those who engaged in servant leadership, transparent communication, gradual implementation, and advocacy for teacher needs experiencing higher levels of perceived staff buy-in and smoother instructional shifts, while those who using top-down mandates faced greater resistance.

**Analysis to support Finding 8.** The leadership approaches principals took in interpreting and implementing the VLA had a significant effect on teacher buy-in and overall success. Four key leadership strategies emerged as particularly effective:

1. **Servant Leadership:** Principals who worked alongside teachers, engaged in training, and provided hands-on support saw higher teacher morale and engagement. Principal Lee shared, "I did LETRS training alongside my teachers. They saw I was in it with them, and that mattered."
2. **Gradual Rollout:** Schools that phased in implementation over multiple months instead of demanding immediate compliance reported less resistance and more sustainable change. A principal stated, "We focused on small wins first. Once teachers saw success, they bought in."
3. **Transparency & Collaboration:** Principals who engaged teachers in decision-making (e.g., curriculum selection, pacing adjustments) reported higher teacher buy-in. One leader explained, "When we let teachers have a say in how we implemented things, they were more willing to embrace the changes."

4. Advocacy for Staff Needs: Leaders who acknowledged the increased workload and worked to support teachers (e.g., embedding PD into the workday, advocating for stipends) had more motivated staff. A principal noted, “When teachers saw we were fighting for their time and support, they were willing to go the extra mile.”

To illustrate the relationship between leadership style and VLA implementation outcomes, Table 10 presents various leadership approaches used by principals, the impact on implementation, and corresponding teacher responses.

**Table 10**

*Leadership Styles and Their Impact on VLA Implementation*

Principal	Leadership Style	Impact on Implementation	Teacher Response
Adams	Servant Leadership	Teachers felt supported	Increased morale
Brown	Gradual Rollout	Lower resistance	Higher long-term buy-in
Clark	Transparency & Collaboration	Higher engagement	More proactive adoption
Davis	Top-Down Mandates	High initial resistance	Teachers complied but lacked enthusiasm
Eve	Advocacy for Staff Needs	Reduced burnout	More sustained motivation
Finn	Servant Leadership	Strong relationships	Teachers felt principal was an ally
Geller	Gradual Rollout	Step-by-step success	Positive momentum
Howell	Transparency & Collaboration	Teachers felt heard	More investment in process
Illig	Advocacy for Staff Needs	Less resentment toward PD	Higher engagement
Jackson	Servant Leadership	Teachers appreciated involvement	Built trust
Knight	Transparency & Collaboration	Stronger PLC discussions	More effective learning communities
Lee	Gradual Rollout	Less pushback	More patience with new methods
Moore	Advocacy for Staff Needs	Stronger teacher retention	Fewer complaints about workload

The data in Table 10 reveal clear patterns in how leadership styles influenced teacher attitudes and instructional implementation. Principals who reported engaging in servant

leadership (e.g., participating in LETRS training with teachers, modeling best practices, providing hands-on support) saw the highest levels of teacher morale and trust. Similarly, leaders who took a gradual, step-by-step approach to rolling out VLA requirements reported lower resistance and higher long-term buy-in.

Another effective strategy was transparency and collaboration, as principals who actively involved teachers in curriculum selection, pacing decisions, and implementation strategies saw higher engagement and proactive adoption of VLA-aligned instruction. Finally, principals who advocated for staff needs—whether by adjusting schedules, embedding professional development into the workday, or securing stipends for additional training—saw reduced teacher burnout and more sustained motivation.

By contrast, principals who relied on a strict, top-down approach that emphasized compliance over collaboration faced the greatest challenges. Teachers in these schools often followed mandates but lacked enthusiasm for the changes, with some expressing frustration over feeling unheard or overwhelmed by new demands. The data strongly suggest that leadership style played a crucial role in shaping how teachers responded to the VLA and whether the implementation process was met with resistance or investment.

## **Summary**

The responses from the thirteen principals interviewed for this study revealed a range of experiences, challenges, and leadership strategies in interpreting and implementing the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). While all participants acknowledged the significance of the VLA in shaping early literacy instruction, their approaches to navigating the policy varied based on prior literacy initiatives. Key findings highlighted that while most principals had early awareness of the VLA, their initial understanding was uneven, leading to differences in how they communicated the

policy to staff and aligned it with existing school practices. The transition from balanced literacy to structured literacy posed challenges for many schools, with professional development playing a critical role in easing this shift. However, gaps in training availability and quality created inconsistencies in teacher preparedness.

Principals also reported curriculum adoption as a major challenge, as many had to select, implement, and train teachers on new literacy programs while managing resistance to change. Additionally, managing student reading plans and VALLS data presented logistical difficulties, particularly for schools with limited administrative support. Teacher resistance to the VLA varied based on experience levels, with veteran teachers often struggling more with the transition, while newer teachers who had been trained in structured literacy approaches found the shift easier. Leadership styles emerged as a crucial factor in the success of VLA implementation, with principals who prioritized servant leadership, transparency, and gradual rollout strategies experiencing greater teacher buy-in compared to those who took a compliance-driven approach.

The data analysis in this chapter provided a comprehensive examination of these findings, incorporating direct interview responses, coding analysis, and visual representations of key trends. The findings revealed strong themes related to professional development, curriculum implementation, and leadership decision-making, which are further explored in Chapter 5. The next chapter will connect these findings to existing literature, discuss implications for educational leaders and policymakers, and provide recommendations for future research on early literacy policy implementation.

## Chapter 5 Discussion of the Findings and Implications

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how elementary school principals interpret and implement early literacy policy changes, focusing on their leadership strategies in navigating the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions. How do principals interpret the Virginia Literacy Act, and how do they communicate and align state guidelines with school-level practices? What leadership strategies do principals use to implement the Virginia Literacy Act, including supporting teachers and addressing challenges?

To explore these questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 principals from 11 school districts across Virginia, representing urban, suburban, and rural districts with diverse student demographics. The collected data underwent a multi-cycle coding analysis, revealing key themes related to policy interpretation, professional development, curriculum adoption, teacher resistance, and leadership strategies.

This chapter provides a discussion of the major findings in relation to existing research, explores implications for educational practitioners and policymakers, offers recommendations for future research, and concludes with reflections on the research process. This study identified eight key findings regarding how elementary school principals in Virginia interpret and implement the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). These findings reveal the challenges, strategies, and leadership approaches that shaped the policy's rollout at the school level.

1. Principals were aware of the Virginia Literacy Act early in its development, but their initial understanding of its requirements and implications varied, leading to inconsistencies in preparation and implementation strategies.

2. Principals recognized that effectively communicating the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) to staff was critical for successful implementation, yet their communication strategies and the level of clarity provided to teachers varied depending on district support, school culture, and staff readiness for change.
3. The shift from balanced literacy to structured literacy posed a significant challenge for many schools, as teachers accustomed to long-standing instructional practices struggled with unlearning familiar strategies and adopting new, evidence-based approaches mandated by the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA).
4. Professional development was widely recognized as essential for successful VLA implementation; however, while some districts provided comprehensive, job-embedded training and instructional coaching, others lacked sufficient ongoing support, leaving principals and teachers to navigate significant changes with minimal guidance.
5. The process of adopting and aligning curriculum materials with the VLA presented numerous implementation challenges, including delays in receiving new resources, inconsistencies between existing instructional materials and structured literacy approaches, and difficulties in maintaining teacher buy-in when mandated programs did not fully meet student needs.
6. Principals indicated that managing Student Reading Plans (SRPs) and the Virginia Assessment of Literacy and Learning System (VALLS) data was one of the most overwhelming aspects of VLA implementation, as teachers and administrators struggled with increased documentation requirements, frequent progress monitoring, and logistical challenges in ensuring compliance.
7. Teacher resistance to VLA implementation varied based on experience level, with veteran educators who had spent years teaching balanced literacy demonstrating the

highest levels of skepticism and hesitation, whereas early-career teachers—who had been trained in Science of Reading-aligned methods—were more open to the transition and required less support.

8. Principals' leadership styles significantly influenced the success of VLA execution, with those who engaged in servant leadership, transparent communication, gradual implementation, and advocacy for teacher needs experiencing higher levels of staff buy-in and smoother instructional shifts, while those using top-down mandates faced greater resistance.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

**Finding 1: Principals were aware of the Virginia Literacy Act early in its development, but their initial understanding of its requirements and implications varied, leading to inconsistencies in preparation and implementation strategies.** While all principals indicated they had heard about the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) early in its legislative process, their depth of understanding and preparedness varied widely based on their prior knowledge of structured literacy and their district's readiness. Some principals, particularly those in districts already implementing the Science of Reading, viewed the VLA as a reinforcement of existing practices rather than a major shift. Others, especially those coming from balanced literacy backgrounds, experienced a more dramatic learning curve.

Several principals reported first learning about the VLA through district-level leaders, such as literacy coordinators or districtwide meetings, while a few encountered it through their own research. The most common initial reaction was uncertainty—many were unsure about how the law would translate into specific expectations for schools. Principal Knight stated, “When I

first heard about it, I was on board with the reasoning behind it, but my biggest concern was how we were actually going to implement it in a way that wouldn't overwhelm teachers.”

Similarly, Principal Lee described experiencing a “glass shattering moment” when realizing how much their prior balanced literacy training contradicted the structured literacy approach. Others, like Principal Moore, noted that their district had already been aligning with the Science of Reading, making the VLA more of a formalization of existing instructional shifts. Across all responses, it was evident that initial interpretations were heavily influenced by district leadership, prior exposure to structured literacy, and the presence (or absence) of a clear rollout plan from the state. These differences in early preparation had lasting effects on how smoothly VLA application progressed within each school. Schools with principals who took an early, proactive approach reported fewer logistical challenges, while those who waited for external guidance encountered more difficulties in aligning their instructional practices with the new mandates.

These findings align with Fullan's (2007) change theory, particularly the initiation stage, where early awareness, preparation, and planning shape the trajectory of policy implementation. Fullan emphasizes that successful initiation depends on clarity of purpose, leadership commitment, and early stakeholder engagement. The variation in principals' initial responses reflects the challenges of policy adoption when there is inconsistency in knowledge and preparedness.

The findings in this study align with existing literature on policy adoption and leadership decision-making during educational reforms. As noted by Woulfin and Gabriel (2020), the success of policy changes in literacy is heavily influenced by how leaders interpret and communicate new mandates. Similarly, Lambert and Penney (2023) assert that school leaders

must act as mediators between policy directives and classroom practice, translating broad legislative changes into concrete, actionable steps. The discrepancies in principal preparedness identified in this study reflect findings from Westall and Cummings (2023), who found that early literacy policy adoption led to greater success in states where school leaders were provided with clear, upfront guidance.

Furthermore, Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013) argue that the effectiveness of policy enactment is often mediated by the degree to which school leaders feel confident in their understanding of the reform, reinforcing the importance of early and ongoing professional learning for administrators. These studies suggest that inconsistencies in VLA preparation were not unique to this study's participants but are part of broader trends in literacy policy integration, where gaps in communication and professional development contribute to varied outcomes across schools and districts.

**Finding 2: Principals recognized that effectively communicating the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) to staff was critical for successful implementation, yet their communication strategies and the level of clarity provided to teachers varied depending on district support, school culture, and staff readiness for change.** Principals widely recognized that effectively communicating the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) to staff was critical for success. However, their communication strategies and the level of clarity provided varied significantly, largely depending on district guidance, school culture, and staff readiness for change. Some principals approached communication through structured professional development and district-led initiatives, while others had to develop their own messaging amid rollout uncertainties.

Many principals described leveraging existing district structures, such as staff meetings, PLCs, and literacy specialists, to reinforce messaging around the VLA. Principal Moore noted

the importance of “ongoing communication and collaboration” through structured meetings and embedded coaching.

Similarly, Principal Knight explained that they framed the VLA as “a state directive that we would be supported in implementing,” helping teachers feel reassured. Conversely, some principals had to work through initial confusion due to unclear messaging at the district or state level. Principal Lee noted that “there was a lot of back and forth with what we were allowed to do, and that caused a lot of frustration.” Others, like Principal Adams, found that “teachers weren’t sure what this meant for their daily instruction, so we had to be very intentional about breaking it down step by step.” Principals who had pre-existing cultures of collaboration and shared decision-making reported smoother communication processes.

In contrast, schools with less structured literacy backgrounds or where teachers felt overwhelmed by previous initiatives experienced greater challenges in gaining staff buy-in. This variation in communication approaches aligns with Fullan’s (2007) initiation phase of change, where leaders play a critical role in shaping how policy directives are understood and framed within their schools. Fullan emphasizes that successfully initiating changes is about and contextualizing them in a way that fosters shared understanding. Principals who proactively clarified expectations and framed the VLA within their existing school culture helped mitigate resistance, while those who lacked clear district guidance struggled with confusion and frustration among staff.

These findings align with prior research declaring the importance of communication in educational policy enforcement. Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) argue that the success of literacy policy reform is directly tied to how well school leaders communicate changes to teachers, with clarity and collaboration playing a significant role in mitigating resistance. Additionally,

Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013) found that teachers are more likely to adopt new instructional approaches when policy changes are framed as meaningful improvements rather than top-down directives. The variation in principals' communication strategies in this study also reflects Coburn's (2005) assertion that policy messages are interpreted differently at the school level, influencing how teachers perceive and implement new requirements.

Furthermore, Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) suggest that teachers respond more positively to leadership that fosters open dialogue, transparency, and shared decision-making—principles that were evident in schools where the VLA was met with greater enthusiasm. These studies reinforce the idea that communication is not just about delivering information; it is about shaping perceptions, fostering collaboration, and ensuring that staff feel supported throughout the change process.

**Finding 3: The shift from balanced literacy to structured literacy posed a significant challenge for many schools, as teachers accustomed to long-standing instructional practices struggled with unlearning familiar strategies and adopting new, evidence-based approaches mandated by the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA).** The transition from balanced literacy to structured literacy was a significant challenge for many schools implementing the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). Principals frequently noted that teachers, particularly those with many years of experience, struggled with unlearning previous instructional methods and adapting to the new, mandated approaches. Several principals stated that teachers who had long relied on balanced literacy techniques, such as leveled readers and three-cueing, found it difficult to shift toward structured literacy, which requires explicit and systematic phonics instruction. Principal Knight expressed:

Any change is hard, right? Any change we do for our staff, we see that all the time,” Nicole acknowledged. “It was something new, something different, something a little uncomfortable for people—especially those that had been doing balanced literacy for years. I have experienced educators that have been teaching for decades. So I had to use this analogy: ‘Think of a surgeon who has been doing heart surgery for years. The patients are fine. They’re recovering. But now there’s newer research, a newer technique that makes surgery even safer and more effective. Of course, the surgeon is going to learn that and use it. Our kids are our patients, and this is the most updated research. We’re going to learn it and apply it to our kids.’”

Principal Knight’s analogy reflects the core challenge of implementing structured literacy: educators were not simply being asked to adopt a new program but to fundamentally shift their instructional mindset and practices. Fullan’s (2007) change theory, particularly the implementation stage, explains why such shifts are often met with resistance. He emphasizes that sustainable change goes beyond procedural adjustments, requiring a transformation in educators’ beliefs and instructional habits.

Additionally, Principal Lee expressed frustration that training focused more on selecting an approved curriculum rather than deeply understanding structured literacy principles, which made it harder for teachers to transition successfully. Meanwhile, Principal Moore found that teachers in upper elementary grades had the most difficulty, as they had previously not been as immersed in structured literacy practices and now needed to adjust their instruction to assist students who still required foundational reading skills. Principals who provided ongoing professional learning, coaching, and gradual deployment strategies reported a smoother transition, while those in districts with a more abrupt shift faced higher levels of resistance.

The challenge of shifting from balanced literacy to structured literacy is well-documented in the research on educational change and teacher professional learning. Petscher et al. (2020) described that teachers require sustained professional development, ongoing coaching, and structured plans to adopt new instructional methods effectively. Without these supports, teachers may struggle to abandon familiar but less effective practices and integrate new evidence-based approaches (Spear-Swerling, 2019).

The literature also indicated that educators often experience cognitive dissonance when confronted with new research that contradicts long-standing beliefs about reading instruction (Seidenberg, 2017). This aligns with principals' observations that veteran teachers, in particular, found it difficult to shift away from the three-cueing system and leveled readers. Research further confirms that successful literacy reform requires not only curriculum adoption but also a deep understanding of the principles behind structured literacy (Moats, 2020). This demonstrates the need for job-embedded professional learning and collaborative problem-solving opportunities to help teachers fully embrace the shift and implement structured literacy practices with fidelity.

**Finding 4: Professional development was widely recognized as essential for successful VLA implementation; however, while some districts provided comprehensive, job-embedded training and instructional coaching, others lacked sufficient ongoing support, leaving principals and teachers to navigate significant changes with minimal guidance.** The professional development provided to support operationalizing the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) varied significantly across districts, affecting the preparedness of both teachers and administrators. Many principals recognized professional learning as essential for equipping teachers with the skills needed to transition to structured literacy, yet the depth and consistency of training were uneven. Some districts offered comprehensive, job-embedded

training, such as LETRS or structured literacy coaching, which helped teachers understand and apply evidence-based practices effectively. However, other schools faced gaps in ongoing support, leaving principals to facilitate much of the professional development themselves or rely on district specialists who were stretched thin. Several principals described providing their own in-house training, breaking down key concepts into manageable steps to aid teachers who had previously relied on balanced literacy strategies. One principal noted that while state-mandated VLA modules were available, they lacked job-embedded coaching, making the application of new strategies more difficult. Principal Geller described how she made up for this by strategically embedded professional learning opportunities, making the transition to VLA-aligned instruction smoother for her staff:

We dedicated an entire year of professional development to the science of reading, led by our reading specialists. Every month, our PD sessions focused on research-based literacy practices, incorporating articles, videos, and collaborative discussions, and classroom visits. We made sure to have these elements in place so that we could learn off of each other.

Devoting a full year to professional development on the science of reading indicates a commitment to successful implementation. By incorporating research-based practices, such as those mentioned by Principal Geller, the approach ensured a comprehensive learning experience. This structure fostered collaboration among educators, allowing them to exchange insights and refine their teaching strategies collectively.

Additionally, the workload of teachers was a recurring concern, as many were balancing VLA-related training with other responsibilities, leading to feelings of burnout. Schools that were able to provide structured planning time, coaching, and gradual rollout reported more

successful transitions, whereas those that lacked ongoing help faced greater resistance and inconsistencies in instructional changes. This variation in professional development aligns with Fullan's (2007) change theory, particularly in both the initiation and implementation stages. During initiation, the level of district-wide support and planning determined the extent to which schools were prepared for the transition, while disparities in professional learning during implementation highlighted the challenges of sustaining change without adequate structures in place.

The literature illustrates the importance of professional development in assisting teachers through literacy reform. Research has shown that teacher preparation and ongoing in-service training are critical for successfully implementing evidence-based reading instruction (Neuman et al., 2023). Many states, including Virginia, have adopted policies that focus on training educators in evidence-based literacy instruction, recognizing that effective literacy instruction relies on teachers' ability to apply research-based methodologies (Neuman et al., 2023; Shanahan, 2014). However, as Goodwin and Jiménez (2021) argue, professional development must be more than just compliance-driven training; it must provide educators with a deep understanding of literacy science and the flexibility to apply best practices within diverse classroom contexts.

Without sustained support, teachers may struggle to translate training into effective instruction, leading to inconsistencies in practice (Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth, 2021). Furthermore, research suggests that literacy coaching and collaborative learning opportunities are essential for ensuring that professional development leads to meaningful changes in instructional practice (Woodward & Thoma, 2021). Schools with embedded coaching models tend to experience smoother transitions during literacy reform, as teachers receive ongoing

feedback and assistance (Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth, 2021). The challenges described by principals in navigating the VLA's professional development requirements reflect broader trends in literacy policy application, where variability in training access and quality can impact the effectiveness of instructional shifts (Westall & Cummings, 2023). Therefore, for large-scale literacy policies like the VLA to succeed, districts must prioritize sustained, high-quality professional development that goes beyond introductory training and actively supports teachers in applying new practices.

**Finding 5: The process of adopting and aligning curriculum materials with the VLA presented numerous implementation challenges, including delays in receiving new resources, inconsistencies between existing instructional materials and structured literacy approaches, and difficulties in maintaining teacher buy-in when mandated programs did not fully meet student needs.** The adoption and alignment of curriculum materials with the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) presented significant challenges for most school leaders, particularly in ensuring that instructional resources effectively aligned with structured literacy practices. Many principals noted delays in receiving new materials, which forced teachers to implement structured literacy with either outdated resources or makeshift materials while awaiting district-approved programs.

Some districts provided clear guidance on curriculum selection, while others left schools to navigate the transition independently, leading to inconsistencies in how structured literacy was implemented across districts. Additionally, the shift away from balanced literacy meant that many previously used instructional materials were no longer aligned with VLA expectations, creating gaps in phonics instruction, decodable texts, and intervention resources. Principals also reported difficulties in maintaining teacher buy-in, especially when mandated programs lacked

components that teachers valued, such as engaging literature or small group instruction. Principal Finn described the profound instructional shifts brought about by the VLA:

I think it's totally shifted our instructional practices for language arts. I think a lot of language arts prior to the VLA was based on small groups. And now teachers are having to adjust their thinking to really engage students in whole-group instruction. That's been a big shift in our mindset, for sure. I think in terms of interventions, we've always been on track with those. But now really digging into the progress monitoring has been helpful, too. Teachers also—especially those most resistant—felt like it was taking away their autonomy to be creative in the classroom, to do fun and engaging lessons. And likewise, teacher efficacy was feeling really low because it was so new and different for them that they were not feeling like they were good at their craft anymore.

Principal Finn's experience reflects the tension between structured literacy mandates and teacher autonomy, a recurring challenge in curriculum adoption under the VLA.

Several principals shared that while structured literacy programs provided a solid foundation in phonics, they often fell short in areas like comprehension, vocabulary, and writing, leaving schools to supplement with additional materials. These inconsistencies and resource challenges made it difficult to establish a smooth transition to structured literacy, reinforcing the need for districts to provide clearer guidance, timely access to materials, and flexibility in curriculum adaptation. This challenge aligns with Fullan's (2007) change theory, as it highlights the complexity of introducing and operationalizing large-scale curriculum shifts. During initiation, delays in securing new materials and inconsistent district-level guidance created structural barriers to effective implementation, leading to varied teacher experiences and perceptions. In the implementation stage, the lack of alignment between mandated programs and

teacher expectations contributed to resistance. Fullan emphasizes the importance of continuous support, adaptation, and engagement of stakeholders in sustaining educational change.

The literature on literacy policy adoption suggests similar challenges related to curriculum alignment and material adoption. Research has shown that large-scale literacy reforms often struggle with the practical realities of aligning new instructional approaches with existing materials, particularly when policy mandates outpace curriculum development and resource distribution (Westall & Cummings, 2023). In previous literacy policy shifts, such as the transition to phonics-based instruction under the No Child Left Behind Act, many districts encountered difficulties in balancing fidelity to mandated programs with the instructional autonomy needed to meet diverse student needs (Pearson, 2004).

The misalignment between structured literacy curricula and certain instructional components, such as writing and comprehension, echoes findings from Mesmer and Griffith (2005), who noted that rigid enactment of evidence-based reading programs sometimes overlooks the broader literacy development needs of students. Furthermore, Neuman et al. (2023) found that effective policy rollout requires a balance between state-mandated curriculum structures and localized adaptations that allow teachers to respond to student needs. The findings from the principal interviews align with this research, reaffirming the importance of ensuring that structured literacy programs are comprehensive enough to address all aspects of reading instruction while also allowing flexibility for teachers to integrate supplementary materials. Without addressing these challenges, literacy reforms risk uneven administration and reduced teacher buy-in, ultimately affecting student learning outcomes.

**Finding 6: Principals reported that managing Student Reading Plans (SRPs) and the Virginia Assessment of Literacy and Learning System (VALLS) data was one of the**

**most overwhelming aspects of VLA implementation, as teachers and administrators struggled with increased documentation requirements, frequent progress monitoring, and logistical challenges in ensuring compliance.** Managing SRPs and VALLS data emerged as one of the challenging aspects of carrying out the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA). Principals consistently reported that the increased documentation requirements placed a burden on both teachers and administrators, leading to frustration and time constraints. The logistics of managing VALLS data, including ensuring timely assessments, interpreting the results, and using the data to inform instruction, created additional stress for educators already managing heavy workloads.

Some principals stated that while they understood the intent behind the increased accountability, the rapid rollout timeline and lack of centralized district guidance made it difficult to establish clear, efficient processes. Others observed disparities in how well schools adapted, with those having strong instructional coaching or dedicated time for data meetings faring better than those without such resources. Overall, principals said that the administrative burden of SRPs and VALLS, combined with the pressure to ensure compliance, contributed to significant challenges in adhering to policy directives. This challenge reflects Fullan's (2007) change theory, particularly in the implementation stage, where the realities of operationalizing policy reforms often create unintended burdens on educators.

These findings align with existing research on the challenges of implementing literacy policies that require extensive data collection and strategic planning. Barrett-Tatum and Ashworth (2021) found that literacy policy adoption often hinges on the capacity of educators to manage assessment and intervention requirements, particularly in districts with limited resources. Their study demonstrated the essential role of literacy specialists in supporting teachers through

policy transitions and helping them navigate new assessment systems. Similarly, Woodward and Thoma (2021) asserted that literacy coaches are critical in ensuring that assessment data is meaningfully translated into instructional practice, reinforcing the importance of instructional leadership in managing assessment demands.

Additionally, Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) noted that without ongoing professional development and clear guidance, teachers may struggle to integrate new assessment requirements into their instructional routines, leading to increased stress and inconsistent application. Research also suggests that data-driven literacy initiatives require well-structured professional learning communities and collaborative planning to be effective (Kraft et al., 2018), reinforcing the need for schools to provide adequate time and assistance for teachers to analyze and respond to VALLS data. These studies confirm that while data-driven instruction is an essential component of literacy improvement efforts, its success depends on structured support systems, clear policy communication, and adequate professional development—all of which were identified as areas of concern by the principals in this study.

**Finding 7: Teacher resistance to VLA implementation varied based on experience level, with veteran educators who had spent years teaching balanced literacy demonstrating the highest levels of skepticism and hesitation, whereas early-career teachers—who had been trained in Science of Reading-aligned methods—were more open to the transition and required less support.** Teacher resistance to Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) was largely influenced by experience level, with veteran educators exhibiting the most skepticism and hesitation. Many principals noted that teachers who had spent years using balanced literacy approaches found it particularly difficult to unlearn familiar instructional practices and adopt new structured literacy methods. These educators often struggled to reconcile

the shift away from leveled readers, guided reading, and three-cueing strategies, which had been foundational to their teaching for decades. Some principals noted that veteran teachers were more vocal in their resistance, questioning the effectiveness of mandated curriculum programs and expressing frustration over the perceived devaluation of their prior instructional knowledge.

In contrast, early-career teachers, many of whom had received training in Science of Reading (SoR)-aligned methods during their teacher preparation programs, were more receptive to the changes. Principals observed that these teachers required less reinforcement in adapting to structured literacy because they had fewer ingrained habits to unlearn. Several administrators stressed the need for differentiated professional development to address these varying levels of resistance, providing more targeted coaching for veteran teachers while allowing early-career educators to deepen their understanding of structured literacy principles.

Additionally, principals noted that peer modeling and collaborative learning opportunities helped bridge the gap between these groups, allowing experienced teachers to see the benefits of structured literacy in practice and gradually build buy-in for the transition. Fullan emphasizes that resistance is a natural part of change, particularly when long-standing beliefs and practices are challenged. Veteran educators, deeply rooted in balanced literacy, experienced more difficulty adjusting because the change disrupted their established instructional frameworks, reinforcing Fullan's assertion that successful implementation requires both emotional and structural support.

The variation in teacher resistance aligns with research on educational change and teacher adaptation. Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013) found that educators with deeply embedded instructional beliefs often struggle with implementing policy-driven instructional changes, particularly when the shift challenges long-held practices. Similarly, Kisa and Correnti (2015)

documented how teachers with extensive experience in balanced literacy approaches were less likely to fully adopt structured literacy practices without targeted professional learning opportunities.

Resistance among veteran teachers also reflects findings from Woulfin and Gabriel (2020), who explained the importance of leadership in guiding teachers through policy transitions. They noted that effective practice of literacy reforms requires school leaders to engage teachers in the change process, provide clear rationales for instructional shifts, and offer sustained, job-embedded professional development.

Additionally, research by Sigmon and Fogelson (2021) suggested that pre-service training plays a critical role in shaping teacher readiness for new literacy policies. Their findings indicate that early-career teachers who were trained in SoR methodologies were more confident in implementing structured literacy practices, reinforcing the need for alignment between teacher preparation programs and state literacy mandates. These studies call attention to the importance of targeted professional development, peer collaboration, and leadership-driven guidance to help veteran educators navigate instructional changes while leveraging the enthusiasm and preparedness of early-career teachers to sustain long-term policy adoption.

**Finding 8: Principals' leadership styles significantly influenced the success of VLA implementation, with those who engaged in servant leadership, transparent communication, gradual implementation, and advocacy for teacher needs experiencing higher levels of staff buy-in and smoother instructional shifts, while those using top-down mandates faced greater resistance.** The leadership approaches principals took in interpreting and implementing the VLA had a significant effect on teacher buy-in and overall success. Principals who prioritized collaboration and teacher-centered approaches saw smoother

transitions, while those who relied on rigid mandates encountered greater resistance. Findings revealed that leadership styles emphasizing shared decision-making, gradual implementation, and direct administrator involvement fostered a more positive school climate during the VLA rollout. Principal Illig illustrated this approach, emphasizing the need to reassure teachers while maintaining expectations:

I'm not coming in here to point out what's going wrong. If anything, I want to come in here and tell you about all the things that I'm impressed about, because you guys were already great teachers. You know, this curriculum isn't going to make or break you.

Good instruction is good instruction.

Principal Illig's leadership reflects the principles of servant leadership, where the leader prioritizes support, encouragement, and professional respect rather than rigid enforcement of mandates (Greenleaf, 1977). By reinforcing teachers' strengths rather than focusing on deficits, she helped cultivate a school culture that embraced the VLA as an opportunity rather than an externally imposed requirement.

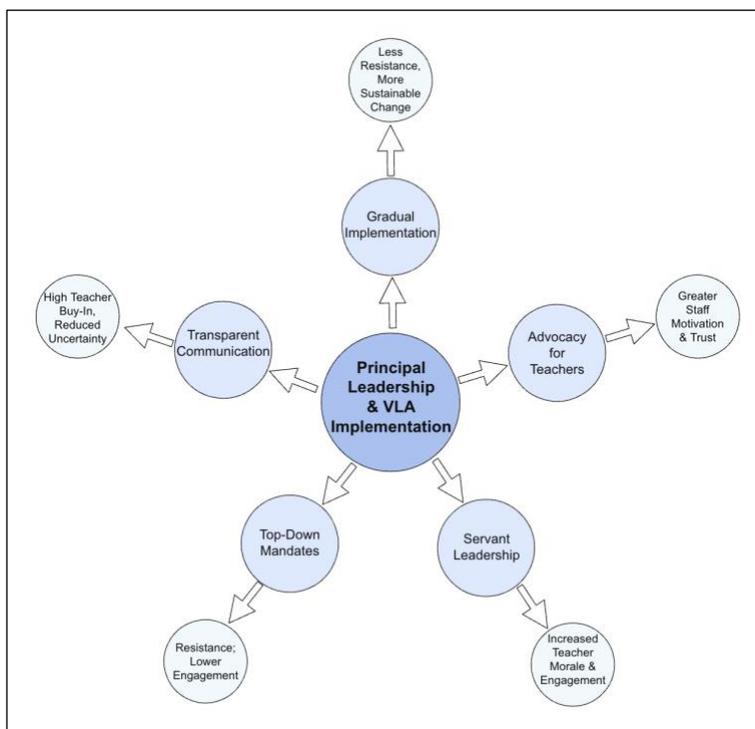
Schools where principals actively participated in professional learning alongside teachers, framed the policy as an opportunity rather than a burden, and provided structural support—such as embedded professional development and workload adjustments—experienced higher levels of teacher investment. Conversely, schools where principals adopted a top-down approach often reported initial compliance but lower enthusiasm, with some educators expressing frustration over feeling excluded from the decision-making process. Principal Eve explained:

My leadership philosophy is like, what can I stay ahead of? Because so much of our job is so reactionary, right? So, the more we can stay out ahead of things, the more, A, we can be sane, but then also keep the main thing the main thing. And that is where I would

imagine a lot of school divisions struggled. If they just have someone in that role who is only top-down, they miss the opportunity to create buy-in. We weren't left in a reactionary place because we had strong district leadership that helped us anticipate what was coming next. But I know principals in other schools who just felt like counselors this entire first part of the school year because they were constantly trying to manage frustration rather than actually implementing the policy effectively.

This perspective reinforces the finding that leadership styles significantly shaped how the VLA was received. Principal Eve's proactive stance—anticipating changes, minimizing reactionary decision-making, and ensuring that leadership was more than just enforcing mandates—created a smoother transition.

These findings suggest that leadership style is not only a determinant of policy adoption but also a key factor in whether instructional changes are internalized and sustained over time. Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between principal leadership styles and VLA implementation outcomes. It highlights how approaches such as servant leadership, transparent communication, gradual implementation, and advocacy for teachers contributed to higher staff morale and engagement, while top-down mandates were associated with increased resistance and lower teacher buy-in.

**Figure 4***Principal Leadership Strategies and VLA Implementation*

This finding aligns with research on leadership and policy implementation in education. Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) identified the role of leadership as crucial in mediating policy shifts, arguing that principals who cultivate collaboration, clearly articulate policy rationales, and offer sustained support achieve greater success in implementing instructional changes. Similarly, Ylimaki et al. (2022) found that successful school leaders enact shared leadership practices, ensuring that policy changes are framed as collective efforts rather than top-down directives. Research on transformational leadership reinforces this as well; Adarkwah and Zeyuan (2020) highlighted that leaders who inspire, support, and involve teachers in decision-making foster greater instructional engagement and long-term adoption of reforms.

Additionally, Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013) noted that when teachers feel heard and valued during instructional transitions, they are more likely to adopt new policies and sustain

best practices. Conversely, studies by Inandi et al. (2013) found that rigid, autocratic leadership styles are associated with higher levels of resistance to change, reinforcing the importance of inclusive and responsive leadership approaches. These studies collectively emphasize that leadership plays a pivotal role in the successful execution of literacy policies, demonstrating that servant leadership, transparent communication, and a gradual, teacher-centered approach are critical for fostering staff investment and ensuring the success of the VLA.

### **Practitioner Implications**

Applying the following recommendations, school leaders can improve the effectiveness of translating policy into practice, assist teachers through instructional shifts, and ensure that literacy policy changes lead to meaningful improvements in student outcomes.

1. District and school leaders should develop structured communication strategies to ensure all staff understand the policy requirements, expectations, and instructional shifts. This includes regular staff meetings, clear written guidance, and accessible resources that reinforce key policy components. When communication is inconsistent, misunderstandings arise, leading to varied applications and potential resistance from staff. By prioritizing clarity and transparency, principals can create a sense of shared purpose and reduce uncertainty around the changes. *This implication is associated with Finding 2.*
2. School leaders should ensure that professional development is not a one-time event but rather an ongoing, embedded process that guides teachers in adapting to structured literacy practices. Literacy coaches, instructional modeling, and collaborative planning time should be prioritized to help teachers integrate new instructional strategies effectively. This approach allows teachers to receive real-time help and reinforcement,

reducing frustration and increasing confidence in their actions. *This implication is associated with Finding 4.*

3. Principals should recognize that shifting instructional practices is a significant change for many educators, especially those who have used balanced literacy for decades. Schools should provide differentiated support, allowing for gradual shifts in practice and targeted professional learning to address specific teacher concerns. Encouraging collaborative learning communities where teachers can share successes and challenges would help foster buy-in and reduce resistance. *This implication is associated with Finding 3 and Finding 7.*
4. School leaders should work with district administrators to ensure that curriculum selections are aligned with both the policy and the specific needs of their student populations. While mandated programs provide consistency, teachers should have the flexibility to supplement with additional research-based resources when core materials do not fully meet student needs. This balance helps maintain teacher investment and ensures students receive high-quality instruction tailored to their learning profiles. *This implication is associated with Finding 5.*
5. School leaders should prioritize servant leadership, transparent decision-making, and advocacy for teachers to foster a positive school culture around policy enactment. When principals engage teachers in the decision-making process, provide them with necessary resources, and acknowledge their concerns, resistance is significantly reduced. Top-down mandates without collaboration can lead to pushback, whereas an inclusive leadership style promotes teacher investment in literacy reform efforts. *This implication is associated with Finding 8.*

## Policy Implications

Effective literacy policy requires careful planning, collaboration, and sustained support to ensure success at the school level. The challenges reported by principals in this study illustrate several critical areas where policy adjustments could improve clarity, consistency, and long-term impact. The following policy recommendations address key issues related to stakeholder involvement, guidance for implementation, professional development, and district-level coordination to facilitate the effective execution of literacy initiatives.

1. Policymakers should engage a broad range of stakeholders—including literacy specialists, teachers, administrators, and district leaders—throughout the policy design process. Several principals noted that those making literacy policy decisions were not necessarily experts in structured literacy or classroom realities. A more collaborative approach, with advisory committees composed of experienced educators, would lead to more practical and effective policy measures. *This implication is associated with Findings 1, 2, 5 and 6.*
2. One of the primary issues with the VLA was that once the law was passed, the VDOE had to interpret and operationalize the policy while fielding several questions from districts. Moving forward, any new literacy policies should be accompanied by explicit state-level guidance that outlines roles, expectations, and logistical considerations before school districts are expected to comply. *This implication is associated with Findings 1, 2, and 6.*
3. The transition to structured literacy requires more than initial training; it demands ongoing, embedded professional learning for teachers and administrators. Future policies should include designated funding for districtwide literacy coaches, school-based

coaching models, and structured training cycles. A commitment to long-term capacity building, rather than one-time professional development modules, would ensure more effective instructional shifts. *This implication is associated with Findings 3, 4 and 7.*

4. Many principals expressed frustration over inconsistent district support, with some districts providing comprehensive guidance and resources while others left schools to navigate independently. District-level policy-makers should create clear, standardized literacy plans, ensuring all schools receive the necessary training, curriculum resources, and data systems to align with state requirements. District-level literacy leadership teams should oversee this process, providing continuous professional development. *This implication is associated with Findings 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8.*

### **Recommendations for Policy Design**

Future literacy policies must explicitly tackle systemic inequalities that affect educational access and outcomes. By doing so, leaders will be in a position to close the literacy achievement gap and create equitable opportunities within education by providing resources and support that may help facilitate success in underprivileged communities and ensuring literacy instruction is differentiated to be both culturally relevant and efficient.

The dynamic nature of educational environments necessitates the continuous monitoring of literacy policy implementation to ensure that policies remain effective and responsive to student needs (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). Without ongoing evaluation, policies may fail to address gaps in instruction, resource allocation, or professional development, leading to stagnant or declining literacy outcomes. By continuously evaluating and adjusting policies, leaders can identify unintended consequences, assess whether instructional practices align with research-based approaches, and refine strategies as needed.

For example, statewide literacy initiatives such as the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) require ongoing assessment to determine whether mandated interventions and instructional shifts are producing measurable improvements in student reading proficiency (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). Regular review of student performance data, along with teacher feedback and classroom observations, can help policymakers ensure that literacy policies are both effective and sustainable. Additionally, collaborating with educators, researchers, and community stakeholders allows for informed decision-making, ensuring that policy adjustments are grounded in real-world classroom experiences rather than solely relying on legislative mandates.

These recommendations are expected to bridge the gap between policy and practice, to ensure that literacy initiative proves to be efficient in enhancing student outcomes while being responsive to the needs of educators and the community.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Several areas for future research emerged from this study, particularly regarding the challenges and outcomes of operationalizing the VLA. First, one area for future research is the long-term impact of the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) on student reading achievement and literacy outcomes. While this study examined the initial interpretation, implementation, and challenges faced by school leaders, further research could analyze whether the structured literacy approach mandated by the VLA leads to sustained improvements in student literacy rates over multiple years. A longitudinal study tracking cohorts of students from early elementary grades through later grades would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the policy.

Second, further research on the effectiveness of professional development models in facilitating literacy policies could help determine the most impactful training approaches for teachers on student literacy outcomes. This study identified inconsistencies in the help teachers

received, suggesting that different methods—such as job-embedded coaching, PLCs, or structured coursework—may yield varied results in teacher preparedness and instructional effectiveness.

Third, a study on the institutionalization of the VLA within schools using Fullan's (2007) change theory would provide valuable insights into the long-term sustainability of structured literacy practices. Fullan's third stage of change, institutionalization, examines whether a policy moves beyond initial compliance to become an embedded and enduring part of instructional culture. This research could explore whether schools continue implementing structured literacy with fidelity despite leadership and staff turnover, competing initiatives, or shifting state policies. Additionally, it could investigate how schools maintain professional learning structures and whether literacy instruction remains aligned with VLA expectations over time. Understanding how the VLA moves from short-term adoption to full integration would help policymakers and educators develop strategies for sustaining literacy reforms beyond their initial rollout.

Finally, a study on teacher perceptions of structured literacy before and after the VLA could explore how attitudes evolve as educators gain experience with the policy. Given the variation in resistance among veteran and early-career teachers in this study, further research could examine how sustained exposure to structured literacy practices affects teacher confidence, instructional beliefs, and long-term adoption. These potential studies would extend the findings of this research, offering deeper insights into the implementation process and informing future literacy initiatives.

## **Summary**

This study examined how elementary school principals in Virginia interpreted and implemented the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA), revealing key challenges and leadership

strategies. Analysis of thirteen principal interviews identified eight findings related to policy communication, instructional shifts, professional development, curriculum alignment, data management, teacher resistance, and leadership approaches. Findings align with existing research on literacy reform, showing the need for clear communication, sustained professional learning, and leadership that fosters collaboration. Practitioner implications stress structured communication, ongoing training, differentiated teacher support, and collaborative leadership. Policy implications recommend educator involvement in policy design, clearer guidance, dedicated funding for professional development, and districtwide consistency. Future research should explore the long-term impact of the VLA, professional development effectiveness, the institutionalization of structured literacy, and shifts in teacher perceptions. Addressing these challenges will help ensure that structured literacy reforms lead to lasting improvements in student outcomes.

### **Researcher Reflections**

Someone once told me, “It is easier to change a person’s religion than it is to change their belief in how to teach reading.” I did not fully understand the weight of that statement until I found myself in the midst of leading literacy reform—first as a first-grade teacher, then as a district literacy leader, and now as a researcher. This journey has been both humbling and illuminating. I once stood in front of eager six-year-olds, believing I was equipped to teach them to read, only to later realize that I had not been given the tools or the knowledge to do so effectively. There was no Virginia Literacy Act then, no structured guidance, no clear path forward—only best intentions wrapped in ineffective practice.

Through this study, I have come to see with clarity what I have long believed: the principal is the key. No matter how disjointed a central office may be, no matter how lacking in

communication a district's literacy leadership might be, a principal who embraces the challenge, who leads with conviction and clarity, can change the trajectory of reading instruction in their building. The principals in this study demonstrated that leadership at the school level can overcome even the most fractured district-level guidance. They set the tone, build the culture, and ultimately determine whether policy translates into practice.

I am grateful to have contributed to the growing body of research on early literacy policy implementation. More than that, I am grateful that Virginia is moving in a direction that prioritizes its youngest learners. The work is not yet finished, but for the first time in a long time, I have hope. Hope that the foundations we lay today will ensure that no teacher ever has to stand in front of a classroom, unprepared to teach reading, the way that I once did. Hope that the leaders in our schools will continue to hold the key—standing strong amid the chaos, lifting their teachers up, and ensuring that, no matter the challenges, what truly matters prevails: unlocking the power of reading for every child.

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## Appendix A: Literature Review of Leadership and Educational Policy Change in Literacy

Author/Year	Purpose/Goals	Methods/Data Sources	Findings/Implications	Significance
Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013)	Explore issues that change teacher practices; reveal issues that influence reform.	Qualitative case study; primary teachers	Teacher acceptance is influenced by perspective, support, alignment, beliefs. Teachers are more likely to embrace changes in line with belief.	Facilitating teacher acceptance and readiness.
Adarkwah & Zeyuan (2020)	Investigate transformational leadership and the impact on teachers.	Quantitative study	Although principals self-reported higher transformational leadership style, it had no meaningful relationship with teacher motivation.	The relationship between leadership styles of principals and teachers.
Balyer & Ozcan (2012)	Understand teachers' perceptions of headmasters' behaviors in terms of transformational leadership qualities.	Quantitative study	A high percentage of teachers perceive their leaders positively in aspects of vision building, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and fostering an innovative climate.	Empirical evidence on the positive impact of transformational leadership in education, specifically on teacher satisfaction and school performance; importance of leadership styles.
Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth (2021)	Examine the effects of a literacy reform policy that allows for local ownership and customization at the district and school level.	Qualitative study; interviews with 29 teachers, reading coaches, and administrators, 10 schools, 4 districts state	Diverse pathways and interpretations of the policy across different districts and schools, with variations in experiences among educators regarding the preparation and implementation of their customized accountability plans.	Federal and state implementation challenges and policy design versus classroom realities.
Brinegar et al., (2024)	Examine how the science of reading can integrate culturally sustaining pedagogies.	Literature analysis of culturally responsive literacy research	The science of reading often overlooks cultural and linguistic diversity; literacy instruction should incorporate students' home literacy practices.	Historical context of literacy education policies.
Bromley et al. (2019)	Explore how literacy education policy affects the production and enactment of literacy curriculum by early childhood teachers.	Qualitative; two case study schools	Literacy curriculum policies in the case-study schools were primarily focused on improving test scores in mandated assessments, potentially impacting early childhood literacy curriculum in adverse ways.	Policy design and classroom realities; tension between policy-driven assessment goals and the practical realities of early literacy education.
Bush (2007)	Investigate the impact of educational leadership on school	Research analysis article	There is a need for a deeper understanding of the theoretical foundations of	How leadership styles and behaviors influence the effectiveness of literacy education

	and student outcomes, examining various leadership models and their effectiveness.		educational leadership and management.	policies and practices; recommending leadership development strategies in future literacy initiatives.
Castles et al. (2018)	Aims to bridge the gap between research on how children learn to read and the public's understanding of effective reading instruction.	Literature review article	Emphasizes the importance of phonics instruction in learning to read.	Illustrates the disconnect between scientific research on reading and educational practice; advocates for policies that incorporate scientific insights into reading instruction to improve literacy outcomes.
Coburn (2005)	Explore the role of school principals in the process of teacher adaptation and enactment of reading policy changes within classrooms.	Qualitative study using sociological theories	Principals greatly influence the way teachers implement reading policy changes through their control over access to policy information, their participation in the policy interpretation process, and the learning environment they establish. This influence is shaped by the principals' own understanding of reading instruction and teacher learning.	Discusses the role of school leaders in bridging policy and practice; discusses how principals shape teachers' access to policy ideas.
Crafton & Kaiser (2011)	Review and evaluate various professional development models for teachers.	Research analysis article	Traditional coaching and mentoring can inadvertently undermine teachers' autonomy and capacity for change. A community of practice model is a superior framework for professional development that empowers teachers and promotes sustained growth.	Provides evidence for the effectiveness of communities of practice in professional development.
Day (2008)	Examine the diversity in teachers' work, lives, and effectiveness.	Mixed-methods; 300 elementary and secondary school teachers	Teacher development and effectiveness are influenced by a wide range of interrelated factors rather than following a simple, linear path.	Emotional well-being and professional identities should be considered in policy design and leadership strategies to support teachers throughout their careers.
Dehaene (2009)	Explore the complex process of reading; illuminate how the human brain, which evolved for purposes unrelated to reading.	Book	Reveals that the act of reading involves intricate neural mechanisms and demonstrates the brain's remarkable ability to adapt	Provides a scientific basis for understanding how reading is acquired and processed by the brain.

			and reconfigure itself to decode written language.	
Eranil & Ozbilen (2017)	Investigate the relationship between school principals' leadership behavior, focusing on teachers' perceptions.	Quantitative study; 383 teachers	A positive correlation was identified between the level of principals' ethical leadership and the presence of positive climate practices in schools.	Importance of ethical leadership in creating a supportive and positive school climate, which is essential for effective policy implementation.
ExcelInEd (2021)	Evaluate state laws and regulations on early literacy against ExcelinEd's established principles for effective early literacy education.	Policy analysis	Suggests that there is a variation in how states incorporate ExcelinEd's principles into their early literacy policies.	Adopt a comprehensive, principle-based approach to early literacy policy that includes support for all stakeholders.
Florit & Cain (2011)	Evaluate the validity of the Simple View of Reading proposed by Gough & Tunmer (1986) for early readers.	Meta-analysis; quantitative	Noted differences in how decoding and reading comprehension are related across different orthographic systems, suggesting tailored approaches to reading instruction.	Empirical evidence supporting the need for differentiated reading instruction strategies.
Folsom et al. (2017)	Examine changes in teacher knowledge of early literacy skills and in ratings of quality of early literacy skills instruction, student engagement during early literacy skills instruction, and teaching competencies.	Quantitative, quasi-experimental study	Outlines Mississippi's reading success.	Successful policy changes in literacy
Gallo-Fox and Cuccuini-Harmon (2018)	Explore the historical development and integration of early childhood and elementary education; examine the impact of these policies on the voice and role of teachers.	Qualitative analysis of research	The imposition of standards and accountability measures has exacerbated tensions between the curricular and instructional philosophies.	Show standards and accountability policies have intensified conflicts between approaches. Historical context of literacy education policies. Ensure that early childhood educators have a meaningful voice in the development and implementation of educational policies.

Goodman (1986)	Provide a comprehensive overview of the whole language movement in literacy education.	Book	Describes the theoretical basis and practical applications of whole language.	Historical context of literacy education policies.
Goodman (1997)	Explain the whole language approach as an overarching philosophy and pedagogy for literacy education.	Article	Emphasizes the importance of treating language as an integral system and learning literacy through its purposeful application in real-life contexts.	Historical context of literacy education policies.
Goodwin & Jiménez (2021)	Discuss equitable literacy teaching	Literature review article	Explains how the discourse on the science of reading presents a narrow view, prioritizing phonics while minimizing the importance of other aspects.	Historical context of literacy education policies.
Gough & Tunmer (1986)	Introduce a straightforward model that posits reading as the product of decoding and comprehension.	Theoretical article	Propose that reading disabilities can be categorized into three types; must distinguish between the skills necessary for reading to effectively diagnose.	Historical context of literacy education policies.
Haj & Jubran (2016)	Assess the extent of transformational leadership implementation by school principals.	Quantitative study; questionnaires	A positive correlation between the practice of transformational leadership by principals and teacher job satisfaction.	Leadership and Decision-Making in Policy Change.
Hattan & Lupo (2020)	Explore the critical role of knowledge in reading comprehension by examining sociocultural and cognitivist perspectives.	Theoretical and research-based analysis	Offers suggestions for rethinking the approach to knowledge in education.; suggest evidence-based instructional techniques and advocate for a broader recognition of different types of knowledge in supporting reading comprehension.	This perspective supports the development of literacy policies and practices that are more equitable and effective.
Hopkins (2014)	Understand the complex interplay between teachers' beliefs, district-level policies, administrative oversight, and teacher training in shaping policy implementation.	Qualitative study	District-level policies, administrative oversight, and teacher training, influence the alignment between policy and classroom practices.	Whole language shaped district-level policies and misaligned classroom practices; inform the development of more effective literacy education policies.
Hynds (2010)	Examine the nature and causes of resistance to school reform initiatives.	Qualitative study	Resistance to the reform efforts manifested in various forms and evolved over time; school leaders felt unprepared	Effective leadership and professional development are crucial for overcoming

			to address resistance, indicating a need for a shared vision and better communication.	resistance and sustaining reform efforts.
Inandi et al. (2013)	Investigate the relationship between school administrators' leadership styles and resistance to change.	Quantitative study; 287 school administrators	Resistance to change in educational settings is influenced by multiple factors beyond leadership style, shows complexity of change management.	Leadership and Decision-Making in Policy Change.
Kisa & Correnti (2015)	Investigate the impact of changes in school-level professional development (PD) on changes in teachers' instructional practices.	Quantitative study; longitudinal survey data from 1,722 teachers in 31 schools	Variations in the implementation of PD across schools, despite all schools implementing the same reform model.	The need for targeted and aligned professional development in facilitating instructional change among teachers, emphasizing the need for PD to be rigorously designed and implemented to support policy objectives and educational reforms effectively.
Kraft et al. (2018)	Assess the effectiveness of teacher coaching as a form of professional development.	Quantitative meta-analysis study	Positive effects of teacher coaching on instructional practices.	Strong evidence supporting the efficacy of teacher coaching as a method for improving instruction and learning in literacy.
Ladd (2011)	Investigate the extent to which teachers' perceptions of their working conditions predict their intentions to leave and actual departures from their schools.	Quantitative study	Teachers' perceptions, especially regarding school leadership, predict their planned movement away.	Improve working conditions and school leadership to retain teachers, particularly in the context of literacy education reforms.
Lambert & Penney (2023)	Investigate the roles and policy work of curriculum leaders.	Qualitative study; semi-structured interviews	Importance of strategic positioning and discourse engagement in the effective enactment of curriculum reforms.	Curriculum leaders bridge policy and practice.
Leithwood & Jantzi (2006)	Evaluate the impact of a school-specific model of transformational leadership on primary school teachers.	Quantitative study; survey data from 2,290 teachers, 655 primary schools.	Transformational leadership influenced teachers' classroom practices, suggesting that leadership styles can play a crucial role in shaping teaching methods and approaches.	Importance of transformational leadership in influencing teaching practices, yet it also raises questions about the direct link between such leadership and

				improvements in student achievement.
Lervåg et al. (2017)	Investigate the relative importance of various language skills in the development of listening and reading comprehension.	Quantitative longitudinal study	Findings consistent with the simple view of reading.	Shows the need for literacy policies and instructional strategies that support the development of specific skills.
Lyon et al. (2005)	Examine how scientific research informs instructional practices in reading.	Article	Explains the most effective strategies for teaching reading, grounded in scientific evidence.	Discusses challenges and barriers which can be used to guide policy decisions and educational practices towards more evidence-based approaches to reading instruction.
Masseti (2009)	Evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention designed to enhance preschoolers' emergent literacy skills.	Quantitative study	Explicit instruction in emergent literacy, combined with structured teacher training and assessment strategies, can effectively improve literacy outcomes.	Introduction and purpose.
Mesmer & Griffith (2005)	Clarify the term "explicit, systematic phonics instruction" and propose a precise definition.	Historical analysis of phonics instruction literature and a survey of 362 primary teachers.	Identified varied interpretations among educators; proposed that effective instruction aligns with students' developmental levels and includes a defined scope and sequence.	Provides a clear framework for implementing phonics instruction, aiding educators in adopting effective, research-based practices.
Moats (2000)	Advocate for the necessity of elementary school teachers to study language.	Book	Mastery of the organization of written and spoken English, and an understanding of the connection between language structure and reading acquisition, can enhance teaching effectiveness.	Policies that support systematic and explicit reading instruction based on a deep understanding of language.
Moats (2009)	Examine teacher knowledge and skills in reading instruction due to changes in education policy.	Research review article	The findings advocate for policy and programmatic changes that ensure teachers acquire the specialized knowledge required for effective literacy instruction.	Emphasizes the need for educational policies to support enhanced teacher education in reading instruction, based on a comprehensive understanding of reading development and language structure.
Neuman et al. (2023)	Provide a comprehensive overview of state	Policy analysis report	State leaders are increasingly committed to improving reading instruction, with	Shows the recent legislative efforts to support reading

	legislation related to reading instruction from 2019 to 2022.		legislation reflecting a bipartisan effort to address disparities in reading proficiency across different racial and ethnic groups.	instruction and identifies areas for further improvement.
O'Day (2009)	Investigate whether strategies effective for native speakers are equally beneficial for nonnative speakers.	Mixed-methods study	The balanced literacy approach might have been lacking in certain areas for effectively supporting English learner students.	Shows policy shift to balanced literacy and the impact on teachers and students.
Petscher et al. (2020)	Evaluate the existing evidence base that informs best practices in reading instruction; address the recent resurgence of misinformation and debates about the science of reading in public discourse.	Article	The authors categorize the evidence supporting reading practices into three levels: compelling evidence, promising evidence, and areas lacking compelling evidence.	Introduction and purpose.
Rose & Zirkel (2007)	Analyze case law related to the Orton-Gillingham reading methodology for students with reading disabilities, covering all published decisions from the inception of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through 2005.	Mixed-methods analysis; document analysis of court cases; elementary	Orton-Gillingham approach led to the design of more than fifteen commercial programs adopted by school districts for over 30 years, with inconclusive results.	Historical Context of Literacy Education Policies.
Rosheim & Tamte (2022)	Examine the impact of policies mandating early screening for dyslexia and the use of specific interventions on actual practice.	Qualitative study	Literacy specialists tailor their instructional practices to the individual profiles of readers and believe that reading intervention is most effective within a balanced, comprehensive literacy framework.	Discusses a variability in outcomes with literacy specialists' instructional practices related to the Orton-Gillingham approach.
Seidenberg (2009)	Reveal the gap between advancements in the understanding of learning, dyslexia, and their neurobiological bases, and the application of this	Article	Discusses how many teachers are unaware of the science of reading and learning, and that educational practices often do not reflect the latest research findings in these areas.	Explains early educational theories.

	knowledge in educational practice.			
Seidenberg (2017)	Advocate for a return to phonics-based instruction; argue for a deeper understanding of the science of reading.	Book	Reading education, informed by scientific research, can enhance the way children learn to read.	Explains the gap between research-supported practices and prevailing teaching methods.
Sigmon & Fogelson (2021)	Determine pre-service educators' level of understanding and confidence in implementing effective early literacy instruction.	Mixed-methods study; pre-service elementary teachers; online survey using Likert scale and open-ended items	Pre-service teachers felt least confident in enlisting parental involvement and using research to guide instruction in their literacy teaching practices.	Critical need for teacher education programs to integrate comprehensive training which includes pre-service training.
Terhoven (2022)	Explore the enactment of governmental curriculum policy in working-class schools through the leadership practices of school management teams.	Qualitative study	Working-class schools are influenced by the discourse of curriculum policy, responding in a manner described as almost robotic.	Discusses the challenges and barriers of pressure for performance, funding, working class conditions, etc.
Tortorelli et al. (2021)	Assess the adequacy of teacher preparation programs in preparing educators to teach code-related reading skills	Literature review study	A focus on technical linguistic knowledge in teacher preparation, often at the expense of pedagogical and situational knowledge; Recommends more comprehensive training approaches.	Shows gaps in teacher preparation that affect the implementation of science-based literacy policies, supporting the need for robust professional development initiatives
Treiman (2017)	Reviews what is known about the processes involved in reading and in learning to read.	Book chapter	Explains bottom-up processing.	Historical Context of Literacy Education Policies.
Vandeyar (2017)	Explore how a teacher navigates and implements meaningful educational change in a diverse classroom setting.	Qualitative study; semi-structured interviews and observations	Educational change is most successful when conducted by teachers as part of their personal and professional projects.	Impact of Policy Changes on Teachers and Teaching Practices.
Vaughn et al. (2019)	Investigate the literacy curriculum adoption process in nine schools across the United States in the context of the No Child Left Behind	Qualitative case study	Principals and teachers continue to experience limited autonomy in the literacy curriculum adoption process due to the prescriptive nature of policies influenced by NCLB.	Impact of federal policies on local educational practices.

	Act of 2002 (NCLB).			
Wasserman et al. (2016)	Explore the relationship between the principal's leadership style and teacher motivation.	Quantitative study; questionnaires of 137 teachers	A positive correlation between the principal's leadership style and teachers' positive perceptions.	Leadership style plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' motivation, their view of the teaching profession, and their propensity to engage in proactive teaching behaviors.
Westall & Cummings (2023)	Evaluate the effectiveness of early literacy policies adopted by 41 states and the District of Columbia on improving elementary students' reading achievement by the end of third grade.	Quantitative study; event-study approach	Early literacy policies lead to improvements in reading achievement on high-stakes assessments and greater in states with comprehensive early literacy policies.	The design and comprehensiveness of literacy policies are key factors in achieving desired educational outcomes.
Woodard & Kline (2015)	Examine the implementation of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts to better inform policies.	Review of research, policies, and practices	Effective literacy policies must provide clarity while also acknowledging the varied landscapes of educational contexts.	Clarity of information impacting policy implementation.
Woodward & Thoma (2021)	Examine the roles and expectations of literacy coaches	Qualitative study; semi-structured interviews and document analysis	A need for clear definitions and consistent communication about the roles of literacy coaches.	Focuses on the use of literacy coaches for effective teacher support.
Woulfin & Gabriel (2020)	Examine the role of infrastructure in the implementation of reading instruction improvements by focusing on three foundational pillars: curriculum, professional development, and leadership.	Theoretical analysis article	It is important that professional development is closely linked to the curriculum being taught and that leadership practices are supportive of instructional coaching and teacher development.	Discusses the challenges and barriers in changing literacy policies and the need for policies that are both flexible and clear.
Wyse & Bradbury (2022)	Examine research evidence, curriculum policy, and teaching practices related to phonics and reading instruction.	Qualitative meta-synthesis of 55 experimental trials and a survey of 2,205 teachers in England.	Found changes in phonics and reading teaching; current approaches may not be sufficiently underpinned by research evidence; recommend reevaluating national curriculum policy.	Highlights the need for policy changes to better align reading instruction with robust research evidence.

Ylimaki et al. (2022)	Examine the impact of leadership in high-needs schools that performed beyond expectations.	Research synthesis; qualitative; elementary; multi-case study; semi-structured interviews; longitudinal	Successful principals engaged in several key practices that contributed to school success.	Key strategies for effective school leadership
Zuckerman et al., (2018)	Identify the qualities of leadership that facilitate teacher performance adaptation.	Mixed-Methods; grades 6-8 interviews, regression analysis, document analysis, observations	Leaders that clearly communicate, give resources, and establish a culture of continuous learning greatly impact teacher adaptation to policy changes.	Focuses on the conditions that enable teacher performance adaptation.

## Legend:

Historical Context of Literacy Education Policies

Successful Policy Changes in Literacy

Challenges and Barriers to Policy Change in Literacy

Leadership and Decision-Making in Policy Change

Impact of Policy Changes on Teachers and Teaching Practices

Policy Recommendations for Future Literacy Initiatives

## **Appendix B: Qualitative Interview Protocol for Elementary Principals on Virginia Literacy Act Changes**

**Title of the Research Study:** Principal Leadership and the Virginia Literacy Act: From Policy Interpretation to Implementation

**Principal Investigator:** Charles Lowery, EdD, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

**Co-Investigator:** Megan R. Cornelius, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

*Each interview will be conducted via Zoom by Megan R. Cornelius.*

### **Interviewer:**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Before we begin, I'd like to provide a brief overview of the study. This qualitative study explores how elementary principals navigate early literacy policy changes, focusing on their leadership strategies, challenges, and the impact on teaching practices. Specifically, it examines how principals interpret and implement the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) within their schools. Your insights and experiences will help inform a deeper understanding of leadership in early literacy policy implementation.

Participants are required to have been involved in the formulation, implementation, or management of early literacy policies. The interview will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. I

plan to interview between 10 and 15 elementary principals, after which I will analyze the responses to identify common themes, differences, and insights.

This interview will be recorded for transcription purposes only, with the option to turn off your camera for audio-only recording. Your information will be coded with a unique identifying number. The transcript will be sent to you for review, and you may suggest any changes you deem necessary. All data, including audio recordings and transcripts, will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. These will be destroyed five years after the study's conclusion.

Participation is voluntary, with no compensation, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. Through your participation and insights, I hope to significantly contribute to the understanding and improvement of early literacy policy changes in educational settings.

Do you consent to participate and be audio-recorded?

### **Opening Statement**

Thank you for your willingness to contribute to this research. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or prefer not to answer a question, please feel free to let me know. Are there any initial questions or concerns you would like to address before we start?

### **Demographic Questions**

1. How long have you been a principal, and how long have you been in your current school?
2. What is your total experience working in education?
3. How would you describe the size and demographics of your school?

### **Interpretation of the Virginia Literacy Act**

1. How did you first learn about the Virginia Literacy Act?

2. What were your initial impressions of it?

Prompts: What information or training were you given to help you understand the policy? How was the policy communicated to you at the district level?

3. How did you interpret the VLA's expectations for your school?

Prompts: Did you see it as a major change or an extension of existing literacy practices? Were there any aspects of the policy that required clarification or adaptation for your specific school context?

4. How did you communicate the VLA's requirements and expectations to your staff?

Prompts: What strategies did you use to ensure teachers understood the policy? What challenges, if any, did you face in explaining or translating the policy to your staff?

### **Implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act**

5. What steps did you take to implement the VLA at your school?

Prompts: How did you plan for and roll out the policy? Were there phases or key milestones in implementation?

6. What strategies did you use to support teachers during this transition?

Prompts: How did you address teachers' concerns or resistance? What resources or supports did you provide to help teachers adjust?

7. What professional development opportunities were provided for teachers regarding the VLA?

Prompts: Did the training align with the needs of your staff? Were there areas where additional training or support was needed? How did staff respond?

8. What challenges did you encounter during the implementation of the VLA, and how did you address them?

Prompts: Can you provide a specific example of a major challenge and how it was resolved?

9. What steps have you taken to make these literacy reforms part of your school's long-term culture and instructional practices?
10. What strategies do you use to ensure that new teachers and staff are aligned with the VLA's expectations?

Prompts: Are there ongoing training or mentorship programs in place? How do you reinforce policy-aligned literacy instruction with new educators?

11. How has the VLA influenced broader school-wide literacy goals and practices?
- Prompts: Have you seen major shifts in teacher practices, student outcomes, or school-wide literacy culture as a result of the VLA?

### **Reflections and Recommendations**

12. Reflecting on your experience, what leadership styles or approaches have been most effective in interpreting and implementing the VLA?

Prompts: Can you provide examples of how specific leadership strategies have supported or hindered implementation?

13. Based on your experience, what recommendations would you make to other school leaders or policymakers for improving the implementation of the VLA?

Prompts: What could have made the process smoother? What additional supports or resources would have been helpful?

**Conclusion of Interview:**

Thank you for your time and for sharing your valuable experiences regarding early literacy policy changes. Your insights are crucial to this study. Is there anything you would like to add relevant to the discussion that might not have been covered? I will be sending you the transcript for your review and would be happy to share the study's findings with you after the dissertation defense if you are interested.

## Appendix C: Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study



### Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Dr. Charles Lowery

IRB# and Title of Study: IRB # 25-075 *Principal Leadership and the Virginia Literacy Act: From Policy Interpretation to Implementation*

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I am conducting this research as part of my course work.

#### ➤ WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete an interview. *As part of the study, you will engage in a one-on-one interview, where we will ask about your experiences and perspectives related to early literacy policy changes under the Virginia Literacy Act. The interview will cover topics such as leadership strategies, challenges in policy implementation, and impacts on teaching practices. Your interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection. This is a requirement for participation.*

The study should take approximately 30-60 minutes of your time.

We do not anticipate any risks from completing this study.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

#### ➤ CONFIDENTIALITY

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Your responses are anonymous, so no one can associate your answers back to you. Please do not include your name or other identifying information in your responses that can identify you.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed using Zoom. The researchers will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). The recordings will be uploaded to a secure password-protected Virginia Tech Google Drive. All data will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Interview recordings will be deleted after transcript verification and member checking. All other data will be destroyed five years after the study's conclusion.

If identifiers are removed from your private information or samples that are collected during this research, that information or those samples could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without your additional informed consent.

➤ **WHO CAN I TALK TO?**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact [megancornelius@vt.edu](mailto:megancornelius@vt.edu). You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 ([irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu)).

## Appendix D: Recruitment Email

**Subject Line:** Invitation to Participate in Research on the Virginia Literacy Act

Dear [Recipient's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Megan Cornelius, and I am a student in the program of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Virginia Tech. I am reaching out to invite you to participate in a research study titled "Principal Leadership and the Virginia Literacy Act: From Policy Interpretation to Implementation" (IRB # IRB-25-075).

This study aims to examine how principals interpret and implement the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) within their schools. Your insights and experiences are invaluable in understanding the complexities of implementing the Virginia Literacy Act and its effects on educational settings.

### Participation Details

- **Who:** Elementary school principals directly involved in the implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act.
- **What:** Participation involves a one-on-one interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes.
- **How:** All interviews will be conducted via Zoom. Transcriptions of the audio recordings will be used for data analysis.
- **Confidentiality:** All data will be securely stored, and identifiers will be replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

**Why Participate?** While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of leadership in educational policy implementation, potentially informing leadership strategies and practices.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please respond to this email or contact me directly at [megancornelius@vt.edu](mailto:megancornelius@vt.edu). Your involvement would be greatly appreciated and will contribute significantly to the field of educational leadership.

Thank you for considering this opportunity.

Warm regards,

Megan Cornelius  
Doctoral Student  
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
Virginia Tech

**Appendix E: CITI Program IRB Certificate of Completion: Social & Behavioral Research**

Completion Date 08-Sep-2022

Expiration Date 07-Sep-2025

Record ID 51186909

This is to certify that:

**Megan Cornelius**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**Social & Behavioral Research**

(Curriculum Group)

**Social & Behavioral Research**

(Course Learner Group)

**1 - Basic Course**

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech)**Not valid for renewal of  
certification through CME.Verify at [www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wa874f195-fa81-47e5-951d-74f821b0e68d-51186909](http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wa874f195-fa81-47e5-951d-74f821b0e68d-51186909)

## Appendix F: IRB Approval Letter



**Division of Scholarly Integrity and  
Research Compliance**  
Institutional Review Board  
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)  
300 Turner Street NW  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061  
540/231-3732  
irb@vt.edu  
<http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp>

### MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** February 17, 2025  
**TO:** Charles L Lowery, Megan Rae Cornelius  
**FROM:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)  
**PROTOCOL TITLE:** Principal Leadership in Implementing the Virginia Literacy Act: Policy, Practice, and Sustainability  
**IRB NUMBER:** 25-075

Effective February 17, 2025, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

### PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)**  
Protocol Determination Date: **February 17, 2025**

### ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol.

*Invent the Future*

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY  
*An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution*