WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A **literature review** is a written summary of journal articles, books, and other documents that describes the past and current state of information on the topic of your research study. It also organizes the literature into subtopics, and documents the need for a proposed study. In the most rigorous form of research, educators base this review mainly on research reported in journal articles. A good review, however, might also contain other information drawn from conference papers, books, and government documents. In composing a literature review, you may cite articles that are both quantitative and qualitative studies. Regardless of the sources of information, all researchers conduct a literature review as a step in the research process.

Why is this review necessary? Many reasons exist. You conduct a literature review to document how your study adds to the existing literature. A study will not add to the literature if it duplicates research already available. Like Maria, you conduct a literature review to convince your graduate committee that you know the literature on your topic and that you can summarize it. You also complete a literature review to provide evidence that educators need your study. You may base this need on learning new ideas, sharing the latest findings with others (like Maria and her school committee), or identifying practices that might improve learning in your classroom. Conducting a literature review also builds your research skills of using the library and being an investigator who follows leads in the literature, all useful experiences to have as a researcher. Reading the literature also helps you learn how other educators compose their research studies and helps you find useful examples and models in the literature for your own research. By conducting a literature search using computer databases, you develop skills in locating needed materials in a timely manner.

How Does the Literature Review Differ for Quantitative and Qualitative Studies?

How the review of the literature is used tends to differ between quantitative and qualitative research. Table 3.1 identifies three primary differences: the amount of literature cited at the beginning of the study, the use it serves at the beginning, and its use at the end of a study.

In a quantitative study, researchers discuss the literature extensively at the beginning of a study (see Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). This serves two major purposes: it justifies the importance of the research problem, and it provides a rationale for (and foreshadows) the purpose of the study and research questions or hypotheses. In many quantitative studies, the authors include the literature in a separate section titled "Review of the Literature" to highlight the important role it plays. The authors also incorporate the literature into the end of the study, comparing the results with prior predictions or expectations made at the beginning of the study.

In a qualitative study, the literature serves a slightly different purpose. Similar to quantitative research, the authors mention the literature at the beginning of the study to document or justify the importance of the research problem (Shelden et al., 2010). However, authors do not typically discuss the literature extensively at the beginning of a study. This allows the views of the participants to emerge without being constrained by the views of others from the literature. In some qualitative studies, researchers use the literature to support the findings. Nevertheless, in many qualitative projects, researchers often cite the

TABLE 3.1

Differences in Extent and Use of Literature in Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Differences	Quantitative Research	Qualitative Research
Amount of literature cited at the beginning of the study	Substantial	Minimal
Use of literature at the beginning of the study	Justifies or documents the need for the study	Justifies or documents the need for the study
	Provides a rationale for the direction of the study (i.e., purpose statement and research questions or hypotheses)	
Use of literature at the end of the study	Confirms or disconfirms prior predictions from the literature	Supports or modifies existing findings in the literature

literature at the end of the study as a contrast or comparison with the major findings in the study. In qualitative inquiry, researchers do not make predictions about findings. They are more interested in whether the findings of a study support or modify existing ideas and practices advanced in the literature—for example, expand on the understanding of trust as mentioned in the introduction to the mothers' trust in principals qualitative study (Shelden et al., 2010).

WHAT ARE THE FIVE STEPS IN CONDUCTING A LITERATURE REVIEW?

Regardless of whether the study is quantitative or qualitative, common steps can be used to conduct a literature review. Knowing these steps helps you read and understand a research study. If you conduct your own research study, knowing the steps in the process will give you a place to start and the ability to recognize when you have successfully completed the review.

Although conducting a literature review follows no prescribed path, if you plan to design and conduct a study, you will typically go through five interrelated steps. If you are simply looking for literature on a topic for your own personal use or for some practical application (such as for Maria's school committee), only the first four steps will apply. However, learning all five steps will provide a sense of how researchers proceed in reviewing the literature. These steps are:

1. *Identify key terms* to use in your search for literature.
2. *Locate literature* about a topic by consulting several types of materials and databases, including those available at an academic library and on the Internet.
3. *Critically evaluate and select the literature* for your review.
4. *Organize the literature* you have selected by abstracting or taking notes on the literature and developing a visual diagram of it.
5. *Write a literature review* that reports summaries of the literature for inclusion in your research report.

Identify Key Terms

Begin your search of the literature by narrowing your topic to a few key terms using one or two words or short phrases. You should choose these carefully because they are important for initially locating literature in a library or through an Internet search. To identify these terms, you can use several strategies, outlined below:

- Write a preliminary "working title" for a project and select two to three key words in the title that capture the central idea of your study. Although some researchers write the title last, a working title keeps you focused on the key ideas of the study. Because it is a "working" title, you can revise it at regular intervals if necessary during the research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).
- Pose a short, general research question that you would like answered in the study. Select the two or three words in this question that best summarize the primary direction of the study.
- Use words that authors report in the literature. In some quantitative research studies, educators test a prediction for what they expect to find from the data. This prediction is an explanation for what researchers hope to find. Researchers use the term *theory* for these explanations, and they might be a theory of "social support" or "learning styles" of students. The actual words of the theory (e.g., "social support" or "learning styles") become the words to use in your search.
- Look in a catalog of terms to find words that match your topic. Visit online databases that are typically available in college or university libraries. For example, one database is the **ERIC database** (see Educational Resources Information Center [ERIC], 1991; **www.eric.ed.gov/**). ERIC provides free access to more than 1.2 million bibliographic records of journal articles and other education-related materials and, if available, includes links to full text. ERIC is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES).
- Go to the bookshelves in a college or university library, scan the table of contents of education journals from the last 7 to 10 years, and look for key terms in titles to the articles. You can also examine the electronic database called *Ingenta* at your academic library. Ingenta supplies access to full-text online publications and journal publications. Especially helpful is the "browse publications" feature, in which you enter the name of the journal you wish to examine and obtain a list of the titles of articles from that journal for select years.

Maria needs to identify key terms to help her locate literature on weapon possession by high school students. After thinking about how she might get started, she writes down a working title, "Weapon Possession by High School Students." She begins by going to the ERIC Web site and enters the words *weapon possession* in the search terms procedure. She examines the articles identified in her search and feels that narrowing her search to high school students will provide more targeted references in the literature. She then uses the feature of searching within results and adds the additional term, *high school students*. She has now sufficiently narrowed her search and will closely examine the references in the literature that her search has yielded. Now try duplicating Maria's procedure yourself. Locate the ERIC Web site and insert Maria's terms into the ERIC database.

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