

# The Importance of the Literature and the Theoretical Framework

By: Amanda J. Rockinson-Szapkiw, EdD

## Introduction

Foundations are important. Jesus tells the parable of the two builders. One builder builds his house on a solid foundation. When storms come, the house remains standing. The other builder builds his house on the sand. When storms come, the house falls. The truth conveyed here is that those who choose to lead a life in accordance to God's word labor not in vain; whereas, those who choose to a life in disobedience to God's word labor in vain.

Although this parable refers to our faith, the principle of this parable applies in developing a research plan. It is important to have a solid foundation within the empirical literature in order to build a successful research plan.

## Topical Discussion: The Literature Review

The literature review consists of 2 parts:

- the process
- the product.

The **process** is the literature search. A literature search is "a systematic and through search of all types of published literature in order to identify as many items as possible that are relevant to a particular topic" (Gash, 2000, p.1). If you are writing a dissertation or a thesis, then you should expect to review between a 1,000 to 2,000 articles. In the product, you may only include 15 to 20 % of what you review.

The **product** is the written document that is a coherent argument that leads to a proposed study written from your perspective. It is a written synthesis of the literature arranged around themes from your critical perspective. One of the most informative definitions of a literature review I have found is one that Ridley (2008) stated. The literature review is "...where there is extensive reference to related research and theory in your field; it is where connections are made between source texts you draw on and where you position yourself and your research among other sources. It is the opportunity to engage in a written dialogue with researchers in your area while at the same time showing that you have engaged with, understood and responded to the relevant body of knowledge underpinning your research. The literature review is where you identify theories and previous research which influenced your choice of research topic and the methodology you are choosing to adopt. You can use the literature to support your identification of a problem to research or illustrate that there is a gap in previous research that needs to be

filled. The literature review, therefore, serves as the driving force and the jumping off point for your own research investigation.” (Ridley, 2008, p.2)

When constructing a literature review, you want to ensure that it does the following:

- Provides context of the study and clarifies the relationship between the proposed research and previous research, both empirical and theoretical
- Show how the proposed study is unique from previous research
- Convince the reader that your study is timely and worthwhile
- Demonstrate your critical ability as a scholar, not your knowledge of others’ works (e.g. “Jones says...” “Anderson states...”). Formulate an argument from YOUR PERSPECTIVE.
- Make assertions and convince reader of their legitimacy by providing logical and empirical support.

Your literature review should logically lead to your research problem, purpose, and questions, which in turn leads to the identification of your research approach and design.

### **Topical Discussion: Theoretical or Conceptual Framework**

Also, guiding your study is you theoretical or conceptual framework. According to Maxwell (2005), “the point is not to *summarize* what has already been done in the field. Instead, it is to ground your proposed study in the relevant previous work, and to give the reader a clear sense of your theoretical approach to the phenomena that you propose to study” (p. 123) Maxwell (2005) says that your conceptual or theoretical framework should serve two purposes:

1. Shows how your research fits into what is already known (relationship to existing theory and research)
2. Shows how your research makes a contribution on the topic to the field (its intellectual goals)

It also informs your research questions and methodology and helps you justify your research problem (shows why your research is important). “In quantitative studies, one uses theory deductively and places it toward the beginning of the plan for a study. The objective is to test or verify theory. One thus begins the study advancing a theory, collects data to test it, and reflects on whether the theory was confirmed or disconfirmed by the results in the study. The theory becomes a framework for the entire study, an organizing model for the research questions or hypotheses for the data collection procedure” (Creswell, 1994, pp. 87-88). Let’s consider an example. Dr. Zeidler, in her handout, *What is a Theoretical Framework?*, provides a great example of a doctoral student using a theoretical framework to guide her study. Let’s take a look at the example she provides to help you better understand the role a theoretical framework should play in your study.

- ▶ **Topic of Interest:** A doctoral student becomes intrigued by the importance of questioning in the secondary classroom.
- ▶ **Review of the Literature Results:** The student notices that the research findings on the effectiveness of questioning strategies are rather equivocal. In particular, much of the

research focuses on the cognitive levels of the questions asked by the teacher and how these questions influence student achievement.

- ▶ **No Clear Pattern/ Contradictory results:** In some studies, frequent questioning at higher cognitive levels has led to more achievement than frequent questioning at the lower cognitive levels. However, an equal number of investigations have shown no differences between the achievement of students who are exposed to questions at distinctly different cognitive levels.
- ▶ **Speculate:** The doctoral student becomes intrigued by these equivocal findings and begins to speculate about some possible explanations. In a blinding flash of insight, the student remembers hearing somewhere that an eccentric Frenchman called Piaget said something about student being categorized into levels of cognitive development.
  - ▶ Could it be that a student's cognitive level has something to do with how much he/she learns?
- ▶ **New search on Theory:** The student heads back to the library and methodically searches through the literature on cognitive development and its relationship to achievement.
- ▶ Two distinct lines of educational research.
  - ▶ The research on the effectiveness of questioning has established that there is a problem. That is, does questioning have any effect on achievement and does the cognitive level of questions make a difference?
  - ▶ The research on the cognitive development of students has provided an answer to the second question which was specific at the beginning of this soliloquy. That is, could it be possible that students of different cognitive levels are affected differently by questions of different cognitive levels?
- ▶ The student writes down the following research hypotheses:
  - ▶ 1. Both high and low cognitive level pupils will benefit from both high and low cognitive level questions as opposed to no questions at all
  - ▶ 2. Only pupils categorized at the high cognitive level will benefit more from the high cognitive level questions than from the low level questions.

The literature review and theoretical framework are the foundation for your research plan and needs to be conducted prior to proposing a research plan. How to conduct and write a literature review is not within the scope of this book as this book focuses on the methodology of a research plan. There are however numerous resources that can be helpful, including Gash's (2000) *Effective Literature Searching for Research* and Hart's (1998) *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination*. Conducting a thorough literature review and identifying a theoretical framework takes time; thus, it is usually a good idea to define goals. For example:

- Within one week, I will schedule an orientation session to my university library.
- Every week during the semester, I will spend 45 minutes a day reviewing articles.
- I will enter 3 research article summaries in my research chart each day.

### **Application: Developing My Research Plan**

Answer the following questions:

What are my process goals for conducting my review of the literature and identifying my theoretical framework?

- 
- 
- 
- 

### **References**

- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Gash, S. (2000) *Effective literature searching for research*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Hart, C. (1998) *Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination*. London: Sage.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ridley, D. (2008). *The literature review: A step-by-step guide for students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.