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## **A Practical Guide to Literature Reviews and Research Questions for School-Based Counselors**

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# A Practical Guide to Literature Reviews and Research Questions for School-Based Counselors

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## Abstract

School-based counselors and counselors-in-training need to be active consumers of high-quality research in order to incorporate research-supported strategies into their school counseling practice. One way to become familiar with current research is through peer-reviewed journal articles. In order for school-based counselors to effectively translate what they have read in an article into counseling practice, they need to be able to assess the quality of what they are reading. In this article we provide counselors and counselors-in-training with a brief resource to constructively evaluate the quality of literature reviews as well as the research questions of an empirical study. We provide a case example and discuss practical application.

*Keywords:* school counseling, literature review, research question

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019), school-based counselors provide a variety of services (e.g., small and large group counseling, psychoeducation, advisement, consultation) to enhance students' academic, career, and social/emotional development. When providing services, school-based counselors are expected to use interventions that are supported by research-based evidence to improve the likelihood that what they are doing will help their students (Mullen et al., 2018). As such, school-based counselors need to be active and critical consumers of high-quality research in order to incorporate research-supported strategies into their school counseling practice. School counselors appear to have a positive view of evidence-based practices (EBPs; Mullen et al., 2018). However, school counselors experience barriers to implementing EBPs, including self-efficacy for implementation or lack of a central database for finding research-supported interventions (Mullen et al., 2018; Schaeffer et al., 2005; Schiele et al., 2014). One way to become familiar with EBPs is by reading peer-reviewed journal articles. There are a variety of journals school-based counselors might review when looking for research-supported strategies such as *Journal of School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation*, *Professional School Counseling*, *Journal of School Counseling*, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *Intervention in School and Clinic*, and the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling*. All of these journals include empirical research articles in

which the authors attempt to answer important research questions that inform school counseling practice. In order for school-based counselors to effectively translate what they have read in an article into counseling practice, they need to be able to identify if what they are reading is of high quality. It is easy to become confused or lost when reading an article that includes academic jargon, which may relate to counselors' lack of self-efficacy for intervention implementation. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide counselors and counselors-in-training with a brief resource to constructively evaluate the quality of literature reviews and the research questions within an empirical article. An additional purpose of this article is to assist school counselors-in-training and practicing school-based counselors in using literature review and research questions in their own work. In this article we review the key components of a literature review and discuss what counselors should look for when reading and empirical article. Additionally, we describe some of the common methodologies school counselors will encounter when consuming research and provide examples of common research questions in school-based counseling.

School-based counselors are not exempt from the demands of accountability. In fact, it is an expectation as part of the ASCA Model within the Manage and Assess components (ASCA, 2019). For example, within the Manage component of the ASCA Model, school counselors develop plans for classroom lessons and small groups and must document the evidence-base from which they are drawing their interventions. Further, within the Assess component, school counselors document the outcomes of their interventions. In addition to the expectations set forth by the school and district-level administrators, counselors are professionally obligated to demonstrate that the practices and interventions that they implement are evidence-based and effective. The Ethical Standards for School Counselors set forth by ASCA (2016; Standard A.3) require counselors to develop comprehensive, data-informed programs to measure the effectiveness of their programs. In this sense, school counselors have a professional and ethical responsibility to stay abreast of current literature and trends. However, the routine use of research evidence is not reflected in the practice of most school counselors (Young & Kaffenberger, 2011), and it can be difficult for school-based counselors to remain immersed in research and information related to best practices once they have entered the field. In the absence of clinical supervision and the

academic rigor of a graduate program, literature reviews from reputable, peer-reviewed journal articles may provide the support that school counselors need to make informed decisions regarding their work. The reality of school-based counselors' work demands quick and easy access to research in a concise and digestible manner.

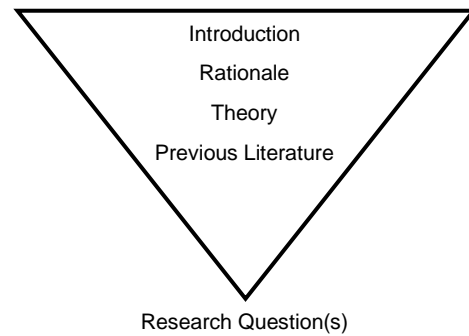
### What is a Literature Review?

Literature reviews are conducted in order to have a clear and current understanding of the current state of a topic. Additionally, researchers review literature when designing a study or writing a conceptual article in order to understand in more depth what is known and to identify gaps in what needs further understanding. "The review of the literature is an in-depth synthesis of the knowledge base of your research problem" (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005, p. 115). Boote and Beile (2005) described a literature review as a theoretical and methodological foundation of a study, and suggest specific aims of literature review: (a) provides context and scope of what is being studied; (b) reviews the results/findings and methods of previous studies to ensure there is a direct connection between the two; (c) identifies gaps of what needs to be accomplished still in an area of study; (d) summarizes and synthesizes existing literature to build a rationale for further investigation.

The first step in writing a research article is to review the previous literature and recent information on the topic. A literature review provides a comprehensive orientation to the theoretical constructs to be investigated and the research relating to these constructs and/or variables. According to Gall et al. (2007) when conducting a literature review a researcher should: (a) define parameters of an investigation; (b) provide context to the research question(s); (c) identify research methodology and instrumentation found effective and ineffective in similar investigations; (d) avoid unintentional replication of prior research investigation(s); (e) conceptualize their research results within the context of previous research (i.e., making meaning of your results). Every article should begin with a review of the literature that includes an introduction to the topic, a rationale, review of previous literature, and the main theories or constructs being studied (Baker, 2016). This information should "funnel" into specific research questions that attempt to close the knowledge gaps and provide school-based counselors with evidence about a particular school counseling intervention or aspect of student development that can be utilized in practice (see Figure 1). A funnel is a useful metaphor when conducting a literature review because it supports the idea that a researcher starts broad and narrows their focus the closer they get to the research question. The next section provides each part of the funneling process.

### Introduction

A primary purpose of a literature review is to provide a concise review of previous literature that includes a solid



**Figure 1**  
**Funnel Analogy**

theoretical framework and strong justification for the research study. The review should primarily include recent articles, typically within the last five years. Some exceptions might be when there is not much literature on a topic or when the authors are citing a foundational or seminal work. For instance, if the author is using solution-focused counseling, they might cite the book that first introduced the theory. The first part of the literature review should introduce the reader to the topic. The introduction will likely include a broad definition of the major area of study in the article. For example, a researcher might be studying the effects of a bullying intervention to help identify ways school-based counselors can more effectively reduce bullying in the school. In the introduction, the author of the article should include a broad definition of bullying and include information about what the concept looks like in the school setting. As an example, Midgett et al. (2017) studied the effects of a bystander intervention to address bullying. The author included a clear and concise definition of bullying. The author might also make distinctions among different types of bullying (e.g., cyberbullying, relational aggression) and operationalize each construct.

### Rationale

Next, the author should make a strong rationale as to why the research study is important. This section should include a discussion about why the topic is important for school counselors. The rationale could include prevalence rates if a student's concern is being studied (e.g., percentage of students who report being bullied) or information about potential adverse effects if the issue is not addressed (e.g., poor academic outcomes for students who are bullied). In our previous example, Midgett et al. (2017) reported the percentage of students who report being bullied and reviewed the psychological and physical effects of being bullied. The author should provide some context that relates the topic to school counseling practice. This section should also include a clear problem statement. The author should make the case that the problem is compelling enough that research needs to be done to develop solutions. Essentially, the author is attempting to answer the question "so what?" related to the topic.

**Theoretical Model**

If a study is guided by a theoretical model, the literature review should include a description of the theory that will be tested in the study. For example, if a study involves the school counselor providing bullying prevention services, the author should review the tenets of the intervention and the theoretical constructs guiding intervention development. Additionally, a review should include a review of relevant and recent studies on the effectiveness of the theory or model under study. Not all studies will be guided by a counseling or developmental theory (e.g., descriptive studies on prevalence rates, frequency of counselor activities); however, intervention studies should be grounded in a well-defined theoretical model that has some previous support. In the Midgett et al. (2017) article, the authors clearly described their approach to bullying prevention, which consists of the STAC model (“stealing the show,” “turning it over,” “accompanying others,” and “coaching compassion”) bystander intervention. The authors describe the primary tenets of the model (e.g., social skills, empathy, social responsibility) and how the tenets align with school counseling practice.

**Previous Literature**

Literature reviews should also include a summary of previous studies related to the topic. For example, authors may review previous studies that used the same group curriculum they are using for their current study. The author should include a concise review of similar studies, including a discussion of the results of the studies. The author should critically analyze how effective the intervention has been in previous studies and discuss where the research currently stands related to the topic. The analysis should include a discussion of positive results as well as results that are not as favorable. For example, in the Midgett et al. (2017) study, the authors reviewed the previous research on effective interventions, and then pointed out that most studies rely on teacher-led curriculum. The authors argued that school counselors should be more involved in intervention delivery.

There are additional considerations when assessing the quality of the literature review and research questions. A specific consideration for school-based counselors is how well the literature review and research questions apply to their work. School-based counselors should consider how applicable the previous literature and questions are for the population with whom they work. Is the previous literature representative of their students’ demographics? For example, if a study was conducted with elementary school students and the literature review is based on younger children, the information might not be as applicable to counselors in a high school setting. Likewise, counselors should consider how well the research questions translate to their work setting and population. Some considerations include: student characteristics, geographic locations, racial and cultural factors, presenting concerns, and counseling modality. For example, if a study was conducted in a rural setting, will it transfer to an urban setting? What are the

characteristics of the school or district in which the study was conducted? Are the school and students in the study similar to the school in which you want to implement your interventions? Finally, counselors should determine if they can implement the intervention in a similar way as described in an article. If the intervention was conducted with individual students, it may not work the same for counselors planning to work with students in groups.

An additional consideration related to the literature review is the accuracy of the information. The literature review includes additional references to resources that may also be of great value to school-based counselors. School-based counselors may find that the citations in the literature review to be interesting and relevant to their current work. If school-based counselors plan to use information from a source cited in a literature review, it is important to find the original study and review the contents for accuracy. Authors may unintentionally misrepresent information from a previous study in their literature review, so it is important to review the original source to make sure the information is accurate. In Table 1, we include a summary of the main components of a literature review and provide key indicators when assessing the quality of the review. We also encourage readers to review other relevant resources that are specific to counseling (Lambie et al., 2008) or related to literature reviews in general (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

**Table 1**  
**Analyzing a Literature Review Using Quality Indicators**

<b>Component</b>	<b>Quality Indicators</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	The introduction includes an overview of the topic, including broad definitions.
<b>Theories or Conceptual Models</b>	If applicable, the author describes the primary theory or conceptual model guiding the research question.
<b>Rationale</b>	The author includes information to justify why the research study is important. The author includes statistics reinforcing the importance of the topic and discusses why the study is important for school counselors. The author includes a clear problem statement.
<b>References to Previous Literature</b>	The author reviews recent literature (primarily within the last five years) and includes research studies that are related to their current study.

**Research Questions**

Empirical articles should include a clear research question or questions. The research question should be developed after reviewing the literature and determining the need for further research on a topic. A sound research question is a logical statement that progresses from what is known or believed to be true to that which is unknown and requires validation (Heppner et al., 2016). The research question drives the research methodology (design, data collection, and analyses), and provides the researcher with a foundation of what is being examined (Bryman, 2007). Therefore, the research design should be based on the research question rather than the researcher’s preferred methodology (i.e., qualitative or quantitative). Hulley and Cummings (2007)

**Table 2**  
**Research Questions in School Counseling Research**

<b>Design</b>	<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Authors</b>
<b>Qualitative (Phenomenology)</b>	What is the influence of the rural context as school counselors construct their professional school counselor identity?	Grimes (2020)
<b>Qualitative (Phenomenology)</b>	What do high school students experience as meaningful in counseling with school counselors?	Sackett et al. (2018)
<b>Correlational</b>	Does school counselors’ work-related rumination predict their job satisfaction, work engagement, burnout, and turnover intentions?	Mullen et al. (2020)
<b>Correlational</b>	Are the two contextual factors (i.e., school support for learning and acceptance of diversity) significantly associated with school connectedness in early adolescence?	Liu et al. (2020)
<b>Quasi Experimental/Experimental</b>	To what extent will the anxiety of students who practice meditation decrease as compared to students in the control group?	Bleasdale et al. (2020)
<b>Quasi Experimental/Experimental</b>	Does the Student Success Skills intervention affect students’ perception of connectedness to school?	Lemberger et al. (2015)

created the acronym FINERMAPS, to describe the characteristics of strong research question: feasible, interesting, novel, ethical, relevant, manageable, appropriate, potential value, publishability, and systematic. A research question should be specific and include the sample/population being studied, the variables being investigated, and a clear identification of the research design (Ratan et al., 2019). If applicable, the question might include the specific measures being utilized to measure the variables.

Research questions differ based on the research methodology used to answer the question. For example, in qualitative studies, researchers are typically seeking to understand how individuals experience, understand, or feel about a particular phenomenon or concept. In school-based counseling, a researcher may want to know more about the experiences of students of students who participate in counseling. An appropriate research question might be: what do high school students experience as meaningful in counseling with school counselors? (Sackett et al., 2018). In correlational studies, the researcher explores the relationship between two or more variables. In these types of studies, the researcher is not attempting to control or manipulate the variables. A researcher might pose the question: are the contextual factors (i.e., school support for learning and acceptance of diversity) significantly associated with school connectedness in early adolescence (Liu et al., 2020)? In experimental and quasi-experimental studies, researchers manipulate a variable. In counseling research, this is often done by providing an intervention to one group of students (treatment group) and comparing it to a group of students (control group) that receives no intervention or a different intervention. The researcher then compares the two groups on a specific outcome to assess whether or not the intervention was effective. A research question could be: to

what extent will the anxiety of students who practice meditation decrease as compared to students in the control group (Bleasdale et al., 2020)? More examples of sound research questions are included in Table 2.

**Practical Application**

In this section, we provide an example of how a school-based counselor used a literature review to support an intervention within their comprehensive school counseling program. Upon review of her school’s data, Latisha discovered that a disproportionate number of students of color had been sent to her district’s disciplinary alternative school program over the last three years. Equipped with this school-based data, she set out to implement a preventative intervention. To garner needed support from her administration, she knew that the foundation of her plan had to be rooted in evidence-based research. Latisha is a professional member of ASCA, which provides her access to the journal *Professional School Counseling*. She entered search terms “students of color,” “support,” “intervention,” “prevention,” “discipline,” and “alternative school,” and a list of articles related to these topics was generated in the system. Furthermore, Latisha searched web-based databases such as Google Scholar and JSTOR. In instances where she found it difficult to access articles, she worked with her district-level administrator and relied on her partnerships with school counseling faculty. Latisha reviewed the abstracts for each article to identify ones that presented a preventative intervention that was done with students of color that decreased referral for disciplinary action and alternative school placement. In addition to reading the selected articles, she also surveyed those reference lists for any additional articles that could potentially inform her plan. Utilizing the skills mentioned earlier in this article, Latisha

was able to evaluate the quality and relevancy of the literature to her program's needs. After a review of the literature, Latisha was able to ascertain current trends, best practices, and evidence-based interventions that had demonstrated efficacy with this population. Armed with this data, Latisha was able to present compelling justification to her administration and other relevant stakeholders that her intervention would be a good use of her time. She was ultimately given the green light to move forward with her school-wide, preventative intervention program. Through the utilization of school-based data and literature, Latisha was able to develop an evidence-based program that promoted equitable outcomes for vulnerable students.

### Research Questions

School-based counselors engaged in EBPs should consider developing their own unique research question(s) to guide their work. By generating one, or perhaps a set of research question(s), school-based counselors stand to add personalization, intentionality, and depth to their inquiry. In concluding the earlier illustration, Latisha thought a guiding research question would be important. The nature of Latisha's program required buy-in from a variety of stakeholders. As such, consistent with the tenets of action research in education (Stringer, 2013), Latisha collaborated with administrators, teachers, and co-counselors to develop one overarching research question to guide their work. After much discussion, the overarching question was related to the feasibility of the program. Because the counselors were each invested in long-term progress, they thought it was important to know early on the practicality and sustainability of the intervention. Ultimately, the research question aided in identifying what was to be discovered at the conclusion of the intervention program; it also helped to give the work a clear focus and purpose.

### Discussion

School counselors appear to be open to implementing evidence-based interventions (Mullen et al., 2018). Thus, when school-based counselors select such interventions, they must be critical consumers of the available research. When reviewing a research article, practitioners must first critically analyze the literature review and research questions. The information in this article can help counselors be more critical consumers of the research as well as active users of the information. We hope this article can help alleviate some of the barriers related to self-efficacy for EBP implementation (Mullen et al., 2018; Schaeffer et al., 2005; Schiele et al., 2014). As we illustrated in the practical example, counselors can use research evidence to advocate for services for students and provide justification to implement effective interventions. Furthermore, by being active and critical consumers of research, counselors can potentially influence school systems and school policy and practice. Although school-based counselors may not be conducting fully developed experimental design research studies in their work, they should be assessing how they are

making a difference. Program evaluation and action research strategies are common approaches that counselors can use to demonstrate effectiveness of their interventions. Formulating a strong research question may provide the foundational framework for counselors to identify the best course of action to use data to support their impact.

### Implications

Counselor educators can use this resource when requiring students to conduct article reviews for class. For example, counselor educators could require students to review the checklist in Table 1 and discuss which components are included and which are missing. The evaluation process can help students develop skills to constructively review articles as they progress into clinical practice. Practicing counselors may find this resource helpful when reviewing previous research to include in requests for policy changes at their district, state, or national levels. For example, practicing counselors can conduct their own literature reviews and use the information to advocate for marginalized student groups, promote equity and access to educational programs, and make the case for school mental health services. School-based counselors can use this guide to review and clearly present research to stakeholders in order to support their interventions and to advocate for changes to inequitable and oppressive systemic practices within the educational system. Finally, counselors can use this resource as a guide when preparing grant proposals to fund timely and innovative initiatives in their school, district, or state.

### Conclusion

School-based counselors play a significant role in supporting students' mental health, academic achievement, and career development. Therefore, it is imperative that they have access to high-quality research so they can be confident that they are using interventions that have empirical support. It can often be challenging to assess the quality of a research article, even for experienced researchers and practitioners. In this article we provide practical strategies to review the literature review and research questions, so that school-based counselors can ensure the research they are consuming is high-quality, and that they are ultimately using the best available research with their students.

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