

Annotated Capstone Sub-Genres

The Literature Review

Overview

A Literature Review provides your reader with an overview of previous researchers' and writers' contributions and the relevant conversations that have taken place around your topic. As Professor Thomas Main reminds us in his "Elements of a Capstone Thesis," the Literature Review "is a narrative of the discussion of your topic or problem in published works." In public and international affairs contexts, Literature Review sources might include both scholarly publications and other analytic writing, such as policy analyses from think tanks and studies produced by government agencies.

Although a Literature Review might begin as an annotated bibliography—a list of summaries of the main points in relevant sources—the final document should synthesize and organize these findings into a narrative that introduces the reader to the main themes, theories, or arguments that recur in the literature. To this end, the literature review is often structured historically/chronologically, offering a brief history of the way thinking has developed around the topic. However, the literature review can also be organized thematically or according to methodology; in this case, the document might be divided into several main strands that appear across the literature.

To write a Literature Review, the first step is to take notes on the relevant research you've gathered in order to gain a sense of the key conversations that have been unfolding in the field. (It's rarely possible to read everything that's been written on a topic, so it's important to identify which sources seem most relevant to your specific research questions.) What do we already know about this topic or problem? What kinds of studies have been published? Where do previous findings overlap or exhibit similarities? How have researchers approached this topic or problem differently? What are the major debates or controversies? What aspects or angles of the issue have *not* been studied yet? Once you identify major trends in the questions that have been researched and the claims that have been made around your topic, you can begin to map out the relationship between your sources and decide how to best structure your narrative.

Remember, rather than simply listing and summarizing each source, the literature review should offer a synthesized overview, placing the research in conversation and making the relationships between each source clear. While you might not directly evaluate or comment on each individual source, your overall narrative should address any pitfalls, gaps, or major issues in the literature. Does one theory or approach account for something that another misses? Did later researchers uncover something new? Answering these questions can help you make choices about your structure and craft meaningful transitions between paragraphs.

The Literature Review forms the foundation for your own contribution to the ongoing dialogue around your topic, and the analysis and synthesis it requires can help strengthen the claims you will make in your Introduction and clarify the most logical methodology to employ in your work. Below is the Literature Review from a Marx graduate's Capstone annotated with key moves made by the writer.

Annotated Model Capstone Literature Review

From “Bronx Students Left Behind: The Implementation of the Small School Movement in Bronx High Schools,” by Katrina Kelley

Literature regarding small schools focuses on two themes. The first theme relates to the desirability of small schools compared to large schools. This stream of literature is used to establish the credibility of the reform, and bring the issue of size to the table as a problem, and from a policy perspective, a clear solution, since evidence that shows that the size of the large school is their problem; the logical solution would be to reduce their size. The second theme relates to the conditions that are needed for a small school to succeed. This is important because the literature no longer assumes that size alone can reform a school. The literature does not address the needs and conditions that are needed by the host schools.

Why Small Schools?

Literature regarding the potential benefits of smaller units of high school structure dates back to Barker and Gump’s study (1964), which advocated a campus model of small schools. Evolution to the more formal schools-within-schools that are being implemented today began with divisions often referred to as academies, houses, or more recently, smaller learning communities, that attempted to subdivide the larger school for students, giving a more personalized experience, while still offering common resources, such as varied course offerings and activities, that make large units desirable (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Gregory, 2001; Ready, Lee & Welner, 2004).

Much of the literature regarding small schools focuses on establishing the fact that, in terms of high schools, smaller units are preferable to larger units in cultivating better student achievement on standardized testing, an important finding in the current push for greater accountability though testing (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Keller, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1997; Klonsky & Klonsky, 1999; Wasley et al., 2000). But there is less consensus on the definitional size in terms of the number of children enrolled (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Lee & Smith, 1997; Wasley et al., 2000; Gregory, 2000; Ready, Lee & Welner, 2004). Goodlad (1984) recommended that secondary schools enroll fewer than 600 students to achieve benefits related to size, while Lee and Smith (1997) found that achievement dropped in secondary schools enrolling less than 600 students and more than 900 students, with the biggest negative effects in schools with more than 2100 students (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001). Chicago, meanwhile, in its implementation, created schools between

This first sentence provides an overview and establishes an organizational structure of two major themes that recur in the literature.

Here the writer identifies gaps in the literature that will be addressed.

The subheadings underscore the organizational structure and highlight key questions addressed by the literature generally and by this study in particular.

In this paragraph, sources are presented chronologically, starting with a key 1964 source that begins the critical conversation around the topic.

This sentence introduces a common thematic strand that occurs across several sources, all cited here.

Here the writer identifies a conflict or lack of consensus in the literature.

These sentences offer evidence to support the claim that there is a lack of consensus on this point in the literature.

200 and 400 students and found this to have positive results (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001).

[...]

How Small Schools?

Because in many cases, early divisions of large high schools, such as houses and academies, tended to exhibit the same problems of their larger units, studies began to focus on necessary conditions that would enable smaller entities to succeed where the larger units did not (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Wallach & Lear, 2003; Warner-King & Price, 2004; Copland & Boatright, 2004; Knowledge Works Foundation 2005; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Gregory, 2001). Consistent attributes in the literature advocate for small school autonomy, identity, leadership, and planning; emphasizing that the small schools establish a separate sense of “self” fostered through complete autonomy from the host school, to avoid evolving into miniature versions of the failing large high school (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Wallach & Lear, 2003; Warner-King & Price, 2004; Copland & Boatright, 2004; Knowledge Works Foundation 2005; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Gregory, 2001; New Century Initiative, 2003). These conditions, however, seem essential foundations for any size school.

Though the climate of the small schools is paramount to their success, changes in the host school climate during the implementation process have not been illuminated. To establish the new small schools, positive and healthy school climates ideally are formed through their creation of a new unique identity autonomous from the large school (Hoy & Tarter, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2002; Wallach & Lear, 2003; Warner-King & Price, 2004; Copland & Boatright, 2004; Knowledge Works Foundation 2005; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Gregory, 2001; Gates Foundation, 2005; Johnson et al. 2002; Barker & Gump, 1964; Sizer, 1984). There is an absence, however, in the discussion of the school climate of the remaining larger high schools as anything other than its potential for hosting the small schools as the reform is developed and implemented. In a recent policy analysis for the city council (Torres et al. 2005), much attention was paid to the conditions of the larger schools that create inhospitable locations for the new schools placed there, which questions the choices in implementation of the Department of Education, but not the effects that the placements themselves may have on the host schools. The analysis does, however, highlight important factors in the decisions of the city in this reform. In particular, the article reveals that the choices of placement for the small schools was propelled primarily by minimizing cost, not by maximizing school safety, small school principles, community

This sentence introduces the next theme in the literature and identifies a major focus of early studies.

Here the writer again groups together several sources by identifying common attributes or positions.

In this paragraph, the writer continues to engage the relevant literature, while also identifying something that is missing in the discussion.

This sentence again highlights a key gap in previous studies.

Here the writer emphasizes the most significant contributions of the studies, rather than dismissing these

involvement or stakeholder acceptance, conditions that research has cited as vital to the success of the small school movement (Torres et al, 2005, 13). Disconnect between the idea of the small school reform and implementation in the Bronx through cost-minimizing decisions ignored the problems and needs of the host schools and decreased the chances that the small schools would succeed.

[...]

Why the Bronx?

The Bronx has been home to large, comprehensive high schools. The Bronx schools have often also been cited as in need of reform, and are home to a large portion of the city's minority, poor, and immigrant student population. The sample size chosen by Torres et al. (2005) shows the importance of the Bronx in the small school movement. Seven of the nine large schools studied regarding the placements of small schools were located in the Bronx (Torres et al. 2005). Though contrary to reform literature regarding placing small schools within safe, hospitable environments with similar cultures (Torres, 2005), small schools were placed in Bronx high schools that were considered failing. This reform was also implemented without the hope of reaching a significant portion of the students in those large failing schools.

With full appreciation of the difficulty of a reform such as this, this Capstone seeks to add analysis of the process of transforming large high schools into small schools as displayed by the Bronx. The study does not seek to enter the debate comparing the effectiveness of small schools to large schools, but merely to evaluate how this reform has affected the large schools that remained, adding another dimension to the effects of the implementation of educational theory into the practical world. This study asks if the implementation of transforming large Bronx high schools into small schools affected the teacher perceptions and real indicators of declining school needs met and climate for those large high schools.

sources entirely because of what they miss.

With this subheading, the writer identifies the need to address the scope of the study – why focus on this particular geographic location, and what has the literature illuminated it up until now?

Here the writer offers evidence to support the claim that this specific borough has been key to the critical conversation, which will help justify their focus on the Bronx in the Capstone.

This paragraph locates this writer's paper within the larger conversation, announcing its intention to contribute to ongoing analysis. The second sentence clarifies the paper's purpose.

The writer concludes the literature review by re-stating the question that this paper hopes to address, in light of what we know from previous studies and in light of what those studies have not yet considered.

Useful templates and phrases for the Literature Review

Introducing Previous Literature:

“It has been well documented/literature shows that...”

“Previous research suggests...”

Introducing a Debate

“When it comes to the topic of _____, most of expert/scholars/researchers will readily agree that _____. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of _____. Whereas some are convinced that _____, others maintain that _____.”

Identifying Limitations:

Previous studies almost exclusively focus on _____.

Historical/Temporal Framing

Over the past decade, most research in X has emphasized the use of ...

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on ...

Early examples of research into X include ... (Smith, 1962; Jones, 1974).

During the past 30 years, much more information has become available on ...

Further resources

“Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper: Literature Review”

<http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/literaturereview>

“Writing a Short Literature Review”

https://library.ithaca.edu/sp/assets/users/lchabot/lit_rev_eg.pdf

“Referring to Sources,” Academic Phrasebank

<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/referring-to-sources/>

“How to Present What ‘They’ Say”

<https://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/learning-commons/documents/writing/synthesis/they-say-i-say-link.pdf>