



Research Reading Guide of the Month
FEBRUARY 2004

Locke, L.F. (2004).

Context Controls, and It Is Your Context That Matters.

Findings from educational research are always influenced by the context within which they were derived. Thus it is that a procedure appearing to work effectively in the context arranged for a study (a teacher, class, school, activity, or measure of achievement), simply may not function at another place and time, with different students, an altered physical environment, or alternative means of measurement. Universally applicable truths are mighty hard to come by in physical education.

The familiar teacher complaint about researchers, "You just don't know my students (or school, principal, gym, and teaching schedule)," is right on the money when it comes to applications of research. The researcher does not (and cannot) know about all of those vital variables, and for that reason cannot possibly write a report that lays out every conceivable adaptation of the findings to fit every imaginable setting. In any case, figuring out exactly how to make use of research information in your gym is not the researcher's job. It is yours. Physical education does not occur in a vacuum, it takes place somewhere, at some time, with some persons, for some purpose, and it is revealed by some particular set of indicators. Those are what constitute context, and nobody can know as much about that as you do.

It is you, the reader of research, who must play the key role here. You have to stand between each study and the realities of your own workplace. You have to be there with all of your craft wisdom, professional training, and common sense. You must think, "What is in this study that might be useful to me, and how can I put it to work in my particular context?" No researcher in the world can do that for you. There is no substitution in this game. If you want to play, you have to stand and deliver in your own gym.

Among the simple lessons that can be derived from the preceding, is the rule that when reading a research report you should pay particular attention to the context for the study. In what ways was it different from your context? Do you suspect that the differences might be important if you try to transfer something (a procedure, a measure, an idea) from the study context to your own workplace environment? Age and prior experience of students, class size and frequency of class meetings, nature of the physical activity involved, and preparation of the teacher are among the many variables that might impede satisfactory transfer.

If you can anticipate how such contextual factors might work against transfer, then you can in many cases plan ways to work around them. If the study was done with small groups of participating learners, you can start your effort with your smallest classes, or perhaps with the aid of a colleague, temporarily divide a larger class. Of course, when a study deals with a powerful variable that clearly makes a large difference (producing what are called "robust findings" in the parlance of researchers), application in your practice may prove beneficial irrespective of differences between the study context and your own. There is only one way to find out, however, you have to try it out – and in doing so the more carefully you consider context, the more you improve your chances of successfully linking research to practice.