



Research Reading Guide of the Month
MARCH 2005

Locke, L.F. (2005).

Ways to Make Research Serve Teaching, II.

This month the research reading guide will remain on vacation while we continue attention to the problem of figuring out how to put research to use. As I noted in the last issue, transferring something from the pages of a report to the gymnasium floor or playing field can be more difficult than it appears. Thus, this short series is devoted to some suggestions for being smart about putting research into practice.

Again, I want to acknowledge the fact that many of these suggestions emerged from conversations with Dolly Lambdin (currently the president of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education) who was particularly well positioned to consider applications of research. Her long career as a university teacher educator was always coupled with her continued presence in schools as a physical education teacher. The concurrent nature of those roles allowed her to move back and forth between the worlds of scholarship and practice with a degree of insight that is not always available to those of us whose careers are largely spent in either college or school environments.

The February issue provided the framework I will use for thinking about applying research to practice. If you do not remember that "set-up" piece (or did not have an opportunity to read it) this would be a good time to go back to the main page and retrieve it by clicking on the Unlock Archive button. It won't take long, and it will make it easier to digest what follows here.

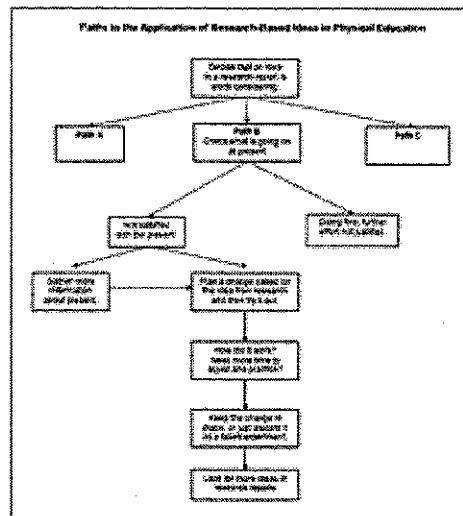
Last month we explored the first form of application suggested by a model that displayed three main tracks. **Path A**, called "**Try it on Monday Morning**," was the route for trying out ideas or strategies derived from research that are relatively simple, low cost, low risk, and intuitively attractive. The protocol for application on that path is straightforward, and although there are some common errors to avoid, the final outcome is likely to be nothing more complex than the alternative actions of "discard it," "revise it and try again," or "retain it for continued use."

As with **Path A**, the application procedure to be considered in this issue, **Path B: Check What Already Goes On**, is appropriate for changes or additions to your teaching that seem transparent and reasonably uncomplicated. The difference here, however, is that working to institute this kind of research-inspired change makes sense only if you are not satisfied with what already is happening in your classes.

The problem with making judgments about your satisfaction is that it requires you to be aware (with some accuracy) of exactly how you teach. In the tumult of busy days full of high speed interactions with students, it is not easy to retain a detailed sense of our actions and their consequences. So, instead of plunging in on Monday morning, for research applications in this category it pays to run a quick preliminary check to see if a change is really justified.

Here is an example of the sort of change that calls use of **Path B**. Several studies in our research literature have employed observation schemes for recording how teachers distribute their attention to individual students over the course of a lesson. Because it is well known that teachers can inadvertently slip into the habit of ignoring some students or giving only one kind of attention to a particular type of pupil, feedback from such instruments can be helpful in spotting patterns of interaction that might otherwise remain unnoticed. Armed with the results from recording what you actually are doing in classes, it can be simple to make adjustments in the routines of your teaching behavior.

The first step, of course, is to admit that you are not absolutely sure about the distribution of attention in your classes. When prodded a bit, most physical education teachers will admit to some degree of uncertainty about that matter (myself included). The next step, however, is not to organize a major effort to recruit and train colleagues to assist you by observing your performance in all of your classes. What you need, instead, is a quick scan to establish a baseline for how you distribute attention in just a few classes. If there is no obvious evidence of ignoring or other kinds of distinct asymmetry in your distribution of attention, there is no cause to expend more time and effort. The "go, no-go" point of decision is clearly indicated in the application model.



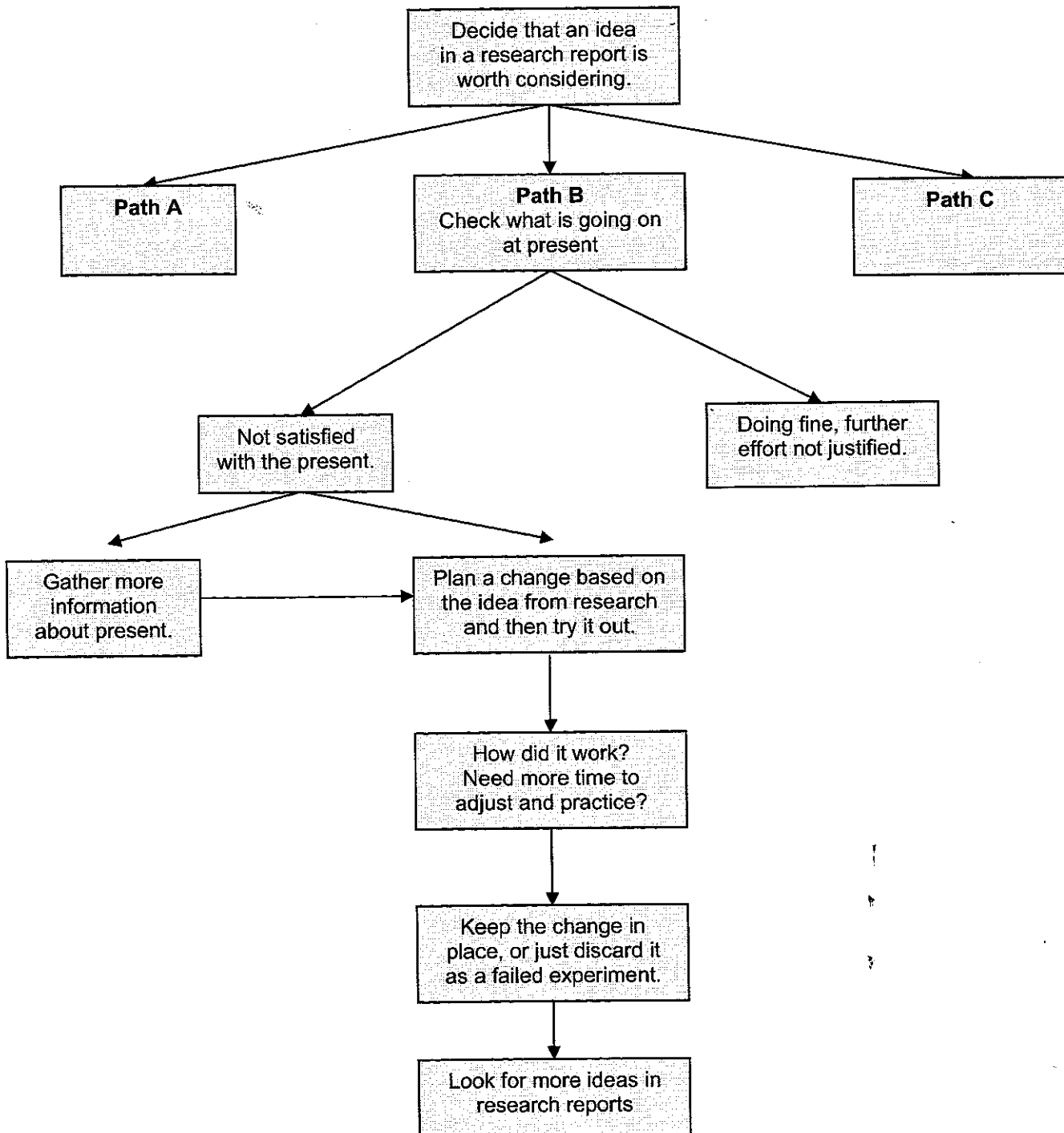
(enlargement on following page)

Nothing elaborate is required. You will need only a colleague who is free to visit several of your classes, pupil rosters, and a clipboard with a pencil. Limit what is recorded to interactions that are clearly visible. Those include such events as conversations with an individual student, non-verbal gestures clearly directed to a particular pupil, hands-on assistance for a student, and other clear-cut forms of individual attention. The observer just puts pencil ticks opposite names on the class roster. By adding several columns the same ticks can record the type of interaction as well. Later, you can count the ticks for each individual and compare frequencies across the entire list of names.

Where there are students who never receive attention or students who seem to attract disproportionate frequencies or types of teacher-student interactions, there may be a hidden problem – or perhaps not. You will have to decide. A closer look (observations in more classes, or a revisit to the same classes on another day) might settle the matter, but doing that will cost time and effort (and more imposition on the good will of colleagues).

If there is evidence of a problem, and I can assure you that aberrations in patterns of teacher attention can be a very serious matter, the cost of additional effort may be well worthwhile. You

Paths to the Application of Research-Based Ideas in Physical Education



will need to use a more formal version of an observation instrument, help one or several colleagues learn how to use it reliably, and accumulate more information about your behavior. This is an appropriate point, however, for me to sound a warning that is based on my own experience with this particular form of such self-inspection.

I found it difficult to consider the results of a simple baseline skim of my classes with a completely dispassionate (honest) eye. When I saw the pattern of attention that I had distributed to pupils, I wanted immediately to "explain" why I gave much more of myself to some students and virtually nothing to others. It took some time (and discomfort) for me to realize that those "explanations" were just ways of avoiding the hard facts residing in those pencil tics. I really did ignore some pupils and did so for reasons that were uncomfortable to confront.

That, however, is enough from ancient history. I am sure you get the point that if you bother to look, then you had better pay attention to what is seen. **Path B** simply allows you the opportunity to be economical in a world where you already have too much to do. Figure out a simple way to check out what already is going on in your class, and then decide whether you are satisfied or not. If you are, then little was lost. If you are not, then you are justified in taking the time to look more closely, to gather more detailed information, and to then use that information in designing corrective action.

And, of course, all of this can apply to many different kinds of research-inspired adjustments to your teaching. How you distribute attention among your students is only one example from the many innovations that call for a quick status check before warranting more serious investment of time and effort.

Next month, **Path C: Stop, Reflect, Consult, and Collaborate**, will deal with ideas from research that may be more complex, be more costly, expose you to greater risks of failure, or simply be difficult to translate into real teaching actions.

Comments on this guide will be welcomed at lflocke@hotmail.com.

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