Unlock Research
Research for Physical Educators

Research Reading Guide of the Month
FEBRUARY 2005

Locke, L.F. (2005).

Ways to Make Research Serve Teaching.

As the title suggests, I now am going to send the research reading guidelines for a brief winter vacation and ask you to turn your attention, instead, to the problem of figuring out how to put research to use. I have argued in previous reading guides that finding ways to improve physical education practice is not the only valuable you can find in reports. Information and ideas that serve to complicate your thinking about practice can give you a more sophisticated and nuanced view of your work and the possibilities it presents. That sort of value aside, however, it certainly is true that sometimes you will find things in research that seem to promise interesting alternatives to present practice, potential solutions to persisting problems, or things that might be just plain fun to try with your students (or colleagues).

Transferring something from the page of a report to the gymnasium floor, however, can be more difficult than it appears. So I am going to offer some Unlock guides for how to be smart about putting research into practice. All of my suggestions about applying research will be based on some long conversations with Dolly Lambdin (President of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education) when we were preparing the concluding chapter of our recent book *Putting Research To Work in Elementary Physical Education (2004).*

Nobody can tell you what will work. I can't tell you what will work in your school because I don't know your school. It may be an overused aphorism, but the following rule is true nonetheless. Every classroom and school is unique, and only the people who are there can determine what is needed and what might be appropriate. It follows, then, that if research-based ideas are to be used to change and improve anything in your gymnasium, it is you who will have to determine what and how. No outsider can do that for you.

Applying research often means adapting research. Figuring out how to use something you found in a report is commonly called *research application*, but such a label can be dangerously misleading. Its implication is that you simply take "how to do it" off the pages of a book or journal, and then insert the process into your daily practice. On rare occasions that may happen, but far more often the process of fitting an idea to the nature and demands of local conditions involves adjustments and a reshaping of what you found in a study. New teaching strategies inspired by research have to be stretched and tailored to meet the unique characteristics of your students, program, school environment, resources, teaching style, and objectives. Doing that is a long way from just *applying* anything.

How teachers identify useful studies. I have observed that when given a stack of studies dealing with the teaching of physical education, teachers have little difficulty in identifying those that contain potentially useful ideas. Not only do they have a keen sense of the difference between sense and nonsense, but they can also spot studies containing things (not always the findings) they would be willing to actually test out in class. Teachers' selections fall into several categories:

1. Studies with suggestions that reflect teachers' concerns about problems in their workplace, whether pedagogical, programmatic, or political.

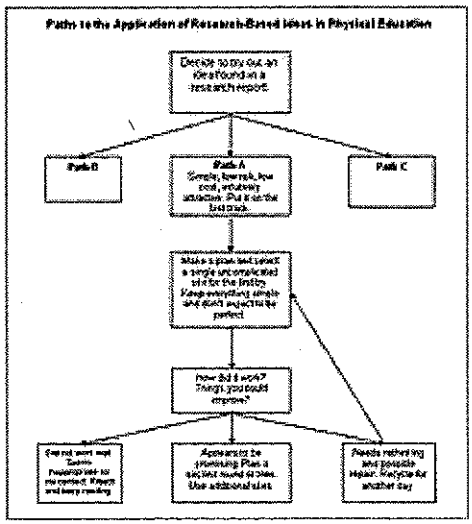
2. Studies with suggested applications that reflect teachers' desire to move their students toward particular outcomes, whether physical, cognitive, or attitudinal.

3. Studies with potentials for use that reflect teachers' need for variety and stimulation, new ideas they had not previously entertained but for which they discover some special interest, curiosity, or personal concern.

In my own teaching, a study which made use of "advance organizers," led me to try that strategy in large lecture sections where I had difficulty in getting all students quickly tuned in and on task (Category 1). A study of pro-social learning in physical education led me to implement a case study approach to improving sportsmanship (Category 2). And a study of mental practice in foul shooting led me to experiment with visualization technique in my basketball class (Category 3) where it was fun but didn't seem to do much to improve skill at the line.

If those are all common reasons for deciding to try a research-based idea in practice, what exactly is the next step? What is the smart way to go from an attractive looking possibility to the reality of actually putting it into practice with students? The answer may be less complicated than you think because the alternatives come from common sense.

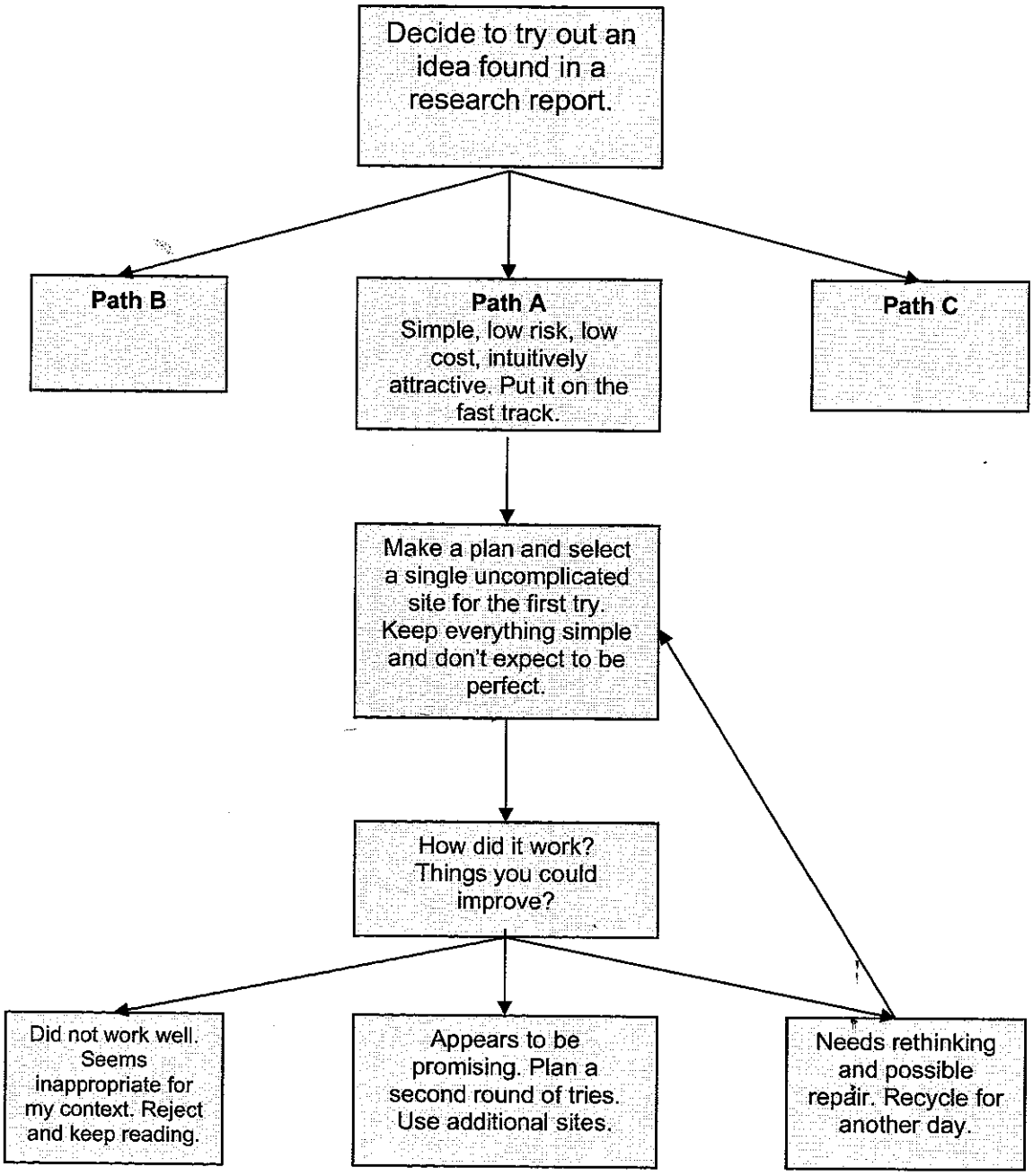
The common paths to research applications. At least in physical education, most efforts at research application call for action that proceeds along one of three well-defined routes – what Dolly and I came to call *paths to application*. The three (designated as A, B, and C) are mapped on the attached diagram, and I will give each a brief explanation, starting with Path A this month and proceeding to the other two next month. I want to caution you, however, that like all such diagrammatic representations, this one is a vast oversimplification.



(enlargement on following page)

In the real world the paths are not so neatly separated and linear but, instead, are richly interconnected and full of branches. It is common to be proceeding along one and suddenly realize you really belong on an adjacent course of action. What makes the most practical sense is to start out by considering which path best fits the opportunity offered by a study. Then, once underway, you just remain watchful to be sure you don't get locked into a bad choice or fail to consider an alternative that is not even included in the application model. Remember, diagrams are just abstractions about a world that is far too complicated to capture in all its richness – and certainly not with little boxes and arrows.

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



Path A: Try it on Monday morning. We will start this month with the easiest path (A), and leave the other two for explorations in the March issue. Path A is the fast track to application. Reading research studies (or their annotations) invariably will turn up ideas for action that are simple, low cost, low risk, and intuitively attractive. On path A you discipline yourself not to turn the test run into a big production. Just make a simple plan for what you want to do and try it out on Monday morning.

The Path A protocol is easy to remember because it flows from common sense.

- Start with just one class, and preferably one that is easy to manage.
- Prune the idea back to the most basic version possible.
- Plan to prepare your students for any change in the regular routine.
- Watch for things that might be done better next time, and jot down a reminder note immediately after the lesson.
- Decide in advance exactly what will tell you whether the application is working as predicted or not.
- Don't expect to be perfect on the first try. For any innovation in teaching both you and the students have to learn the ropes. Many of the test efforts on Path A lead into recursive loops that go right back to the planning stage. There, you can use what you learned from the first trial to devise a better second trial.

Where teachers get lost on Path A. The most common error in this kind of "jump-in-and-just-do-it" application strategy is not having a plan for deciding whether the change really makes anything better. Once you and your students have settled down and know what to do, what evidence are you going to consider when deciding whether it worked or not? You don't need an elaborate plan for evaluation at the start, but you do have to know where to look. Once you have decided on that, the decision to discard, revise, or retain will be easy.

Next month we will examine two other paths that are more cautious and that allow you to take into account some considerations not involved in Path A.

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

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