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Swimming and Water Safety: Reaching all Children in Australian Primary Schools

Timothy Joseph Lynch

Data gathered indicate that reductions in annual Australian drowning fatalities for not only children, but people of all ages, have hit a plateau, and if anything, figures suggest that fatal drownings in recent years are on the increase. It is alarming that figures are not falling despite the many well-developed swimming and water safety education programs available. The number of drowning deaths in Australia is regarded by governing bodies as far too many, hence it is proposed that the necessary changes required to further reduce drowning may involve teachers within primary schools being used more efficiently in the educational process. This paper concludes that by implementing swimming and water safety with conviction into the school curriculum, all students will become more aware of drowning risk behaviors, thus successfully decreasing drowning fatalities in both the short and long terms.

School teachers have acquired pedagogical knowledge and experience in applying it to their knowledge areas. In this paper I argue that by supplementing their pedagogical skills with swimming and water safety knowledge, teachers can successfully implement a water safety curriculum in schools. I propose that professional development using existing courses is one strategy to improve the swimming and water safety knowledge and qualifications of primary school teachers. Two exemplar swim training courses are offered by the Australian Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association: Swim Australia Teacher (SAT) and AUSTSWIM (Australian Council for the Teaching of Swimming and Water Safety).

Primary school teachers allow ready access to all children in Australia. It is possible for swimming and water safety knowledge to be connected to any of the eight key learning subjects in the primary school curriculum. Teachers may have increased opportunities and autonomy to do this with the development of the new National Curriculum Framework. I investigate research literature to suggest how this proposal is best managed.

Swimming and Water Safety: The Plateau

Between 1 July 2009 and 30 June 2010, 314 people drowned in Australian waterways. This has increased for the second year in a row: 4% since the year before and 12% on the five year average. Fifty-six of the drowning deaths were children

aged 0–17 years. Thirty-three of these fatalities were under 5 years of age, increasing 7% on the 5-year average of 31 (Royal Life Saving Society Australia, 2010).

A considerable amount of work has been attributed to educating the public about swimming and water safety awareness in a commitment to reduce drowning fatalities. It is acknowledged that the best time to prepare children for safe aquatic participation and provide the skills and knowledge needed to have a lifelong safe association with water is during childhood (RLSSA, 2010). Successful water safety programs implemented within Australian communities have included the following:

- Royal Life Saving’s Society Australia (RLSSA) Keep Watch program
- RLSSA Swim and Survive program
- Laurie Lawrence’s Kids Alive Do The Five
- Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) Surf’s Up
- Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) Telstra Beach to Bush

Programs associated with courses and qualifications for teaching swimming and water safety include the following:

- Australian Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association (ASCTA) Swim Australia Teacher
- AUSTSWIM training of teachers of swimming and water safety

Water Safety Programs in Australia

RLSSA

The Keep Watch Program’s aim is to “prevent drowning deaths of children under 5 years of age in all aquatic locations” (AUSTSWIM, 2009, p. 3). The locations with specific hazards include the Keep Watch at Public Pools, Keep Watch at The Farm, and Keep Watch at Bath Time. Despite these programs and efforts over the past seven years the number of drowning deaths for children under 5 years has decreased only slightly (RLSSA, 2011).

The Swim and Survive program was launched in 1982. The demand for the program was such that there were one million awards achieved in the first two years. To date, it is estimated that nearly 10 million Australians have participated in the Royal Life Saving Society’s Swim and Survive Program and “during this time there has been a 75% reduction in drowning in the 5-14 year age group,” the program’s targeted age group (RLSSA, 2011).

Laurie Lawrence’s Kids Alive Do The Five

This water safety program began in 1988 to reduce preschool drowning. “Drowning is the greatest cause of accidental death in the under five age group in Australia. Every year, one child drowns each week” (Lawrence, 2011). The five program points comprise an easy to remember jingle for when children under five are around water: Fence the pool, shut the gate, teach your kids to swim—it’s great, supervise—watch your mate, and learn how to resuscitate.

Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA)

SLSA has two school educational programs. Telstra Beach to Bush was the largest educational initiative ever undertaken by Surf Life Saving after research indicated that half the people rescued at the beach lived more than 50 kilometres from the beach (SLSA, 2011a). The resource “Surf’s Up” was released in 2007 containing a range of cross-curricular activities for teachers to implement in the classroom (SLSA, 2011b).

Swim Australia

Swim Australia (Australian Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association) was “launched in 1997 by the Federal Minister for Sport and Recreation to assist developing the learn-to-swim program in Australia to its full potential. ASCTA is a not-for-profit-membership-based organization that strives to train the world’s best swimming and water safety teachers and highest performing swimming coaches” (Australian Swimming Coaches & Teachers Association, 2011). ASCTA is Australia’s premier professional swimming body and courses are recognized by the International Federation of Swim Teachers Association (IFTSTA). Swim Australia’s aim is for all Australians to learn to swim and gain water safety knowledge through safe, enjoyable and quality swimming lessons.

ASCTA is an Australian Registered Training Organization (RTO) offering 35 units of competency, delivered in all states and territories (Australian Government, 2011). Swim Australia Teacher courses include the following:

- Swim Australia Teacher (SAT) directed at 4–12 years
- Swim Australia Teacher of Babies and Toddlers (SAT B & T) directed at 0–4 years,
- Swim Australia Teacher of Competitive Swimming (SAT CS) directed at 7–12 years
- Swim Australia Teacher Adolescents and Adults (SAT AA) directed at 14 and above
- Swim Australia Teacher Learners with Disability (SAT LWD)
- Swim Australia Teacher Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (SAT CALD; Australian Swimming Coaches, 2011)

AUSTSWIM

AUSTSWIM has a close philosophical and working relationship with Swim Australia, RLSSA, and SLSA (AUSTSWIM, 2009). AUSTSWIM programs for teaching swimming and water safety can be aligned with the units of competency in the corresponding Swim Australia Teacher courses. AUSTSWIM is also an Australian Registered Training Organization (RTO), offering 18 units of competency but not all are delivered within all Australian states and territories (Australian Government, 2011). AUSTSWIM courses include

- AUSTSWIM Teacher of Swimming and water safety
- AUSTSWIM Teacher of Infant and Preschool Aquatics

- AUSTSWIM Teacher of Aquatics for People with a Disability
- AUSTSWIM Teacher Toward Competitive Strokes
- AUSTSWIM Teacher of Adults

Synergy: Optimizing School Teacher Involvement

While all programs appear to have been successful in contributing to the promotion of water safety and swimming development, the RLSSA 2010 national drowning report suggested that more education is required. This recommendation is supported by Peden, Franklin, and Larsen (2009, p. 197) who stated “there is an increasing concern that water safety education is decreasing.” The challenges and actions identified by RLSSA within the 2010 report (p. 2) included the following:

- Improving pool fencing legislation and ensuring pool fences are checked regularly.
- Ensuring appropriate levels of funding for comprehensive integrated public awareness and education programs, such as the Royal Life Saving Keep Watch program.
- Ensuring quality instructors in resuscitation and swimming and water safety programs.
- Educating those who have contact with parents and carers of young children.
- Continuing and increasing research into the causes and prevention of drowning.

I would like to argue that primary school teachers play a direct role in at least three, possibly four, of these actions. If the individual school teacher participated in research into the causes and prevention of drowning, then they could contribute to all five of these actions. Hence, school teachers are a valuable human resource who can assist in water safety public awareness and swimming promotion. I propose that teachers implementing swimming and water safety with conviction into school curriculum can enable all students to become aware and successfully decrease drowning fatalities.

Furthermore, in Australia, children have traditionally received their swimming and water safety education during primary school (Morgan, 2005). Within Australian education curriculum, swimming and water safety education is closely aligned with the Health and Physical Education key learning area, which consists of three strands: health, personal development, and physical activities. Swimming and water safety education can be skillfully connected to any of the eight key learning areas (discipline subjects) by primary school teachers.

School Curriculum

I would further argue that teachers will have greater opportunities and autonomy to connect swimming and water safety education within the key learning areas (discipline subjects) with the development of a National Curriculum Framework. This new framework will be replacing the current state syllabi. This is acknowledged by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2010, p. 10):

Jurisdictions, systems, and schools will be able to implement the Australian Curriculum in ways that value teachers' professional knowledge, reflect local contexts and take into account individual students' family, cultural, and community backgrounds. Schools and teachers determine pedagogical and other delivery considerations.

As aquatic activities are so much a part of the Australian culture, I argue that swimming and water safety should be an integral part of the curriculum. Hence, it is pertinent that teachers have the knowledge and confidence to implement swimming and water safety education into the classroom and beyond. This argument is supported by the Australian Water Safety Council (2008b), who state that swimming and aquatic activity in Australia is part of the "social makeup" of the country. In many schools, this will involve curriculum reform. Ewing (2010, p. 148) describes curriculum reform:

Change arguably refers more generally to undertaking something new: a movement from one state, form or direction to another. Curriculum reform implies more than change — it is a direct assertion that this change will bring about improvement or enhancement. Curriculum reform therefore suggests that students will benefit from the innovative practices, materials, or the teacher's change in beliefs and pedagogical approach. In other words, their experiences at school will in some way improve.

Curriculum change is a complex process (Sparkes, 1991), especially socially complex (Fullan, 2001), which often results in schools experiencing only surface or superficial change (Sparkes, 1991).

As Ewing (2010) suggests curriculum reform may involve innovative practice, materials, teacher's change in beliefs, and pedagogy. As evidenced, curricular materials for water safety education are available within Australia. I argue that innovative practice and pedagogical change is a direct result of teachers' beliefs. Teachers need to believe that the effort and time they are investing into pedagogical and practice change will result in curriculum reform. Hence, one important element of my proposed water safety reform involves teachers valuing their influence on children and believing the difference they can make in reducing drowning fatalities through implementing swimming and water safety education.

Teacher Preparation

Peden et al. (2009) conducted a research study examining key water safety issues in primary schools across Australia. One of the key issues identified was the "lack of qualified staff at primary schools who are both able and willing to undertake instruction of aquatic activity" (p. 205). Another finding was that teachers with no water safety qualifications "were less confident in instructing or even getting in the water" (p. 205). The negative impact that a lack of teacher confidence has on implementation corresponds with findings from a research report published by Morgan and Bourke (2005) called "an investigation of preservice and primary school teachers' perspectives of PE teacher confidence and PE teacher education," in which they state, "Several Australian studies have described the lack of qualifications of

classroom teachers to deliver PE programs, largely as a result of inadequate teacher training, thus failing to develop teacher confidence” (2005, p. 7).

Furthermore, a doctoral dissertation, “An evaluation of school responses to the introduction to the Queensland 1999 Health and Physical Education (HPE) syllabus and policy documents in three Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) primary schools,” found that the degree of implementation of the 1999 HPE syllabus corresponded to the teacher’s degree of HPE qualifications, knowledge, and experience in the HPE learning area (Lynch, 2005). Therefore, I would argue that an increase in “swimming and water safety” qualifications, knowledge, and experience among school staff ought to result in the more confident delivery of primary school aquatic programs (Peden et al., 2009). As a result of increased water safety qualifications, school teachers ought to consistently serve as valuable resources to assist in water safety public awareness and swimming promotion.

Outsourcing

For many primary schools in Australia, it is common practice to have qualified swim instructors from externally provided programs, usually associated with the municipal pool. Peden et al. (2009, p. 202) found that “Aquatic activity was outsourced at 88.1% of primary schools surveyed and were most commonly outsourced to commercial learn-to-swim teachers (36.5%), followed by Education Department appointed swim teachers (21.2%), and teachers from the community (19.2%), all who were required to hold approved water safety qualifications.”

Outsourcing aquatic activity enables regular provision of water safety education in Australian schools. Regular provision can be an issue due to restrictions which include “legal liability concerns, time and cost constraints, increasing workloads, staff/student ratios, difficulties coping with varied skill levels, and a lack of adequately qualified staff” (Australian Water Safety Council, 2008a). While outsourcing of swimming programs on the surface appears to be working well, there is still a concern that water safety education is not reducing fatal drownings.

I would further argue that when using externally-provided programs implemented by external swim instructors, many teachers are not involved during the students’ swimming and water safety lesson. In some schools this may be used as teacher release time to meet the entitled 120 min per week (Roulston, 1999) and at other schools, teachers may choose to take a passive role by observing from a distance. This is not to suggest that schools should not use outside agents for swimming instruction or to denigrate the expertise that swimming instructors encompass. Instead, I am suggesting that classroom teacher involvement in water safety education, both in the water and in the classroom, could be one strategy for reinforcing children’s knowledge, skills, and understanding. This may involve teachers being in the water if they are comfortable with this, or it may suggest teachers assisting from the side of the pool by offering feedback that acknowledges children’s efforts and improvements. It also involves, when it is not teacher release time, external instructors and teachers collaboratively and cooperatively promoting swimming and water safety. Data gathered in a recent study (Whipp, Hutton, Grove, & Jackson, 2011) found that teachers working collaboratively with external providers is associated with positive perceptions about the value of the physical activity and

enables teachers to develop confidence with less stress. Hence, effort is required for teachers to go “above and beyond” what is often current practice in schools. Effort is a result of teachers believing that it is pertinent and enables curriculum reform.

In fact, not having teachers involved in swimming and water safety activities at pools can have detrimental effects. It is a lost opportunity for more fully integrating swimming and water safety education into the curriculum. It can also be argued that teachers removing themselves from swimming lessons can be perceived as permission to distance themselves from swimming and water safety education altogether. Emmel (2004) warned that schools use sporting organizations, including swimming instructors, as extensions to normal curricular offerings but not as replacements for them.

Water Safety Curriculum Connections

In relation to Emmel’s warning, I interpret that when water safety education is offered by the classroom teacher, important connections can be made with other curriculum activities. As a result, swimming and water safety lessons in the pool can reinforce curriculum concepts such as health, personal development, and science, through the “hands on” experience of the children. Research suggests that the more knowledgeable teachers are about swimming and water safety concepts, the more confident they will be in becoming involved at the pool (Peden et al. 2009). The more knowledgeable and confident the teachers are, the more likely they will integrate water safety education into all aspects of the school curriculum, both in and out of the classroom.

Well trained teachers have acquired expertise in pedagogical knowledge, as well as content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, in a variety of topic areas. They have achieved the National Professional Standards of Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) as a result of four years of initial teacher education as well as their subsequent professional experiences. While some teachers will have swimming and water safety qualifications, knowledge, and experience, many do not (Peden et al., 2009). I recommend that teachers participating in professional development using swimming and water safety courses to gain qualifications will be more knowledgeable, confident, and likely to implement and integrate water safety education into the curriculum. The acquisition of water safety knowledge and qualifications will offer an opportunity for these same teachers to realize the pertinent role they can play in improving water safety and reducing the risk of drowning of their students. Peden et al. (2009, p. 207) argued similarly that “support should be provided to encourage school staff to gain and maintain current water safety qualifications as a means of improving the provision of and participation in school-based aquatic activity for both students and supervisors.”

Barriers

Assuming workloads of classroom teachers have increased, as research suggests, then the increases form a barrier to teachers providing water safety education. This assumption does not rationalize why a teacher at the pool, who is not in release

time, with an external swimming instructor conducting the swimming lesson, is not involved. Nor does it justify why when teachers are planning units of work or brainstorming curriculum connections, that the connection with water safety is avoided.

Professional development opportunities for teachers, specifically through swimming and water safety courses, can build teacher awareness of the importance of water safety and confidence to promote it. Real change involves transformation of people's beliefs about their surroundings. In the current discussion, it involves teachers' realization of the impact role they could have in water safety education. Real change involves transformation of people's beliefs, which can be threatening and stressful for the teachers involved (Sparkes, 1991). Transformations often result in conflict, loss, and struggle, which are fundamental to successful change (Fullan, 1982). My proposal that classroom teachers ought to complete swimming and water safety courses is a highly sensitive issue, especially among people who have had very diverse and varying experiences in and around water. The sensitivity of this issue to teachers cannot be ignored. Professional development in swimming and water safety teacher education needs to be undertaken with a clear understanding of the perils. Just as children should not be forced to swim, but rather given plentiful opportunities and encouraged to make the choice for themselves to learn to swim, so should classroom teachers be afforded the same opportunities, choices, and rewards.

Long Term Advantages

I am willing to argue that teachers acquiring swimming and water safety qualifications can afford four important advantages in the long term for promoting school-based water safety education:

1. It increases the opportunities for water safety education inside the classroom by encouraging integration into many areas of the curriculum other than just the HPE physical activity lessons in the pool.
2. Teachers who are more knowledgeable will be more confident and more likely will increase the quality of implementation inside the classroom and the pool.
3. Knowledgeable teachers have more confidence to promote higher quality swimming and water safety lessons and to work more collaboratively and cooperatively with swimming instructors. Knowledgeable teachers with qualifications can serve as quality assurance for swimming conducted by outside organizations.
4. Knowledgeable and qualified teachers believe more strongly in the importance of implementing water safety into the curriculum, which may enable deeper curriculum change and education reform.

Does One Cap Fit All?

Having classroom teachers uniformly qualified in swimming and water safety enables an equitable education for all children in primary schools across Australia. Equitable education for all children is one of the purposes of the latest national reform: "The most important driver for a National Curriculum should be about

equity and social justice and improved learning outcomes for our most disadvantaged and isolated students” (Ewing, 2010, p. 127). These aspirations are evident throughout the National Curriculum and are very explicitly described within the goals that drive the curriculum reform, established at the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (December 2008):

- Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence
- Goal 2: All young Australians become:
 - Successful learners
 - Confident and creative individuals
 - Active and informed citizens (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008).

It can be argued that offering opportunities for all teachers to gain qualifications in swimming and water safety can enable an equitable education for all students, regardless of location or socioeconomic status. Research suggests that rural and isolated schools find it most difficult to conduct aquatic activities (Peden et al., 2009), which corresponds with data gathered for drowning fatalities.

The RLSSA National Drowning Report 2010 states that “the location where children drown changes as they grow, from swimming pools in the under 5 age group to river/ creek/ stream locations for older children” (RLSSA, p. 6). River/ creek/ stream locations along with lake/ dam/ lagoon are often associated with rural areas within Australia, where there is no access to a beach. “The most common locations where people drown are open water bodies, rivers, oceans, and harbours, followed by lakes, dams lagoons and the beach” (RLSSA, 2009, p. 11). This was acknowledged by Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) with the development of Telstra Beach to Bush program, their largest educational initiative to date.

Strategies for Promoting Teacher Water Safety Qualifications

One strategy for enabling teachers to gain qualifications in swimming and water safety is the Get Active Queensland Accreditation Program (GAQAP) ASCTA Swimming Teaching and Water Safety Course. “GAQAP provides teachers, school sport volunteers, tertiary and senior secondary school students throughout Queensland with free training that can ultimately lead to recognised accreditation in coaching, officiating and sports first aid” (Queensland Government, 2011). While there is no fee for attending the day-long course there is a reduced Swim Australia Teacher accreditation fee for interested participants.

Another long term strategy is to incorporate swimming qualifications into initial teacher education. During the study conducted by Peden et al. “several respondents stated that qualified graduates holding water safety qualifications would be highly regarded” (2009, p. 205). Victoria Institute of Teachers (VIT) teacher registration requires that PE (HPE) graduates from initial teacher education programs in the primary school “have a current first aid certificate and current teacher of swimming and water safety qualification” (VIT, 2008), which includes ASCTA Swim Australia or AUSTSWIM.

New South Wales Institute of Teachers (NSWIT) and Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) do not require any swimming or water safety qualification for accreditation in teacher registration but it is an expectation of some employers (VIT personal communication, May 20, 2011). There is no reason why this requirement should be limited to HPE teachers in Victoria. The requirement could be extended to all teacher candidates and opportunities promoted to all primary classroom teachers in Victoria and other states and territories.

Conclusion

The best time to prepare children for safe aquatic participation is during childhood (RLSSA, 2010), which is why it is pertinent that primary schools and teachers value their roles in water safety education and potential influence they have on children. There are many water safety programs available to support schools and teachers in educating children that I have briefly investigated. While these programs appear to have been successful in contributing to the promotion of water safety and swimming development, there is an increasing concern that water safety education is decreasing (Peden et al., 2009). I propose that teachers implementing swimming and water safety with conviction into school curriculum can enable all students to become aware and successfully decrease drowning fatalities.

I suggest that classroom teacher involvement in water safety education both in the water and in the classroom could be one strategy for reinforcing children's knowledge, skills, and understanding. At present, many schools outsource aquatic activity, which successfully overcomes restrictions and enables regular provision of water safety education. I suggest that external instructors and teachers collaboratively and cooperatively promote swimming and water safety rather than the external instructor being solely responsible. This involves teachers making important water safety connections with other curriculum areas.

One important element of my proposed water safety reform involves "teacher belief," teachers believing the difference they can make in reducing drowning fatalities through implementing swimming and water safety education. Belief is necessary for the effort required. Real change involves transformation of people's beliefs, which can be threatening and stressful for the teachers involved (Sparkes, 1991); furthermore, it requires support and understanding. I recommend that teachers participating in professional development using swimming and water safety courses to gain qualifications will be more knowledgeable, confident, and likely to give the effort necessary to implement and integrate water safety education into the curriculum. This has the potential to penetrate swimming and water safety education for all children in Australian schools to a level not yet achieved.

There are professional development programs and policies within the Queensland education system and Victorian Institute of Teachers registration, respectively, that have begun this necessary complex process of reform. This needs to continue in a sensitive and understanding manner and spread to every jurisdiction and system so that all Australian children have access to water safety education. It is also consistent with the National Curriculum and the equitable education it espouses for all children in primary schools across Australia.

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