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Rips, currents and snags: Investigating the complexities of teaching swimming and water safety within primary schools.

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Rips, currents and snags

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It is possible for swimming and water safety to be skilfully connected to any of the eight key learning curriculum areas (discipline subjects) by primary school teachers, and can be argued that teachers will have increased opportunity and autonomy to do this with the development of a National Curriculum Framework. While this proposal seems simple on the surface, there are underlying complexities that may act as possible barriers.

Introduction

Swimming and water safety can be skilfully connected to any of the eight key learning areas (discipline subjects) by primary school teachers. It can be argued that teachers will have increased opportunity and autonomy to do this with the development of a National Curriculum Framework. This framework will be replacing a more detailed, prescriptive jurisdiction syllabus. This is acknowledged by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2010):

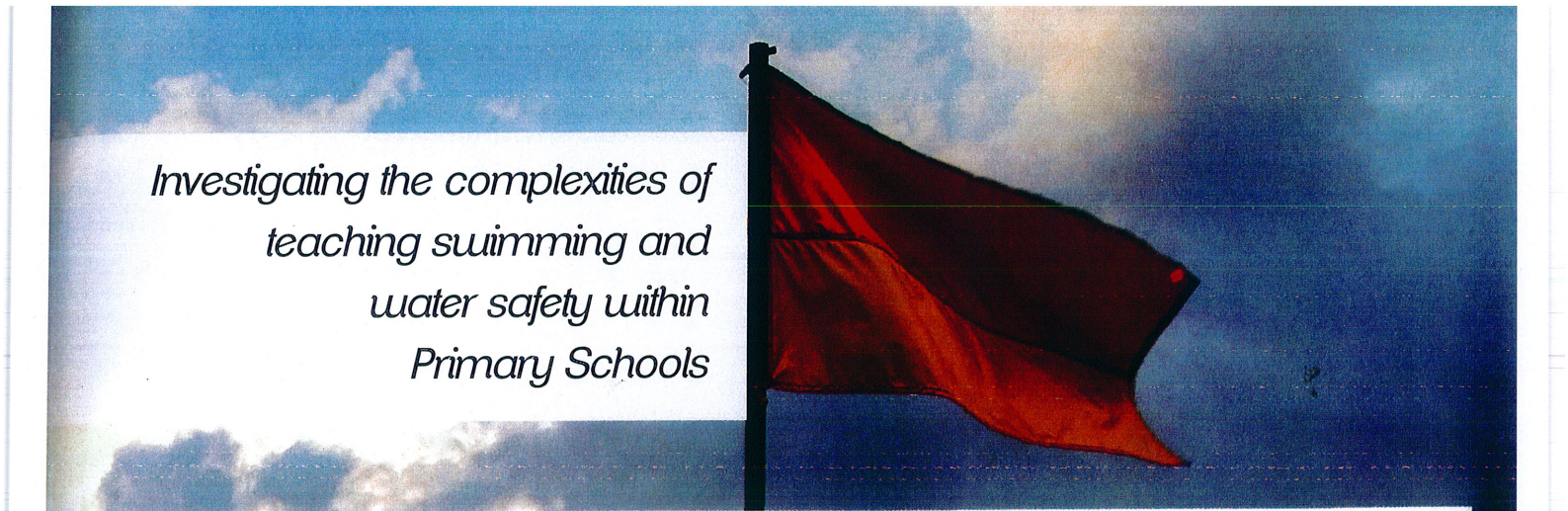
Jurisdictions, systems and schools will be able to implement the Australian Curriculum in ways that value teachers' professional knowledge, reflect local contexts and take into account individual students' family, cultural and community backgrounds. Schools and teachers determine pedagogical and other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

Teachers having the knowledge and confidence to implement swimming and water safety into the curriculum is essential for as stated by the Australian Water Safety Council, swimming and aquatic activity in Australia are part of the social makeup of the country.

For many schools this will involve change for improvement, resulting in curriculum reform teacher's beliefs about the curriculum that will therefore enable penetration of swimming and water safety to a deeper level. Hence, 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.

Peden, Franklin and Larsen (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. Another finding was that teachers with no water safety qualifications were less confident in instructing or even getting in the water. A lack of school teacher confidence and the negative impact this has on implementation corresponds with findings from the research conducted by Morgan and Bourke (2005) 'An investigation of pre-service and primary school teachers' perspectives of PE teacher confidence and PE teacher education':

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.



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Furthermore, a research study conducted as 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, it can be argued that an increase in 'Swimming and water safety' qualifications, knowledge and experience amongst school staff will result in delivery of more aquatic programs with confidence and hence, school teachers can be utilised consistently as a valuable resource to assist in water safety public awareness and swimming promotion.

***Swimming and Water
Safety Practice in
Primary Schools***

For many primary schools in Australia it is common practice to have qualified swim instructors from externally provided programmes, usually associated with the municipal pool.

Peden, Franklin & Larsen (2009) 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 has overcome many barriers to providing water safety education in Australia. According to the Australian Water Safety Council, restrictions have included 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. While this appears to be working well, there is still a concern that water safety education is not sufficient.

Furthermore, it can be argued that when using externally provided programs implemented by external swim instructors, some teachers will not be utilised during the students' swimming and water safety lesson.

This is not to suggest that schools do not use outside agents for swimming instruction or diminish the expertise that swimming instructors encompass, however teacher involvement could be one possible strategy for educating all children and reinforcing knowledge, skills and understanding. This may involve teachers being in the water if they are comfortable with this, or it may be involvement from the side of the pool, offering feedback, acknowledging children's efforts and improvements. It also involves external instructors and teachers collaboratively and cooperatively promoting swimming and water safety. Data gathered in a recent study carried out by 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, enables teachers to develop confidence and is less stressful.

Teachers being permitted to not be involved in swimming and water safety activities at pools can have detrimental effects, rather than the enhanced outcomes that they originally set out to achieve.

What messages are children being given through the 'hidden or unintentional curriculum' when a teacher takes a seat at the pool and removes themselves from the learning experience? 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.

It is suggested that schools be careful that they use sporting organizations, including Swimming Instructors as extensions to curriculum provision and not as a replacement for it. Thus, water safety education needs to be offered by the school teacher through connections within other curriculum activities and then swimming and water safety lessons in the pool reinforce these concepts in a 'hands on' physical dimension. Research suggests the more knowledgeable teachers are about swimming and water safety, the more confident they will be in adopting an involved role at the pool, and the more likely water safety education will be integrated into the school curriculum, in and out of the classroom.

Reaching all children


Another benefit of having teachers qualified in swimming and water safety is that it will enable an equitable education for all children in primary schools across Australia. This is the purpose of the latest national reform. This is evident through the National Curriculum and explicitly within the goals 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

Furthermore, research (Peden, Franklin & Larsen, 2009) suggests that rural and isolated schools find it most difficult to conduct aquatic activities.

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 socio-economic status.

It is recognised that teachers have increasing workloads which research suggests has formed a barrier for water safety education. However, teacher education and specifically swimming and water safety courses are paramount in building teacher awareness and confidence. Real (deep) change involves transformation of people's beliefs about their surroundings or in this situation, realisation of the impact role they have in water safety education. Education curriculum change expert Fullan (1982) suggests that transformations often result in conflict, loss and struggle which are fundamental to successful change.



The proposal of school teachers completing swimming and water safety courses is a sensitive issue, as people have diverse and varying experiences on and around water.

This cannot be ignored and hence, swimming and water safety teacher education needs to be undertaken with a clear understanding that just as children should not be forced to swim, but rather given opportunities and encouraged to make the choice for themselves, so should the same inclusive principles apply to teachers.

However, having emphasised the socio-critical principles of professionally

developing teachers there also is no denying that it may involve some teachers moving out of their comfort zone. One strategy offering opportunities to gain swimming and water safety discipline knowledge and subsequently qualifications, the Australian Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association - Swim Australia™ Teacher (SAT) accreditation program.

The nature of teaching swimming and water safety in Primary Schools involves a complex process of social relationships between external swimming instructors and teachers, industry and education, and it involves

teacher stress and no doubt at times obstruction.

However, the struggles and opposition are all necessary for swimming and water safety curriculum reform, empowered by teachers valuing and believing in the process and the vital role they assume.

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