

# **Swimming and water safety education: continuing the journey of belief**

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The purpose of this paper is to share the continuing swimming and water safety education journey, within a university unit which culminates in pre-service teachers implementing quality swimming and water safety lessons for children from local primary schools within the Latrobe Valley, Victoria. There is no cost for children to participate in these lessons and for some it is the only swimming and water safety lessons they receive. This journey began in semester one, 2011 and involved 39 Monash University (Gippsland) students preparing and conducting swimming lessons over three weeks to approximately 80 children. In semester one, 2013 the journey continued increasing to approximately 70 Monash University (Gippsland) students and 140 children.

Pathways were investigated and initiated in 2011 which began a journey of collaboration between Australian Registered Training Organisations (RTO), the local health industry (local leisure and sports centre) and external swimming instructors employed at the venue, local primary schools and the university sector; Monash University (Gippsland). Pathways created the opportunity for the university students to obtain qualifications for safe implementation of swimming lessons; Australian Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association (ASCTA) - Swim Australia Teacher (SAT), Royal Life Saving Society Australia (RLSSA) Bronze Medallion (BM) and RLSSA Resuscitation (RE) courses. Dr. Tim Lynch, Senior Lecturer at Monash University reflects on this swimming education journey towards achieving the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (December, 2008) and shares feedback evidencing benefits for the various community stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Swimming and water safety education; community collaboration; strengths-based approach; pre-service teachers; health and physical education

## **Introduction**

It is a defining time for Health and Physical Education (HPE) in Australian schools with the first national curriculum Framework to be released in December 2013 and embedded within, Swimming and water safety curriculum. It can also be argued that it is a defining time for pre-service teacher education, particularly the preparation of teachers for future quality implementation of HPE curriculum within school communities. Research suggests that the more knowledgeable teachers are about swimming and water safety concepts, the more confident they will be in teaching this aspect of the curriculum (Peden, Franklin & Larsen, 2009). However, there are a number of barriers for Swimming and water safety education in schools, in particular the cost involved, for which a collaborative approach is recommended (Larsen, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to share a swimming education community collaboration program underpinned by a strengths-based approach as adopted by the national HPE curriculum Framework (MacDonald, 2012). The strengths-based approach “supports a critical view of health education with a focus on the learner embedded within a community’s structural facilitators, assets and constraints, and is enacted through resource-oriented and competence-raising approaches to learning” (Macdonald, 2013, p. 100). The program accentuated the vital role pre-service teacher

education can play in the development of children's swimming and water safety knowledge, skills and understanding within communities, especially ones that are socio-economically disadvantaged.

The benefits for stakeholders are illustrated and it is anticipated that by sharing the 'continued journey of belief' that subsequently other communities and educators will consider their context's suitability for similar community programs. Hence, this paper conceptualises how the new HPE curriculum may be delivered to overcome barriers in practice. This successful journey is reported by examining the various contexts of influence and program benefits:

- Australian primary schools
- Teacher preparation
- Response of program stakeholders

### **Australian primary schools**

There is increasing concern that water safety education is decreasing (Peden et al. 2009). "Over the past 10 years the aquatic industry has observed a decline in the swimming skills of children and teenagers and this has been reflected in the national drowning statistics particularly in the 15–24 years age group" (Larsen, 2013). Recent media articles suggest that such decline is a result of financial difficulties amongst various families and school communities. Many Australian school principals have considered axing swimming for this reason (Thompson, 2012).

Meadow Heights Primary School principal Kevin Pope said poverty was a major factor in a quarter of his pupils missing out on swimming lessons this year. 'A swimming program that costs \$100 a kid, and you've got three kids at the school – to come up with \$300 is very challenging'. (Thompson, 2012).

Australian primary schools often use qualified swim instructors from externally provided programs. Research by Peden, Franklin, & Larsen (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". Hence, Royal Life Saving Society Australia (RLSSA) has requested Government assistance through making swimming and water safety lessons compulsory for all primary school children; financial support for parents struggling with the cost of lessons; and funds for programs tailoring towards rural, Indigenous and multicultural communities (Larsen, 2013).

The best time to prepare children for safe aquatic participation is during childhood (RLSSA, 2010). This is advocated by Kirk (2005) who states that early learning experiences are crucial to continuing involvement in physical activity. Kirk stresses that currently only particular sections of the population are in a position to access quality experiences in schools and sporting clubs. In particular, children from lower socio-economic groups often miss out on quality early experiences. Furthermore, there is a growing body of research that suggests health, specifically social, mental and physical wellbeing is the result of social conditions and social status (Douglas, 2013). This complex situation relates directly to the national HPE Framework; "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). This is evident through the goals established at the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Committee on Education,

Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008) which drives the national reform.

### **Teacher preparation**

Monash University (Gippsland campus) pre-service teachers choosing the Physical Education (PE) major stream study the unit EDF2611 Experiencing Aquatic Environments. General pre-service teachers may also choose this unit as an elective within their education course, offered biennially. It was a requirement within this aquatics unit and also for Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) teacher registration that PE graduates from initial teacher education programs have a current teacher of swimming and water safety qualification (VIT, 2012). The unit at the Gippsland campus previously required that students complete swimming and water safety accreditation during their own time and present evidence of the qualification, which could cost students as much as \$450. Hence, the unit workshop program (two hours per week) was carefully redesigned by the unit coordinator to create a pathway between the university unit objectives and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) swimming and water safety course units of competency.

Partnerships between Australian RTOs, the local health industry (local leisure and sports centre) and external swimming instructors employed at the venue, local primary schools and Monash University (Gippsland) were initiated in January 2011. Correspondence with providers commenced and the response from Australian Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association (ASCTA) and RLSSA was optimistic, laying the foundations for strong partnerships. It was evident that ASCTA and RLSSA clearly valued the opportunity to promote swimming and water safety education, especially within the demographics of Latrobe Valley, Gippsland, eastern Victoria, where a large percentage of the region comprises of a socio-economically disadvantaged population (DEECD, 2011, p. 7).

A requirement of the unit coordinator to become a qualified Presenter of Swimming and water safety (for any provider) involved completion of a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE40110) (personal communication, 2 February 2011). This was necessary to grant the university students the swimming and water safety teacher qualifications. Also, by becoming an endorsed service member with Lifesaving Victoria (Victorian branch of RLSSA), the author was qualified to endorse the Bronze Medallion (BM), Resuscitation (RE), and Bronze Rescue (BR). Hence, successful pathways created the opportunity for the pre-service teachers to obtain the various swimming and water safety qualifications. Current RE was a requirement for the SAT qualification which enabled a pathway within a pathway. The SAT qualification was \$100 for the university students, the Bronze medallion cost \$15.70 and the Resuscitation cost \$10.50. These expenditures were to cover the cost of administration and resources, and were significantly reduced.

Creating pathways between RTOs, namely, ASCTA and RLSSA, was necessary to enable the implementation of safe and free swimming and water safety lessons for the primary school children. Such collaborative pathways are recommended for Swimming and water safety; “A collaborative approach is required to tackle this problem and we all need to take responsibility in ensuring that children do not miss out on learning these essential life saving skills” (Larsen, 2013). When planning the unit, swimming lessons for the local schools were deliberately held in the last three weeks of semester allowing

approximately nine scheduled face-to-face weeks for swimming and water safety workshop preparation. This enables time for building all university pre-service teachers' confidence and competence in the pool. It also allows time to assess whether each pre-service teacher was ready to implement the lessons with maximum safety. The pre-service teachers were required to plan swimming and water safety sequential lessons for children of a particular age and ability as their first piece of unit assessment. Constructive feedback was provided and class-time preparation involved sharing lesson segments and activities through peer teaching and learning episodes. This allows time for suggestions, possible alternatives or improvements to be offered by peers. Hence, the pre-service teachers followed the cycle of four stages for an inquiry approach during the unit: understand; plan; act; and reflect (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999).

Research suggests that Teacher Educators are challenged to rethink their connections between university courses and school field experiences. It is argued that a learning environment underpinned by a "non hierarchical interplay between academic, practitioner and community expertise" (Zeichner, 2010, p. 89) offers extended pre-service teacher learning opportunities and subsequently enhanced preparation. Such an environment that enables 'a synergy of learning' involves many and interconnected relationships. Hence, the unit was deliberately designed to combine strengths within the community to offer pre-service teachers and school children optimal swimming and water safety learning where the 'theory' meets the 'practice'.

### **Response of program stakeholders**

This collaborative journey began in semester one, 2011 and culminated in 39 Monash University (Gippsland) students conducting three swimming lessons over three weeks to approximately 80 children. The children were Grades Two and Three (Churchill North Primary School) and Grades Three and Four (Lumen Christi Catholic Primary School). As the unit is offered biennially the next opportunity for the unit was in semester one 2013. Enrolment increased by 79 percent to approximately 70 Monash University (Gippsland) students, enabling swimming and water safety lessons to cater for 140 children. The children included Preps, Grade One and Grade Two from Churchill Primary school and Lumen Christi Catholic Primary school, and Prep to Grade Six from Yinnar South Primary school. The increase in pre-service teachers enrolled in the unit suggests that it was perceived as meaningful in 2011.

During the period of swimming lessons the children were placed by their class teacher in swimming ability groups (beginners, developers, established for age) of approximately four. The pre-service teachers on average worked in pairs and were responsible for the same group of children for 30 minute lessons each week over the three weeks. Each pair of pre-service teachers would take two 30 minute lessons during the workshop. Hence, a ratio of at least 1:2 swim teachers to children was maintained. In 2013 early years' children were targeted for the lessons as this was consistent with research as the best time to introduce children to enjoyable experiences in the water (Kirk, 2005; RLSSA, 2010).

Feedback from all stakeholders over the years has overwhelmingly evidenced the success of the university unit and swimming lessons. The Student Evaluation of Teaching Unit (SETU), university pre-service teacher overall satisfaction with the quality of the unit, has continued to improve since the strengths-based approach was introduced (Table 2). The introduction of the pathways and lessons for local primary

school children saw a 100 percent improvement in overall satisfaction with the quality of the unit from 2009 to 2011. The pathways (ASCTA and RLSSA) have also resulted in pre-service teacher improved resources, meaningful feedback and practical value.

Table 2 Student Evaluation of Teaching Unit  
(more than 15 enrolments and 10 or more completed surveys).

Year EDF2611 offered	Overall Satisfaction with quality (5 – strongly agree, 1 – strongly disagree)	The learning resources in this unit supported my studies (5 – strongly agree, 1 – strongly disagree)	The feedback I received in this unit was useful (5 – strongly agree, 1 – strongly disagree)	This unit made a positive contribution to my experiences during practicum (5 – strongly agree, 1 – strongly disagree)	Overall impression of the ASCTA SAT course (5 – excellent, 1 – unsatisfactory)
2009	2	3.1	2.63	2.33	No course
2011 (First year of community collaboration)	4	4	4	4.3	4.7
2013 (Second year of community collaboration)	4.4	4.61	4.22	4.75	4.8

Comments within SETU advocated meaningful learning experiences throughout the unit. Best aspects of the unit when a strength-based approach was introduced in 2011 included “Obtaining my SAT certificate and CPR certificate. Overall, fun and educational, with a teacher with clear, precise explanations and relating the coursework to field based examples” (Monash University Faculty of Education (MU F of E), 2011b, p. 1). However, many comments related to the culminating swimming lessons for the school children; “The practical elements of the class, improving swimming skills, learning CPR and being able to practise teaching children while at university with the support of the lecturer” (MU F of E, 2011b, p. 1); “Being able to implement our lesson plans with children from primary schools” (MU F of E, 2011b, p. 1); and “The practical side was very rewarding and confidence building in both personal and social spheres” (MU F of E, 2011b, p. 1). Another comment synthesised various aspects:

Learning how to teach swimming and the opportunity to teach kids how to swim in prac. All aspects that we learnt about related to teaching primary kids (which hasn’t happened in the last two years of PE). Tim’s explanations and teaching was fantastic with the use of his prior experiences etc. And also his hard work to help us reach success in all tasks” (MU F of E, 2011b, p. 1).

Similar supportive comments were made by pre-service teachers in 2013, “Getting to teach students swimming lessons was a highlight as we were all contributing to the children’s learning and helping them to achieve skills that they would otherwise not have the chance to practice” (MU F of E, 2013b, p. 1). “Learning through experience, including teaching children first hand” (MU F of E, 2013b, p. 1), “Organising and implementing swimming lessons” (MU F of E, 2013b, p. 1). “The partnership with the Churchill Leisure Centre was fantastic, having the swimming lessons in the pool was a great learning experience and the chance to complete swimming qualifications was great” (MU F of E, 2013b, p. 1). “The best aspect was that

we could put the theory into practice rather than just assume what would happen” (MU F of E, 2013b, p. 1). “Really enjoyed taking the students (children) for lessons and being able to offer a lot of my previous experience with swimming to my class” (MU F of E, 2013b, p. 1). “Putting what we learnt into practice – being given opportunities to teach kids how to swim” (MU F of E, 2013b, p. 1). “Swimming lessons with the students, having the option to do Swim Australia qualification and bronze medallion” (MU F of E, 2013b, p. 1).

In the 2011 ASCTA SAT course evaluations summary pre-service teachers remarked that the most helpful aspects of the course pathway often pertained to the swimming lessons. These included “observing other teaching” (ASCTA, 2011, p. 1); and “The ‘teacher-student’ format ensured the material was thoroughly covered with hands on experiences” (ASCTA, 2011, p. 1). “Being taught correct swimming movements, then being able to practise them before micro teaching” (ASCTA, 2011, p. 1). “Much more effective than if I had done it on my own. Well done on allowing this to be part of our university training” (ASCTA, 2011, p. 1). This was consistent with the feedback in 2013 where pre-service teachers commented; “The supervision and assistance provided throughout” (ASCTA, 2013, p. 1), “The assistance of Tim and the amount of equipment available at the venue” (ASCTA, 2013, p. 1). “The resources and feedback provided” (ASCTA, 2013, p. 1). “Doing the course over a period of time” (ASCTA, 2013, p. 1), “Demonstrations and explanations of things in and out of the pool” (ASCTA, 2013, p. 1).

Responses from stakeholders during the culminating lessons suggest that they all valued the enhanced learning community collaboration generated. The children from the local primary schools were excited to be taught swimming lessons by the university pre-service teachers. This observation was evidenced by teacher’s and children’s comments; “The swimming program was highly beneficial for the students in my class. It gave many the chance to experience the water in a controlled and safe environment, one that some rarely get to engage with” (personal communication, June 13, 2013). Children were quoted as stating “It was fun because we learnt to swim. I liked the games” (personal communication, June 13, 2013); “It was like fun because all the things we learnt about swimming. I got to swim with my friends. The swim teachers were kind and sweet” (personal communication, June 13, 2013); and “I felt happy because I got to do swimming on a Friday too. The people were nice to me” (personal communication, June 13, 2013).

Parents came to support their children and comments from teachers, teaching assistants, parents and the children expressed their gratitude for the lessons provided. One teacher wrote; “My kids had a ball with the swimming. Like I said to you then, any time you need children feel free to approach us. We are very willing to assist.” (personal communication, July 23, 2011). Another teacher stated that many parents “commented that it was good that the children were able to access the lessons and that they were free” (personal communication, June 13, 2013). The Yinnar South Primary school principal contacted the local newspaper to share the program with the wider community and was quoted in the article; “For our (students) to get one-on-one water experience is great; the parents have given really positive feedback and it’s been thoroughly enjoyed by everybody” (Symons, 2013).

The Churchill Primary School Prep-Grade 2 team leader summarised the benefits of the program and gratitude within this context:

It was a fantastic opportunity for our students as many have never had formal (swimming) lessons before. The low socio-economic situation of many families in this area means that many students are not able to have the opportunity of learning about water safety with instructors. While Churchill Primary School does offer a swimming lesson program we often find that those most in need of lessons find the price too high. By offering free lessons through the University program we had 100% attendance from Prep/One/ Two, which is amazing!

The children were very excited about going to the swimming lessons and were looking forward to going each time. They enjoyed getting to know their instructors and it was good to see the university students grow in their confidence of dealing with junior primary school children. Relationships between the instructors and students were just beginning to develop, so it was a shame there weren't more lessons.

We have also received many positive comments from parents about this wonderful opportunity. Many were amazed that the lessons would be offered free of charge. One family has three children in the Prep/One/Two area and normally sending all three to swimming lessons is too expensive. However, this time because they were free, all three children were able to go. Their Mum was so happy she didn't have to exclude any of her children from the lessons. (personal communication, June 13, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

A collaborative approach is recommended in overcoming barriers to Swimming and water safety education (Larsen, 2013) and this unit/program offers a practical example of how this may be achieved. The educational journey shared, evidences the power of human relations and the combining of strengths to overcome impediments. One major obstacle for the implementation of Swimming and water safety in primary schools is the cost involved. This Swimming and water safety program evidences the strengths-based approach adopted by the national HPE curriculum Framework, and socially just goals established at the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), enabling costs to be minimised for all stakeholders. Pre-service teachers' preparation and implementation of quality swimming and water safety lessons for children from local primary schools subsequently enhanced the meaningfulness of university workshops, and resulted in all stakeholders requesting more swimming lessons. The swimming program accentuated the vital role pre-service teacher education can play in the development of children's swimming and water safety knowledge, skills and understanding within communities in the short and long term. Furthermore, educators are encouraged to consider their context's suitability for a similar strengths-based program.

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