CHAPTER 8
RESPECTFUL PEDAGOGIES IN AQUATIC EDUCATION

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Respectful aquatic pedagogies prioritise children's welfare, autonomy and natural learning in the water. Based on neuroscientific theories and pedagogies of affection, they promote security in aquatic environments, development and confidence through games and free exploration.

Introduction

Numerous studies on children during school ages have pointed out that negative aquatic experiences can have a significant impact on future learning and, in some cases, cause traumas with lasting consequences on mental, emotional and social health. Among these adverse experiences we find unexpected or forced immersion, lack of the teacher's response to the child's requests to lower the difficulty or to increase safety, and pressure to participate in undesired activities (Peden and Franklin, 2020).

Moreover, involuntary cough caused by an accidental submersion represents the first degree of a non-fatal drowning, which highlights the importance of avoiding strategies that aim for the prevention of drowning through deliberate exposure to these situations. In this context, it is fundamental to reconsider instructive methodologies in aquatic education, prioritising respectful approaches that guarantee a safe and positive learning, free from unnecessary risks.

Respectful aquatic pedagogies represent a revolutionary educational paradigm that prioritises the learners' emotional and physical welfare during the learning process in the aquatic environment. This approach, based on contemporary neuroscientific, psychological and pedagogical principles, aims to transform the aquatic experience into a safe and rewarding discovery process (Fonseca-Pinto et al., 2024). When combining theories such as the polyvagal, constructivist methodologies and emotional co-regulation strategies (as it is the adult, with their experience, calm and connection, who helps the child to progressively regulate), a model is proposed in which aquatic abilities learning emerges naturally from the harmonious interaction with the medium, the

empathetic guidance of qualified professionals and the recognition of individual needs.

The persistence of non-respectful pedagogical practices today has led to a growing alliance between aquatic professionals and academics from around the world. One of the most recent initiatives is the creation of the International Network for Respectful Aquatic Education for Children's Rights, founded by Gabriela Baldini (2025).

This research explores the fundamental principles of respectful pedagogies and their application in the teaching of swimming and aquatic activities.

Pedagogy vs. methodology: clarifying concepts

It is key to distinguish between pedagogy and methodology, two concepts that are closely related but different in their approach and function.

Pedagogy. The science that studies education in its entirety, encompassing the principles, theories and bases that guide the teaching-learning process. It aims to understand how people learn and how teaching should be structured in order to optimise its effectiveness.

Methodology. The combination of specific methods and strategies applied in learning to implement the pedagogical principles during practice. It focuses on practical application of principles, designing technical proposals and tools to improve the learning process.

Basically, pedagogy guides methodology, providing the theoretical basis and conceptual framework, whereas methodology translates these theories into specific strategies that learners can apply. For instance, basing learning on constructivism (pedagogy) can lead to using collaborative learning as methodology,

Respectful pedagogy in aquatic education

The conceptualisation of a respectful aquatic pedagogy is based on an approach centred on the child, which accompanies their learning considering their emotions, timings and individual needs. It is distinguished by the constant presence of adult referents, who favour a safe environment without forcing activities, respecting the emotional responses of the child to the practice proposals. Structured but flexible teaching protocols are established in safe and welcoming environments, using ludic and

experiential methodologies. In this context, the teacher fulfils the role of a learning facilitator, observing, accompanying and respecting individual processes, which contributes to a positive and rewarding aquatic experience.

However, educational practices that do not respect these principles still persist. According to the International Network for Respectful Aquatic Education for Children's Rights, some practices include imposing activities on children against their will, failing to acknowledge their emotions, justifying suffering as part of learning, and prioritising goals over their well-being. Identifying and challenging these practices is fundamental to consolidating a truly respectful aquatic education that focuses on the holistic development and enjoyment of the child in water (Baldini, 2025).

Fundamental principles of respectful pedagogies

Respectful pedagogies are reflected in diverse educational methodologies that prioritise the integral development of the child, their autonomy and emotional welfare. Also closely related to this, we find soft and positive pedagogies, as well as those of care and affection. Among other specific examples, there is the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, which bases learning on projects that emerge from the children's interests, promoting their creativity and ability to express themselves. Moreover, the Montessori approach encourages self-education in a prepared environment, allowing children to explore and learn independently. Waldorf pedagogy emphasises holistic development through art, nature and imaginative playing, reinforcing creativity and connection to the environment. Pikler pedagogy focuses on respect for the baby's free motor development, offering them the opportunity to explore and learn at their own pace without unnecessary interventions. Each one of these reflects the essence of an education based on respect, trust and the child's autonomy, and they are being applied to aquatic contexts. Some other are emerging, such as the Understanding Aquatic Method, which bases its principles on respectful education.

In all of these proposals, the child is considered a developing human being, exploring the world through experience, which pushes forward their learning and the acquisition

of competences that go further than simple execution and repetition. These approaches promote the building of different abilities, such as how to be, how to act, how to know and how to do.

Respectful pedagogies are based on a series of interrelated principles that aim to create a learning environment that boosts the integral development of the child. These are the principles and how to put them into practice:

1. **Prepared and coercion-free environment.** Creating an organised learning environment which is organised, stimulating and respectful, and that promotes integral development.

2. **Integral development (emotional, social and cognitive).** Aiming for the balanced development of the emotional, social and cognitive abilities of each child.
3. **Respect for individuality and development paces.** Recognising that each child has a unique growing and learning pace, adapting these individual differences into the practice.
4. **Autonomy and self-directed learning.** The development of the children's autonomy must be a gradual process and in keeping with their developmental stage, not only in the physical aspect, but also in the cognitive and emotional sides. It is natural and desirable that, in these young ages, children trust the adults that surround them, as this trust provides safety to explore and learn. Autonomy is not imposed; it is built from the interaction with their environment and the lived experiences. Sometimes the intention is to promote early autonomy and responsibility, maladjusted to the child's age. Nevertheless, self-directed learning does not involve leaving the child by themselves in their process, but to accompany them respecting their pace and individual needs. Listening to their will, understanding their timing and, if needed, adjusting the learning proposals or waiting for the right moment, allows exploration and discovery to be realised in a more significant and rewarding way.
5. **Active listening and respectful communication.** Promoting open, honest and empathetic communication between teachers and learners.
6. **Connection with nature and the real world.** Promoting contact with nature and experiential learning to develop an environmental awareness and a deep understanding of the surroundings.
7. **Safe affective bond and based on trust.** Establishing solid interpersonal relationships in which each one of the participants feels seen and accepted as they are and with the emotions they are feeling.
8. **Education without punishments or artificial rewards.** Focusing on teaching self-regulation and conflict resolution skills through mutual respect and effective communication.
9. **Games as a teaching tool.** Recognising the value of games as an essentially enjoyable activity that contributes to cognitive, motor, emotional and social development.
10. **Teacher as a guide and learning facilitator.** Transforming the role of the teacher into a learning facilitator, who promotes critical thinking and autonomy in accordance with the developmental level of the child.

Safe learning enhancement

The enjoyment of interacting with the aquatic medium varies for each person, and it is built since infancy. This relationship is shaped by the individual experiences, and it turns into a personal belief about the water.

In the classes of aquatic education, independently of the age, it is key to respect each person's previous relationship with the aquatic environment. Starting from there, we can offer proposals and promote exploration, so the discovery of the aquatic environment is a nice and enjoyable experience.

Interestingly enough, it is not common for a teacher to take an adult's hand and force them to immerse in the water. In adult classes, strategies that respect autonomy and integrity are applied. However, in the case of children, doubts emerge often about the need to force certain experiences. It is important to remember that diving or submerging are not essential obligations or requirements for the development of aquatic competence. They are more of a process of exploration, similar to the adaptation of the different depths of the pool, the use of floats or the learning of swimming techniques.

This process must be undertaken through adequate progressions, establishing a trusting relationship between teacher and learner, assuring a perception of safety. There is not a unique and universal model, as the context and the individual needs are key factors.

It is fundamental that the aquatic professional understands that no ability should be imposed over the will and consent of the learner, without considering their age or physical, cognitive or social condition. Science does not back up the idea that it is beneficial to force a child to participate in a certain activity in the water. In fact, this kind of practice can be considered negligence, abuse or mistreatment in other fields, and it is the time to apply the same consideration in the aquatic environment. For instance, in the next Table 1, we can see the use of one or another pedagogy in the case of a child who does not want to be left alone in the tubular float. The offered examples are focused on verbal expressions, but it is important to remember that body language and the type of physical contact, such as holding the student and immersing him, are also signs of non-respectful practices.

Table 1. Examples of respectful and non-respectful responses

Child's reaction	Respecftul response	Non-respectful response
Fear of water	"I can understand that water can be scary at first. Let's get closer together little by little. You can hold me, and we will advance whenever you feel ready."	"C'mon, don't be a coward. Get inside already!"
Overexcitement	"I see that you are very excited. It is great that you love the water so much. Let's channel that energy into a fun and safe game. What about we…?"	"Calm down, you are not in an amusement park."
Resistance to participate	"It is fine if you don't want to get inside now. You can look from there and join whenever you feel comfortable. Would you like me to tell you what we are doing?	"You have to get inside, don't just stand there."
Anxiety of submerging the face	"There is no rush to put your face into the water. We can start by submerging only your chin, and, when you feel ready, we will try to do bubbles together."	"C'mon, put your face into the water already! It's not that hard!"
Difficulty to float	"Floating can be difficult at first. Let's try together. I will hold you and I will let go little by little. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, tell me."	"Don't worry, everyone floats. Do it already!"
Frustration for not achieving the exercise	"Learning new skills takes time. You are doing amazing. We will divide this exercise into sections and we will practice together."	"I don't understand why you can't do it. It's easy!"

What does the professional need to consider to promote respectful pedagogies?

Emotional, physical and mental welfare of the professional is the foundation for promoting respectful pedagogies which are focused on the student. To do so, it is important to identify and handle certain needs that can lead to non-respectful practices:

● Need to control the session and the pace of learning. The objectives have to be a reference for advancing, without imposing rigid schedules.
● Need to be approved by the students. The motivating climate in the class will vary depending on the pedagogical proposals, the students' previous experiences and their daily motivation.
● Need to be recognised as the higher authority in the classroom. Authority does not entail authoritarianism; effective leadership is built through group participation and the use of playing as a strategy.
● Personal belief system based on the idea that the teacher is the absolute expert, and the students must obey their rules without questioning them.

On the other hand, a professional who respects students and their learning process

must work on certain key aspects:

- **Overall self-care:** adequate resting, physical exercise, balanced diet and hydration. Maintaining a good physical and mental state allows you to be available for the needs of the student and the learning process.
- **Passion for teaching:** enjoying teaching and interacting with students turns education into a natural consequence.
- **Curiosity and continuous formation:** knowledge has no limits when considering the teaching of aquatic education. It is necessary to understand aspects that go further from the aquatic medium, such as pedagogical principles, pedagogy and stages of development.
- **Compromise and consciousness:** each professional has a personal story and a belief system that impact their practice. It is important to recognise that we do not react in the same way to all students, and that this speaks more about us than about them. The availability of personal development is key in educational work.

What a respectful pedagogy is and what it is not

What a respectful pedagogy is	What a respectful pedagogy is not
1. Respects the learning pace of each child	1. Imposes a unique learning pace for everyone
2. Promotes autonomy and self-directed learning	2. Promotes dependence from the adult for learning and deciding
3. Promotes affective bonds and trust	3. It is based on rigid authoritarian relationships
4. Offers a prepared environment and promotes invitation	4. Uses environments with a preestablished response and not very stimulating
5. Uses games as a teaching tool	5. Proposes exercises that are focused on the repetition of motor actions
6. It is based on positive discipline (promotes dialogue, reasoning and explanation)	6. Uses punishments, rewards and threats to discipline
7. Promotes respectful communication and values the child's feelings and thoughts	7. Attends exclusively to the programmed objectives and the teacher's beliefs about learning
8. Aims for the overall development (psycho-emotional, social, cognitive and motor)	8. Prioritises only the performance, independently of how the student is feeling.
9. Considers the teacher as a guide and facilitator	9. Considers the teacher as the only source of knowledge
10. Incorporates the connection with nature and the transfer to the real world	10. Prepares for the interaction in a specific context, but without considering the different environments and realities

10 steps to implement respectful pedagogies in aquatic education

Hereunder (Table 2 and Figure 1), we present the key steps to implement respectful pedagogies in aquatic education. These principles aim to ensure a rewarding and positive experience for the children, promoting their safety, confidence and welfare in the aquatic medium.

Table 2. 10 steps for the implementation of a respectful aquatic pedagogy.

Action	Description
1. Formation and capacitation	Assuring that teachers are formed in recognised institutions that are specialised in respectful aquatic education.
2. Creating a safe and welcoming environment	Designing aquatic spaces with safety elements and adequate temperature and materials
3. Establishing effective communication	Maintaining open and constant communication with the families about the progress and needs of the children. Clarifying the activities to the children and obtaining their consent before undertaking them.
4. Respecting individual paces	Not forcing the practice of skills if the child shows resistance or fear. Observing and respecting each child's corporal and emotional signs. Adapting activities to the level of comfort and skill of each participant.
5. Promoting learning through games	Designing ludic activities that promote the development of aquatic abilities. Incorporating games that boost cooperation and positive social interaction in the water.
6. Promoting familiar participation	Actively involving parents or caretakers in the aquatic sessions. Educating families about safety practices, supervision, care and drowning prevention.
7. Implementing an integral approach	Developing programs that tackle aquatic education, drowning prevention and environmental education. Including activities that promote the children's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development.
8. Establishing clear policies and procedures	Creating well-established safety and emergency protocols. Establishing clear directions about respectful educational practices and consequences for inappropriate behaviour.
8. Continuously evaluating and adjusting	Doing regular evaluations of the used programs and methods. Asking for the participants and their families' feedback to constantly improve.
10. Promoting inclusion and equity	Ensuring that the programs are accessible for children with different functionality and experiential levels. Adapting the activities to include all of the participants, independently of their abilites.

Figure 1. 10 steps for the implementation of a respectful aquatic pedagogy.


Conclusion

Respectful pedagogies offer a promising path to transform aquatic education, creating learning environments that empower children, boost their creativity and benefit their overall welfare. When prioritising respect, autonomy and emotional connection, these methodologies build the foundation to form secure and competent humans who are committed to the world they live in.

There is no function of the swimming education that should be put above the respect for the person. Even the argument of drowning prevention loses validity when using coercive methods that can cause traumas and invalidate the importance of the children's emotions. Moreover, there is no program that can ensure the complete drowning prevention.

Choosing a respectful aquatic education is not only possible, but it is also a responsibility for both the field's professionals and the entities that manage aquatic programs. Promoting professional capacitation and encouraging tutoring in sessions are key strategies to develop conscient teachers who are committed to this vision.

Fortunately, in different parts of the world, there are already aquatic centres that are committed to this vision. Publicly recognising their labour is important to keep supporting a future in which aquatic education is truly inclusive, safe, and trauma-free. Thanks to their dedication and effort, more and more children can develop a positive relationship with the water, based on respect and welfare. Thank you all for this effort.
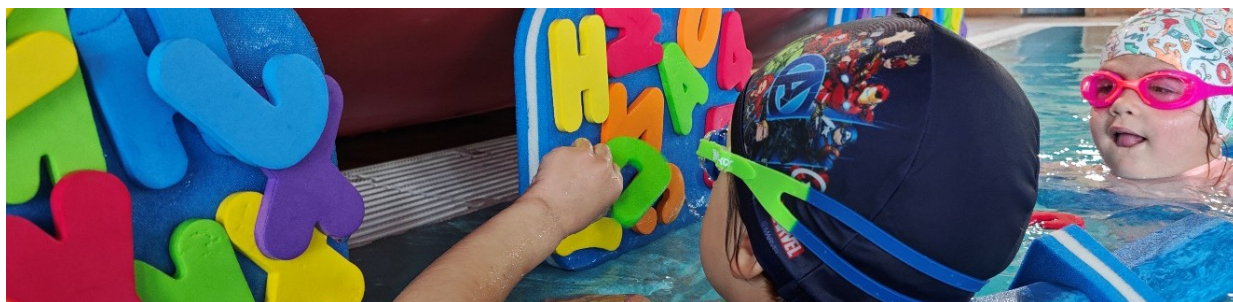
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