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## A Cause to Action: Learning to Develop a Culturally Responsive/ Relevant Approach to 21st Century Water Safety Messaging through Collaborative Partnerships

Angela K. Beale-Tawfeeq  
Rowan University, [akbeale6@gmail.com](mailto:akbeale6@gmail.com)

Austin Anderson  
University of Southern Indiana, [aranderson2@usi.edu](mailto:aranderson2@usi.edu)

William D. Ramos  
Indiana University, [wramos@indiana.edu](mailto:wramos@indiana.edu)

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### Abstract

Globally, and in the United States, drowning is considered a “neglected public health threat” (WHO, 2014b). Reports have shown that there are groups of people in certain communities who are at greater risk. African Americans, as a group, have a drowning death rate 9% higher than that of the overall population, with the greatest disparity being among African American youth (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014). While many national programs and organizations present water safety awareness and drowning prevention efforts within communities, very few offer multi-sectorial collaborative efforts (WHO, 2017a) among culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) aquatic stakeholders designed to empower, promote, and support water safety awareness in communities. Inspired by evidence-based research, derived from a national water safety and drowning prevention campaign, the purpose of this article is to answer a call to action by the World Health Organization (2017a) to approach water safety education through a social justice lens to inform programming and collaborative partnerships.

*Keywords:* drowning, cultural competency, aquatic safety, drowning prevention

### Introduction

Racial and ethnic disparities resulting in unintentional injuries that are caused by drowning, and gaps in the drowning prevention and water safety education messaging, have received an increasing amount of attention. In 2014, the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Report on Drowning: Preventing a Leading Killer, recognized drowning as a “neglected public health threat” (p. 3). There have been well documented gaps in drowning disparities believed to be reflective of public health care and educational systems ignoring the issues of race, socioeconomic disparities, and cultural stereotyping, particularly in the United States (Banks, 2014; Gilchrist & Parker, 2014; Ito, 2014; Quan, 2014; Bennett, Linnan, & Chung, 2014; Lovett-Scott & Prather, 2014; Beale & Lynn, 2011). This fact points to the obvious need to inform and utilize public awareness to implement drowning prevention education and interventions (WHO, 2017a), particularly among at-risk minority communities.

Although unintentional drowning deaths have decreased globally, (WHO, 2017a; 2014b) each year approximately 360,000 people still die from drowning, with over 90% of drownings occurring in low- and middle income countries (WHO, 2017a). Additionally, drowning is the third leading cause of death globally among youth ages 5 to 14, with statistics revealing that vulnerable and underrepresented populations (e.g. children, racial and cultural minorities, immigrant and indigenous groups) are at higher risk. This factor creates not only an issue of injury but also one of equity (Quan, 2014; Moran, Quan, Franklin & Bennett, Quan, Gomez, 2017; Quan & Cummings, 2003; Cummings & Quan, 1999). While worldwide reports continue to reveal devastating statistics, drowning prevention efforts, to date, have received little to no support in working

toward regulatory development (WHO, 2017, 2014; Quan, 2014; Moran, Quan, Franklin & Bennett, 2011; Quan & Cummings, 2003).

The relationship between race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, drowning prevention interventions, water safety education (e.g. water safety messages, services), and access is complex. Low- and middle-income communities, and poor areas with high proportions of minority populations, generally lack the resources needed to maintain minimal community provider services such as affordable swim lesson instruction and viable swim lesson instructors. This dearth of provider services decreases access to drowning prevention interventions and water safety education and exacerbates socio-ecological factors which contribute to a lack of awareness among aquatic stakeholders (e.g. policy makers, communities, parents/caregivers, non-governmental/non-profit organizations (NGOs), safety providers, and corporate agencies) leaving this “preventable cause of death” (WHO, 2017a,p.1) in place. This situation is inadequate to meet the needs of targeted minority communities and the most vulnerable of populations.

### **Water Safety Education Through the Lens of Social Justice**

In the current dispensation among aquatic stakeholders, there is significant interest in curbing drowning disparities (Bennett, Gomez & Quan, 2017; WHO, 2017a, 2014b; Red Cross, 2014a; Ito, 2014; Quan, 2014; Beale, 2012). This unity in purpose across the body of literature can be seen as a call for social justice within water safety education to facilitate change, and ultimately save lives. Viewing water safety messaging and drowning prevention initiatives through a lens of social justice could help to elicit such change. In the United States, educational systems have historically struggled to meet the needs of underrepresented populations such as racially and ethnically diverse youth, individuals of a minority sexual orientation, and individuals with disabilities (Pharr, Irwin, Layne, Irwin, 2018; Culp, 2016; Gay, 2000; 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; 1994). With drowning disparities consistently reflecting disproportionate impacts on underrepresented populations and youth, committing to social justice within water safety education and messaging can help to ensure that individuals, regardless of race, gender, ability, and socio-economic status, can benefit equally.

Although it is understood that there is no magic formula for success in this area, given the diversity of environments, populations, and communities, the “tabula rasa” for any and all transformational efforts allows for creativity and collaboration to maximize efforts and create initiatives to yield projects that reflect the virtues of a multi-sectorial approach. As swimming and water safety education programming has been identified as a drowning prevention strategy and a direct bridge for knowledge acquisition among children to keep them safe from danger in, on, and around bodies of water (Wallis, Watt, Franklin, Taylor, Nixon & Kimble, 2015), national and international aquatic stakeholders need to conduct

a “gap analysis” of these services. Popular educational programs such as those provided by the Red Cross in relation to water safety messaging must be examined from the perspective of the youth most disproportionately impacted by the drowning epidemic.

The purpose of the present study is to serve as a reflective analysis of a “collective action” with seasonal investment across three areas: 1) reflective evaluation of water safety based education and water safety messaging by a national aquatic stakeholder; 2) establishment of new collaborations with diverse partners; and 3) coordination of a national effort to raise public awareness. Additionally, it is the hope among the research community that a systematic evaluation of these educational programs using applied research techniques which engage the community can help to define and explore the problem of the disproportionate impact of drowning on historically underrepresented populations. The aim of this educational analysis is to assist educators and researchers in creating measurable change and promoting population health.

### **History of Educational Service Delivery and Programming**

In 2014, The Red Cross celebrated 100 years of involvement with water safety. As a result of this longstanding commitment to educating people about safe water behaviors, which has included learning to swim, the organization has become synonymous with the cause through its numerous wide spread efforts. Much of its success has been attributed to the work of Wilbert E. Longfellow, known as the “Commodore”, who is credited with developing the first water safety and lifesaving courses (Red Cross, 2014b). The results of his work have spurred on the conceptualization of formalized instruction and safety messaging to prevent and reduce drowning.

Also bearing Longfellow’s name is the youth-centered water safety education program, Longfellow’s Whales Tales, which has been in existence since 1988 (C. Harvey, personal communication, March 10, 2018). This dryland-based program is designed to provide youth with basic safety knowledge on how to remain safe in, on, and around the water (Red Cross, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c). Most often associated with the Whales Tales course content are messaging slogans used to engrain what are thought to be the desired behaviors related to keeping youth safe. Some of the most notable of the seven messages include: (a) don’t just pack it wear your jacket, (b) think so you don’t sink, (c) reach or throw, don’t go, and (d) look before you leap (Red Cross, 2014b; 2014c). These programs are credited for reaching millions since their inception and are designed to be taught by a range of volunteers, in varying settings, without requiring formal training.

In addition to the knowledge component is the Learn to Swim (LTS) program, which is designed as a combination of skill development and water safety knowledge acquisition (Red Cross, 2014c). The LTS program has become known as the gold standard in the industry and still holds the market share within these types of programs with an emphasis around teaching people how to swim (Ramos & Anderson, 2017). Taught as a tiered system of skill development, the program uses a sequential set of six levels to take participants from parent/toddler based immersion experiences to swimming and skill proficiency. Although generally designed for youth, the program does have accommodations to work with adults as well.

In addition to the aforementioned programs, the Red Cross has previously partnered with the National Swimming Pool Foundation to create an on-line course related to home pool safety. All these programs have undergone regular systematic reviews and were updated to keep them relevant with the most up-to-date information in the field related to drowning prevention. Currently, both the Water Safety Instructor course, and Longfellow's Whales Tales are heading into the review stage.

### **Reflective Evaluation of Water Safety Education Messaging/Centennial Research and Application: Using Data to Make A Difference**

In the summers of 2015 and 2016, data were collected to determine if water safety messages embedded into the ARC LTS curriculum were effective in injury prevention by examining predicted behaviors of youth ages 5-11. The data served as part of a study by Ramos and Anderson and was conducted at various ARC "Centennial Program" participant locations throughout the southeastern United States. This study administered a pre/post survey to swim lesson participants to examine their attitudes, intentions and beliefs about water safety behavior. Results of this study indicated that the knowledge areas of rescue, call for help, and the wearing/use of lifejackets were "areas of concern" for researchers regarding knowledge acquisition and behavioral intention (Ramos & Anderson, 2017).

While the purpose of the Ramos and Anderson 2017 study was to predict participant behavior related to water safety, the researchers were struck by the demographic breakdown of the participant sites. As the aim of the initial Centennial Program at the time was to "lower drowning rates by 50% in 50 local communities where those rates exceed the national average," the study took place in the greater Atlanta, Georgia and the Orlando and Indian River, Florida areas. The facilities within the programs served largely minority groups, and as such, the populations of participants in the study were primarily of African American and Hispanic racial and ethnic identities. During the data collection process, researchers gained a socio-cultural perspective that was unexpected.

Reflecting upon the results of the Ramos and Anderson study from a cultural perspective provides some intriguing outcomes for the standardized delivery of water safety messaging. For example, youth participants in the study expressed reluctance to always call the police for help during an aquatic emergency, as reflected in the low scores within the “call for help” knowledge domain (Ramos & Anderson, 2017). Examining this result from the cultural perspective of the participants allows for the integration of complex social issues such as those surrounding relationships between community police and minority populations.

The further analysis of low participant scores in the areas of rescue and wearing/using lifejackets through a cultural lens allows for the integration of concepts such as rescuer altruism (Pearn & Franklin, 2012), the impact of media representations of (super)hero behavior (Wilson, 2008), and underlying cultural norms related to what it means to be a “big boy/girl.” The examination of demographics and responses to water safety messaging presented in the study warranted the consideration of the importance of culturally competent water safety messaging and service delivery, including possible changes in the content and delivery of standardized water safety instruction.

### **Collaborative and Coordinated Effort to Make a Difference in Communities**

Globally, research has shown the importance and impact that multi-sectorial approaches and community level interventions can have on curbing drowning as one of the world’s most preventable causes of death (WHO, 2017a; 2014b; 2018c; Bennett, Linnan & Chung, 2014; Mecrow, Rahman, Linnan, Scarr, Mashreky, Talab, & Rahman, 2015; Beale, 2012; Waller & Norwood, 2011). Through collaborative efforts, aquatic stakeholders (e.g. practitioners, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), researchers, policy makers, parents, and communities) can develop a coordinated effort to combat drowning, a neglected public health issue, in a strategic and evidence-based way.

The use of partnerships and collaboration as an approach to prevent drowning has shown that through sharing a common interest, connection, and cooperation, lives can be saved (WHO, 2017a; 2014b; 2018c; Beale, 2012; Waller & Norwood, 2011). Additionally, multi-sectorial collaborations serve as an invaluable resource in culturally and linguistically diverse (CLDs), underserved, and low-income communities, where barriers exist and resources are limited (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014). Through the use of collaborative partnerships with CLD aquatic stakeholders, multi-sectorial collaborations can yield programming that will address the needs and interests of communities disproportionately impacted by unintentional injuries attributed to drowning.

For example, among youth in the U.S., African-Americans are at a 50% greater risk of injury related drowning deaths when compared to all other ethnic groups (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014; Ito, 2014; Quan, 2014; Brenner, Taneja, et al. 2009). The history of challenges and barriers surrounding the existence of a minority swimming gap have justified the need to understand how socio-cultural and socio-ecological factors impact water safety awareness and drowning prevention efforts in minority communities. As such, the importance of creating culturally responsive educational experiences to promote drowning prevention and water safety messaging and awareness in CLD communities should not be discounted (Beale, 2014; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through multi-sectorial collaborations with aquatic stakeholders in CLD communities can develop culturally responsive practices and positive relationships to foster essential skills and bridge the gap and lack of commitment regarding the cultural discontinuity that often hinders aquatic physical activity and water safety awareness in the U.S.

### **Answering a Call to Action**

As an organization with over 100 years of experience in the area of water safety, the Red Cross, along with Diversity in Aquatics (DIA; a non-profit organization comprised of one of the largest group of CLD researchers, athletes, coaches, aquatic professionals) collectively focused on the promotion of aquatic physical activity, water safety, and drowning prevention. The mission of DIA is:

...to empower and improve the quality of life and reduce the risk of unintentional drowning deaths in historically underrepresented communities and vulnerable populations, through water safety education and the promotion of aquatic physical activity (e.g. rowing, scuba, diving, competitive swimming, learn to swim programming, triathlons)... to Educate, Promote, and Support water safety education, learn to swim programming, and participation in healthy aquatic activities for all (Diversity in Aquatics, 2018).

It is with this shared vision among collaborative partners that the Red Cross, with knowledge gained from evidence-based research gathered within its Centennial Campaign, and Diversity in Aquatics aim to form a collaborative action to save lives (Diversity in Aquatics, 2018; American Red Cross, 2014b; Golob, Giles, & Rich, 2013; Waller & Norwood, 2011).

In 2017, the inaugural National Leadership Summit on Diversity in Aquatics was held and comprised of aquatic stakeholders from a variety of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) national organizations. Through constituent-focused strategies involving collaboration with targeted group members (Table 1), tool kits and action plans were developed to provide a substantive role for diverse community members to participate in planning of

water safety education programs and appropriate risk message strategies that will help drive outreach and programming into diverse communities (Ramos & Anderson, 2017; Waller & Norwood, 2014). This created the understanding that visual graphics and language translation alone do not increase CLD communities' understanding of water safety information factors (e.g. water safety messaging). Looking through the lens of social justice, aquatic stakeholders engaged in strategic planning to support constituents in their efforts to target minority communities in the promotion of water safety awareness (Tables 1 and 2).

**Table 1.** National Leadership Summit on Diversity in Aquatic Stakeholders

1. American Red Cross	2. Diversity in Aquatics
3. Jack and Jill of America Incorporated	4. League of United Latin American Citizens
5. National Association of Hispanic Nurses	6. Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated
7. Iota Phi Theta	8. Sigma Lambda Gamma
9. Boys and Girls Club of America	10. Sigma Lambda Beta

**Table 2.** National Leadership Summit Goals for the promotion of water safety awareness

<b>GOAL 1:</b> To raise awareness among community leaders and influencers that represent historically underrepresented communities that have a disproportionate number of drownings and/or people who do not know how to swim-specifically African-American, Hispanic, and Latino communities.
<b>GOAL 2:</b> To seek strategies for community leaders and influencers to help gain more involvement in minority communities beyond the American Red Cross Centennial Campaign to increase involvement in learn-to-swim (LTS) and water safety programming as a lifetime/lifesaving activity.
<b>GOAL 3:</b> To enhance community partnerships through active engagement and involvement by stakeholders in minority communities to create a plan to deliver water safety and learn-to-swim (LTS) programming opportunities in key communities where Red Cross does not currently have a presence.

The overall purpose of the National Leadership Summit on Diversity in Aquatics was to engage CLD community-based partner organizations in the mission towards addressing drowning as a “neglected public health threat” (WHO, 2017a; 2014b; 2018c). This is one way in which promoting awareness and providing access to professional aquatic skills training, often void in CLD communities, is being fulfilled. For example, following the convention the organization Jack and Jill of America Inc. answered the call to action by including



the promotion of water safety awareness as a part of their national initiatives and the promotion of chapters becoming “Water Safety Ambassadors” (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Jack and Jill of America Water Safety Ambassador Objectives

<b>Objective 1:</b> Learn and teach water safety basic
<b>Objective 2:</b> Provide dryland-water safety instruction
<b>Objective 3:</b> Offer Learn-to-Swim lesson program
<b>Objective 4:</b> Underwrite costs for at least 10 community children to learn to swim.
<b>Objective 5:</b> Provide and participate in lifeguarding and/or water safety instructor training and certification.

Additionally, DIA and the Red Cross joined forces, with the International Water Safety Day (IWSD) Foundation, and invited all aquatic stakeholders and partners, to raise water safety awareness at a global level on May 15<sup>th</sup> annually (internationalwatersafetyday.org, 2018). During the celebration of International Water Safety Day (IWSD), participants are asked to get involved through activities such as: promotion on social media (Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook), raising awareness of water safety without barriers (e.g. pool access optional), and passing out promotional items (Table 4). In 2017, this effort successfully reached more than 1,000,000 people, with the hope that IWSD will gain momentum to bring awareness to water safety and drowning as a neglected public health issue and save lives.

**Table 4:** International Water Safety Day United States Participants 2017

1. American Red Cross	2. Diversity in Aquatics
3. Jack and Jill of America Incorporated	4. League of United Latin American Citizens
5. National Association of Hispanic Nurses	6. Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated
7. Iota Phi Theta	8. Sigma Lambda Gamma
9. Boys and Girls Club of America	10. Sigma Lambda Beta
11. K-12 School Districts	12. Fitness Center Chains
13. Dallas Fort worth Texas Airport	14. Hotels & Resorts
15. Pool Safety Campaign	16. Community Colleges and Universities

### **Multisectoral Recommendations & Supportive Practices**

Multisectoral collaborations developed from evidence-based research have shown that, although all partners may not have water safety and drowning prevention as a part of their primary agenda, partnerships can yield transference of goals, serving all parties involved. Multisectoral partnerships and collaborations happen when varying aquatic stakeholder agendas intersect providing opportunities for

water safety and drowning prevention educational efforts to reach new and untapped audiences (WHO, 2017a). Therefore, it is important that, as we continue to strive to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of water safety and drowning prevention efforts in CLD communities, we encourage all communities to engage in the conversations and participate in opportunities to create social change. Supportive practices for viewing water safety education through the lens of social justice might include, but are not limited to, some of the following recommendations:

- Creating water safety programming which is grounded in culturally responsive and culturally relevant teaching practices and strategies that are evidence-based and data driven. Such programming may include modeling and adjusting program content for audiences given their cultural backgrounds (i.e., rethinking the “call for help” messaging in the LTS program to account for culturally relevant issues between communities of color and police).
- Creating water safety programmatic content and drowning prevention interventions and initiatives that are more reflective of participants, role models, and leaders from CLD communities.
- Fundamentally changing some aspects of the ways in which water safety education and water safety messages are designed and delivered, including grounding in learning outcomes from multisectoral collaborations amongst aquatic stakeholders, with specific input from CLD communities.
- Create multisectoral collaborations and partnerships grounded in theory that will take into account the ecological and socio-ecological factors which may marginalize CLD communities and become change agents and problem solvers one step at a time.
- Create opportunities for the promotion of water safety education without walls. This might mean breaking down the belief that water safety education and learning to swim can only be taught in pools. It is the belief of the authors that water safety begins with having awareness. By eliminating barriers to access (e.g., pools, affordability of lessons; stereotypes of aquatic participation) the opportunity to increase *engagement* in the conversation regarding the importance of water safety can increase in CLD and underserved communities (e.g. Water Safety Education as a part of National K-12 Physical and Health Education Curriculum).

It is paramount that we be positioned not only to provide culturally relevant water safety education programming, messaging, and drowning prevention initiatives, but also be committed to social justice as a part of our practices to ensure that all communities have an equal opportunity to benefit (WHO, 2017a; 2014b; 2010c; Ito, 2014). It is the belief of the authors that, via multisectoral collaborations among varying aquatic stakeholders, the ability to push for regulatory agency, with a mandate to reduce drowning disparities and protect the health of vulnerable populations, can be achieved. Additionally, it is

understood that regulatory development in any sector, by design, can ensure that the standards and recommended practices for vested aquatic stakeholders (as identified by the World Health Organization) can be met, allowing us all, then and only then, to take a stroke in the right direction.

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